**Journey of the Six**

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**Summary**

On entering the Sacred Realm, Ganondorf took up the Triforce. It broke, for one such as he who craved Power above all else could never have a balanced heart. Power rises. Wisdom flees. Courage sleeps. What happens before the Hero wakes?

**Notes**

So, have you read the tags? All of them? Still okay to continue? This is the product of just under three years of writing that I had to, at times, set aside because
I was having trouble writing it - the story was there, but the concepts and events weren't pleasant to deal with. As any other author will tell you though, sometimes the story needs to be told. So I typed...and typed, and typed. 26 chapters around 15 pages each, plus all the timeline, language, references, character sheets, maps, pantheons, social constructs and cultural behaviors I could fit into 9 other documents around that length...it'll take a while to read, and I'm going to post semi-regularly as I double check continuity and things like grammar and spelling.

While the inspiration has struck many others before, and will likely continue after, this is yet another take on a relatively well used moment in gaming history.

This is a story covering the seven years between the opening of the Sacred Realm and Link's awakening to a post-Ganondorf Hyrule (technically a bit before and after as well), as told through the eyes of one who saw it happen. This is that story, as told through the eyes of one who sees the truth.

My muses are vicious and entirely too pleased with themselves. Enjoy.
The Best Laid Plans

Dawn comes quickly this time of year, so far into the Eldin mountain range, the rising sun cresting the apex of Death Mountain five days distant yet. We are two days out from the furthest patrol point on our circuit Taoh says, and I am inclined to believe him. The ranger in our small party is also the eldest and the unofficial leader for this journey, having run this particular circuit dozens of times, while both Yoru and I are completely green and thoroughly ill-suited to direct the group despite our respective ranks. It chafes my brother somewhat, so used to being in command and now forced to follow the direction of another, but he is wise enough and Taoh old enough that the discomfort is easily borne. I am entirely content with my position, it is what I am good at, and what I feel best suits my aptitudes. I also have enough to do in a well-stocked village, let alone on the trail and usually camping, that not having to direct or act as second is a welcome relief.

The outposts, too, are welcome. This shall be the last we see for a quarter moon, and I fully intend to make the most of it. The water cistern on the roof provides shockingly chill liquid through all of the seasons, though in the winter it must be near brutal cold, but for one of my skill set that is simply remedied. Closing my eyes and calling on the Goddesses’ gifts, I let the power pool in my core and flow through my palm, stopping once the bathing room is filled with steam and the water nearly too hot to touch. Yawning, I fill the third tub and repeat the process on the second, then move on to the fourth. I am still not accustomed to rising before the sun, so much of my magic finding its power in the dark and the twilight, and so I am tired and stifling more yawns as I return to the central building of the outpost complex where Chia is watching the porridge.

“Aein-shiik, morning.” The elemental mage nods as I return to the hearth and take over stirring the thick gruel.

“Good morning, Chia-han. The baths are ready if you so wish.” I return, tasting and wrinkling my nose at the bland, gluey concoction. It is both filling and nutritious, and will fuel our morning journeying well, but that doesn’t mean it has to taste like old paste. I recognize nearly all of the herbs and spices stored in jars and chests, and the way stations all keep a similar set up to their provisions, and within moments I have cinnamon bark, dried ginger, and clove buds in the spice mortar and am grinding away. Yoru grumbles his way to the baths without so much as a nod, and Alma follows nearly on his heels. Once I have the flavorings that also work as an ulcer soother and preventative ground to a fine powder, I stir it into the oats and barley bubbling away over the small fire. Honey pots are numerous, and I spot a box of dried service berries that will further assist in creating something more than simply edible. Unfortunately, they are just beyond my reach, and I dare not risk spilling the lot by batting at the box with my spoon to extend my reach. A warm palm on the small of my back is all the warning I get as a hand reaches upward and grasps the box in a certain grip as I catch a whiff of sage and dog.

“This one, right?” Enzo asks, smiling down at me, and I nod.

“Yes, thank you.” I murmur, and take the service berries from him, checking the amount and calculating how much water I’ll need to reconstitute them. If I focus on them, then I don’t have to look at him. He makes me nervous, though not in a bad way. More in the same manner that Keiko makes Yoru nervous back home, in that blushing and awkward way. The beast master is much like his dogs; large, friendly, industrious and playful. Even their hair is similar, theirs being full with the remains of their winter coat and thick and long for it, his because he chooses to wear it that way. He must be back from feeding them the rest of the offal from last night’s mountain goat.

“What are they?” He asks, picking one up with his free hand, the other still ensconced
firmly against my waist.

“Dried service berries, they grow near swamps and rivers in the plains, and are good for keeping the heart healthy and the skin firm.” I tell him. “They need to be rehydrated, or are too tough to eat.”

“Anything you make is good to eat.” He says, his hand slipping under the hem of my tabard. “In fact, you look good enough…”

“Kindly unhand my brother.” Yoru grouches from the door to the bathing rooms, his hair still damp but in clean tunic and trousers, his bone-and-hide armor loosely placed, and the linen strips that will hold it steady and can be used as bandages in an emergency in a neat bundle in his hand. I feel my face heat even as Enzo’s hand withdraws and he takes a step back.

“Space in the bathhouse?” He asks, and Yoru nods curtly.

“Chia-han was finishing up when I left. The water should still be hot if you move quickly.” Now that there is some space between us, my younger twin seems less inclined to remove Enzo’s hand entirely, rather than just from my person.

“Thanks.” The beast master nods, and leaves as quickly as he came. I busy myself by taking two handfuls of the dried fruit and placing it in a small pot of water next to the fire. Stirring the gruel to keep it from burning or sticking to the pot, I then go about burying six large potatoes in the ashes and setting the last pot next to the flames to heat yet more water for cleaning after our meal. Yoru winds the cording of bracers and baldric, securing the dodongo leather and tektite plates in place.

“I don’t like the way Enzo-eh treats you Aein-ah.” He says, seemingly focused on securing the ends of his arm binding. “He’s too old for you.”

“He’s only nine years older.” I flush again. “And it’s not like we’d have children.”

“You’re only seventeen.”

“Same as you, eight minutes older, in fact.” I remind him. Just because he’s always been physically bigger than I am, and has grown nearly a half hand taller in the last two years doesn’t mean he can boss me around like he does his friends.

“He’s more than half your age again.”

“And when we’re sixty no one will care.” I argue. Not that I can see myself with anyone at that age. I can’t see myself at that age.

“…just, be careful, alright? I don’t want you hurt.”

“There are oils that I can….”

“Ew! No, I…that’s not what I meant. I meant heart-hurt big brother.” Yoru says, moving to stand next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. I sigh, and look up to meet his worried carnelian gaze.

“I’ll be careful, I promise.” I tell him, and some of the tension he is carrying eases.

“So…when is breakfast ready?” He asks, smiling. “I could eat a horse.”
I’m not cooking it for you.” I tell him, and check on the berries. “Almost done, if you want to put the berry box back on the shelf and get bowls.” He does both without saying anything further, and just in time as Chia and Alma return from the bathing rooms and take up their bowls the moment Chia finishes braiding her hair back from her face. I drain the berries and dump them into the porridge, giving the whole a final quick stir before shifting it off of the hearth and letting the elemental mage, pike-lady, and my brother the blade master serve themselves. Leaving a honey-pot on the table, I carry myself off to the baths as quickly as I can, but am still too late to sneak surreptitious glances at Enzo’s lean muscled chest and arms. In fact, even Taoh has finished his bath, leaving one tub filled with ice-water waiting for me.

I heat the water only enough to not give me a permanent case of blue balls and scrub quickly and efficiently, using the last of the water to shave meagre wisps of soft fuzz from my chin. I pull cotton and warm woven wool over slightly damp skin and stamp into my boots, taking up the small packs and belt that are the telling tools of my trade and clasping it about my waist. I have only finished restraining my hair in its customary braids and bands when Chia arrives to guide the water from our party’s cleansing back to the earth, telling me without words that Taoh is preparing to embark on the next stage of our circuit. I rush to the hall and shovel down the bowl of porridge left for me in time for Alma to scrub the bowl, and finish the last of the water before refilling the skein.

That one, and three others, return with me to the sleeping quarters where I compress my bedroll and fold the thick quilt with some regret. It was warm and plush, and I will miss having such comforts, for it is not of standard stock. Bap, the four-year old biscuit colored Gordonian herder that Enzo says likes me, pads into the sleeping room with his harness in place, indicating that it is nearly time to leave. I strap the four water skeins two to a side, the bedroll across his back, and lead him back to the hall with a gesture. The potatoes are done, and I stuff them in a burlap sack after knocking the ash off and place the bag on top of the bedroll. The cinder-bin has been emptied, and I sweep the ashes up and into it, knowing that the caretaker of this outpost will use the bin a dozen or more times before it needs to be emptied again and that the ashes will not bring rot with them.

A sudden hunch has me taking up two of the herb pouches and stuffing both marshmallow and licorice root into the first, and chamomile and ginseng into the second. A pot of honey, and a string of garlic in the bottom of my pack, followed by the two herb pouches, and I stuff my arms through the sleeves of the wrap-cloak lined with rabbit skin and not for the first time think of my father with gratitude for his delicate stitching. My own is just as dainty now, but it took over a year of careful coaching and practice before I was willing to use that skill on a living creature. Bap follows silently as I extinguish the lanterns and move to take my place behind Alma and in front of Chia and Taoh. Enzo will take point, speaking with Farore’s creatures to scout ahead as we move. I will be responsible for communication with spirits and ghosts, and Taoh will watch our back trail.

Chia seals the way station, physically locking the doors and then cloaking the entire structure in illusion aided by construction designed to blend into the landscape. The spell settles easily, the land itself knowing the shape and intent of the magic and absorbing it like a welcome friend. The tiny Picori house-sprite, not as strong or as coherent as those attached to a household or a person, watches from the threshold as we move out along the faint trail and down towards the valley between Mount Lana the much squatter Mount Brynna. Downhill, the journey is pleasant, and I take the time to familiarize myself with the trail and the spirits of the mountain. If everything goes according to plan, this circuit will be one I run for at least the next five years, so knowing the terrain both physically and spiritually is of utmost necessity.

As we near the base of Lana Enzo’s Ree starts a colony of rabbits to bolt, and Yoru has his sling out and a stone flying before Taoh can draw his bow, but it doesn’t matter because he’s still faster than the rabbits, and Ree and Tan each bring the animal their partner hit to the appropriate person. We stop long enough for a field dressing, the heads, forequarters, and innards going to the
dogs and the rest inside a game bag with spells for cool and shade woven into the very fabric. I in turn clip chives and new sage, tucking the leaves into Chia’s game bag since mine is full of honey and garlic. Alma catches a decently sized limb of dead fall as we begin the ascent of Mount Brynna, and Enzo leads us to a pool of spring water a little after high noon.

While Yoru busies himself with clearing space for a fire I take stock of what grows and have the luck to find low-growing greens and a patch of new wild carrots. Taoh and Enzo skin their kills and divide the meat in order to spit it. Alma and Chia take the time to remove the dog’s burdens and let them hunt for themselves, and I relax and clean the vegetables with the fresh water. The stream-spirits splash and play, and show me their shining round moonstones, fairly glowing with power. I stroke one, letting the smooth surface and soothing power refresh me but leaving them their treasure. With a scalpel too worn to hold a sturdy and sharp enough edge I trim the new carrots and wrap them in the greens, then retrieve the sage and chive from Chia’s bag and let the two most experienced members of the party season the meat.

We stay at the pool for a good two marks, resting and eating, before Chia smother the ashes and Yoru replaces the sod in the fire pit. Taoh, Alma and I reload the dogs before Taoh takes point and Alma flank, with Enzo behind Yoru behind me and Chia in front. Taoh will push us to reach the valley on the other side of Mount Brynna by nightfall, for my map says there is a cavern system there that provides a natural chimney and wind block. The hollow bamboo poles that Alma’s paired canine Rhis is responsible for have the linen cording coiled and binding around the waxed denim weave that is our one concession to camping in late spring weather. Sealing out both breeze and damp, with the cavern walls on three sides, will provide nearly as much warmth as a cabin, and easily as much comfort. There is no sign of rain on the horizon, and the air smells fresh and green, rather than damp and electric. We should have good weather for the next three days at least, most likely more.

Brynna’s ascent is easy and shallow, mists surrounding the courtyard of Hylia’s Descent just visible to the far south and west, Death Mountain’s peak a faint shadow in the distance. Rounding Brynna’s apex by following the cleared ledge left from an ancient rock slide takes even that vision from our small party, it is easy to forget that we travel so close to the sacred lands. As an afterthought, the Shaekha’ri people only retain a handful of representatives in the Great Landing. The purer races; Goron, Zora, Kokiri, Geru’doo, and Hylian all are granted space for their peoples through the treaties signed by the Great King Kaspar Madelhar Hyrule, of the line of Hylia herself. Those borders are not lightly broken, and as the Guardians we patrol the lands that encircle the whole. Our bloodlines are a reflection of the Hylian’s, a shadow to the light cast by the Children of a Holy Avatar, rather than a muddled mess of all the elements themselves like the Humans, but still not pure enough.

Shaking myself out of my books and histories, I turn my attention to the trail and the energy of life and death, cycle and change, all around me. The once majestic Brynna attests to these patterns, her spirit ponderous and heavy as with her brothers and sisters strewn about her, shoulders slumping with the erosion of wind and rain and the shifting of deep earth, her caldera all but erased over the centuries. In hundreds of generations of trees, she will join her ancestors as granules of stone memories in the desert, slipping under the great sea to the far west to lose all coherency as stone and be born again in heat and flame. In this time, at this moment, the feel of the land beneath my feet, the color of the sky, the scent of the wind, the pulse of life growing green is like and unlike anywhere else in the world, and I can almost hear the music of the Divine dance moving around me. Perhaps that is what it means to be Hylian. I can see the steps, find the rhythm, perceive the patterns, but I cannot hear the harmony, nor can I change its tempo, and I cannot alter the score.

Yoru has brought his flute, and Taoh his drums, and I know Chia plays the pipes. Perhaps if we have time after the camp is set, I can persuade them to play. Enzo’s bass blends well with my
tenor and Yoru’s baritone, though I have yet to hear Alma sing I know she is a soprano, and there are songs that all Shaekha’ri know no matter what clan they hail from. Heartened by the thought of music, my step is light the rest of the day. As I am the slowest member of our patrol due to my shorter stride and tendency to lose myself in unfamiliar patterns, my pace is matched by the others, and we reach the base of Mount Brynna just over a mark before dusk will settle in. The cavern system is extensive, a result of cataclysmic energy surging from the heart of the world in arcs and leaps and leaving tunnels, caves, and crystal gardens pocketing the entire Eldin range, and the partition we are to use as a base for our camp is a half mark’s travel in the canyon from the last of the descent.

The streams and eddies pool and meander full from spring melt and leave parts of the valley submerged, but the camp itself is set nearly three man heights above the highest flood marks and is roughly circular with bits of quartz embedded in the stone. Alma climbs further to check the chimney, and Enzo lets loose both Ree and Kor to secure the surroundings. I immediately unburden Bap of my supplies, and take the pot and bowls from Jae’s harness as well. Letting the two Gordonian herders shake their ruffs back into place I dismiss them with a treat of baked and preserved duck liver smeared with butter and set to work.

While Taoh sets up the wind-break, Chia has industriously cleared the small traces of clutter that fill the base of the natural chimney in the back of the cavern and has the collapsible charcoal brazier blazing by the time I’ve organized myself enough to put it to use. Deadfall on the trail provided nearly a full satchel worth of small, dark brown edible mushrooms, each cap a quarter the size of my palm. Some of the new carrots, leeks pulled from the streambed, an abundance of low growing greens, and some of the foodstuffs we carry mean that while tonight’s meal will be low on protein, it will be nutritionally sound. I empty one of the water skeins into the camp cookpot and suspend it over the brazier, letting it get the full heat of the flame and augmenting it with some of my own power to bring it to boil faster.

It will still be half a mark to boil hot enough to cook the dried potato-starch noodles through, and I busy myself with cleaning the mushrooms and peeling the carrots and leeks while a small flat pan heats directly at the side of the brazier. Careful not to spill even one precious drop, once the pan is hot enough to make drops of water dance and sizzle, I spoon the smallest amount of butter possible to serve my purpose onto the flat top and set the mushroom caps to cook. Six bowls wait, and each gets slices of four cooked caps as they are ready. Carrots next, then the leeks, then six cloves of garlic, and I lift the cheesecloth filled with cooked noodles from the pot and hang them to drain and cool while submerging a second bundle of spinach. The leaves cook quickly, and I hang that package as well before taking the pot off the heat and adding a second skein of water and a full dozen handfuls of oats to the inside. The flat pan acts as a lid, and with breakfast started I return to the noodles, now cool enough to handle, and cut manageable lengths from the bunch, filling each bowl close to the rim. A squeeze of the spinach, and some quick tearing for it is still too hot to handle easily, and our evening meal is nearly ready.

The tiny jar of sesame oil is sealed well with wax, and I carefully peel just enough back to get at the liquid. A block of paste made from a mix of beans, grains, brine and mold that has been fermented, drained, and dried that is worth its weight in red rupees crumbles easily to the touch, and I extract just enough that, when mixed with a quarter cup of water, becomes a flavorful seasoning liquid that lends an earthy, rich, and salty flavor to any dish. In the same cup I pour enough sesame oil to suspend over the top, and emulsify the lot before pouring a portion over each bowl. I replace the wax seal as Yoru returns from digging the jakes, never an easy task in rocky terrain, his hands still damp from a quick wash in the stream.

“Head up towards the southern mountainside, about ninety paces, and there’s a boulder shaped somewhat like the Han clan’s rune directly behind.” He tells us, and receives a nod of
acknowledgement from myself, Taoh, and Chia. I can still hear Enzo talking to his dogs, and know he will remain on guard until the last has returned from the hunt. Alma may already be visiting the site of Yoru’s labors, and so I put off my own trip in favor of handing out bowls. I even head outside to bring Enzo’s directly to him, and get to lean against his warm back as we eat. Kor returns by the time he’s finished, and he waits for me to do the same before taking my bowl to be cleaned while I head towards the necessaries before it becomes too dark to be safe without a partner. Returning to camp, the ten white, cream, and tan bundles of fluff that are Enzo’s dogs lay about the camp as a pack in various states of relaxation, with all the people but Chia already inside.

The gathering gloom of encroaching twilight calls my eyes skyward to the clear skies, brilliant stars and glimmering moon. This is the time of day that I am in my element, between dark and the day, where liminality flourishes bounded only by undefined potential. I take the time to drink in the delicate beams of brother moon with the last vestiges of sister sun, and feel my magic stores gently fill with each breath I take. Offering prayers to the lesser gods seems appropriate, and I take the time to do so, knowing full well that the hunches and inclinations that come upon me are a gift of Nayru, and standing in any of the Golden Goddesses’ favor is something that I would wish to continue. Respecting those gifts and honoring the givers is only just, and I can feel Chia next to me doing the same. Though her magic is more in tune with the natural elements, we both share a race whose strength is in the hidden, subtle and shadowed.

We remain until Taoh emerges from behind the wind break to see if we will be joining the others or if we intend to remain and keep first watch. Chia heads inside immediately, intent on drawing straws to determine who will take which watch, while I am content to stay, and say as much. I do mention my craving for music, however, and the ranger old enough to be my father twice over smiles.

“That would be good, I think, for all of us. I will ask the others.” He nods, and then does, the moment that I move to follow him back into the camp.

“I’ve volunteered for first watch, if that will help decide.” I state after, to give those that may hesitate the knowledge that they will not have to work immediately after performing and hopefully encourage the more reluctant party members to join in, my younger brother included. It does, and Taoh takes second watch with Alma even as Yoru and Chia claim third, leaving me partnered with Enzo and Yoru scowling because of it, but not overtly protesting as he would normally do. I am thankful for it, and more thankful when he pulls out his wooden flute and connects the mouthpiece. Taoh’s drum is a small, single sided affair with a short, wide beater, and Chia’s pipes gleam silver in the firelight.

Not for the first time do I wish my own instrument was much more portable than it is, but when given a choice between carrying enough silk, catgut, pots, jars, and boxes to be completely effective in my job and the large wooden case lined with velvet to protect the delicate instrument from the elements, I made the only choice I could. The keys are loose and the board protected, the hammers sealed in its case back in the home converted from a family dwelling into a treatment house appropriate to one who works with the dead and the boundaries that divide them from the living.

There is a nurse still in the village, as well as an apothecary, and should greater need arise Sharu-shiik can make the two day journey from Takarau and is welcome to any shelter and supplies she may need in the clinic. My mentor is aging, as people do, but is managing her joints and aches well, or I would not be comfortable enough leaving on my journey-quest with Yoru, though we are both past the age where it is typically performed. Just as the women go on a seeking when they get their first blood, a man must journey to be considered a man, for at least a year and a day. That journey will be complete for us in just over three moonturns, once we arrive back in Sahila, but until then, both Yoru and I are still boys in the eyes of the ancestors. Despite having served as Sahila’s
The firm ‘tock’ of Taoh’s beater against the rim of his drum sets the beat and starts me out of my reverie, and with the first nine strikes I know the rhythm and am prepared for the “Ballad of Shadow’s Seeming”, which flows quite naturally into “Nayru’s seventh Aria”, followed by a cheery rendition of “Farore’s Laughter” on Chia’s pipes with Yoru’s flute adding punctuation to the melody. “Din’s Battle Dance” leaves Taoh sweating with effort, and I take that as my cue to take over for a song or two as he recovers. I make it through “The Cucco’s Flight” without bursting into laughter, though Alma is not so lucky and by the end of it both Enzo and Taoh are grinning and Chia’s dissolved in a fit. Yoru too, is pleased with my choice, if the shuddering of his shoulders as he desperately tries not to laugh out loud are any indication.

“Aein-shiik, I know they say laughter is the best medicine, but did you need to act it out as well?!” Taoh gasps around deep belly chuckles, and I smile as softly and innocently as I can at him, making my eyes appear larger than they actually are and adopting a tone of incredulity.

“Taoh-eh, I always make my medicine as effective as possible.” I manage, before my own grin breaks over my face. “And it’s not nearly as funny without.” I admit.

“Ah, Aein-shiik, I did not know your voice was so steady.” Alma manages once all of our breathing has steadied. “Do you know the part of Hylia’s Consort, for “Falling”?”

“I do, and I assume you know the Lady’s?” The question is rhetorical, for she is nodding before I make it halfway through my words. We end up singing the entire sequence of the history-songs, with Yoru taking the part of the Great Impa, Enzo singing Demise, Chia the Goddess Blade, and Taoh filling in the various smaller parts. I am weary by the time I begin “Timeless” as the Consort, now Farore’s Chosen, bids farewell to the Shadow Lover and becomes immortal in rejecting death, ready to fight for the land he has chosen as his own for all time. Alma, her voice a good match for mine, sings what small part Death has in the measures, and the tight harmony of the final lines takes us into true night. Yoru has already dismantled his flute, and Chia is cleaning her pipes as the final note fades into the dark and I stretch.

“Ready to go?” Enzo asks, and I nod.

“Just let me grab some water for my throat.” I agree, and secure my knives and a handful of fine, solid needles about my person, leaving my herb pouch and potion bottles by my bedroll. I retain a single red potion, just in case, as well as a roll of bandages, and we head out quickly and quietly for the first portion of the watch, recharged by the music.

Moving to the point where even the wind-break shielded brazier fire does not interfere with our night sight, we split apart and move in opposite directions around the camp. I take a clockwise path, while Enzo moves counterclockwise, though he sends Bap to keep me company and Ree is at his heels the entire time. It takes a full mark and a half for a half circle, and I am pleased when I spot him before he sees me and waves, and we continue on. Once the full rotation has been made, we move towards camp together, sending the dogs ahead, and I get another hunch. Slowing my pace accordingly, I know I am right when he falls in step next to me.

“I’m not really that tired.” He breathes, sliding a hand around my waist and stroking my hip as we walk.

“I’m a bit keyed up myself.” I invite, and he takes it for what it is.

“Let’s check in and send Alma-eh and Taoh-eh out, then head towards the Han rune shaped stone.” He offers, his hand sliding beneath the hem of my tunic to brush lightly at the bottom
of my ribs before withdrawing back outside my clothing.

‘Sounds good.” My voice deepens with the words, and I know he can see the flush on my skin as easily as I can see the dilated pupils and quickening rise and fall of his chest leading to the grown bulge in his pants just as easily.

The wind-break is filled with dogs and two sleeping people, as Taoh and Alma are already awake and preparing themselves for their turn at guarding the camp. Yoru is snoring, and Chia’s eyes fluttering beneath her lids indicating dreams and deep sleep. I leave my weapons and accoutrements by my bedroll and take the time to slide into my nightshirt and out of the clothing dusty from our travel. Sliding my boots back on without redoing the lacings, I move to the opening in the wind break and beckon Enzo who has done the same. Taoh’s russet red eyes sit beneath one raised brow and I yawn before replying.

“I need to use the jakes, and it’s too dangerous alone with the unstable path.” I whisper, and he nods.

“Return swiftly then, we move out early.”

“I will.” I affirm, and he and Alma disappear into the night. The rock shaped like the Han clan’s rune is large and looks remarkably similar to the symbol itself, which means it is large and solid enough for Enzo to crowd me against and tilt my chin up to take my lips in our third covert kiss. He tends to use a bit too much tongue for my preference, again much like his dogs, and I push back to gain some control of the action. He wrests it away by moving his mouth from mine and down my throat to nip at my collarbone and then up again to chew lightly on my ear, playing with the lobe there and sending a remarkably strong thrill through my core and straight to my cock. It stands up and pays attention as his hands slide underneath my night shirt and trace the spare curve of hip and lower back, brushing my buttocks but not touching directly.

“So beautiful, Aein-ah. Let me help you relax.” He murmurs as he drops to his knees and lifts the light fabric upwards. The night air is cool against such sensitive skin, and I shiver, then shiver again as his hot mouth causes a drastic change in my perception of reality. It’s so very good, in fact, I barely notice the single slicked finger tracing my cleft until it touches the furled opening at my base and presses inside even as his nose touches my stomach beneath my navel. I can’t seem to breathe as the sensation overwhelms me, and then he finds the small spongey ball inside of me that sends me to the stars.

Thankfully, the stone behind me is angled enough to keep me upright, and Enzo doesn’t seem to mind that I lack the confidence and skill to return the favor. Instead, I use my hands, and exhausted we return to camp. Even the chill water of the stream is not enough to rouse me from the lethargy anterior to orgasm, and I fall to my bedroll and he to his as though each of us had been shot. I do not stir when second watch turns to third, and it is only Yoru’s grasp on my shoulder that gently brings me out of dreams and into a world of preparing breakfast. The oats are nearly ready, only needing heat to coagulate the proteins in the grain, crushed nuts to sustain us, and some honey to be palatable. True to form, we are cleaning the campsite by sunrise, and have begun to trek around Mount Ebizo’s western edge.

Lunch consists of a burrow of degu for the dogs, and dried strips of the last deer Yoru downed with more cooked oats and honey that I baked into small, sticky bars at the same time as preparing the jerky. I do not stir when second watch turns to third, and it is only Yoru’s grasp on my shoulder that gently brings me out of dreams and into a world of preparing breakfast. The oats are nearly ready, only needing heat to coagulate the proteins in the grain, crushed nuts to sustain us, and some honey to be palatable. True to form, we are cleaning the campsite by sunrise, and have begun to trek around Mount Ebizo’s western edge.

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creatures to depend on the hunting in the area, for there are tracks of both wolves and wolfos recent enough to be aware of, but not particularly alert. In that, I will bow to Taoh’s understanding of the circuit and appropriate husbandry of its resources.

The clear skies we have enjoyed and I expected to be able to count on disappear between one breath and the next two hours before we are to reach our campsite. Dark, thunderous clouds flashing sparks without striking at the land pour out in great billows from Hyrule in time for all of us to see it, but too quickly to do anything about it. In less than a hundred heartbeats, the sky is dark. A hundred more, and our party drenched from the sudden down pour as cold as the water directly from the cistern at the last way point. Chia stumbles, then falls, and does not stir even as my gut is wrenched seemingly inside out and every nerve point screams in atavistic fear, rooting me in place, too terrified to even breathe. A rushing fills my ears, darkness fills my vision, and numbness fills my limbs.

The scent of acrid smelling salts gives me something to focus on, tearing me away from the twisted, unnatural darkness that seems to have eaten me whole. I gag, the stench powerful even when not directly under your nose, and that is enough to return sensation to my body and skin and make me wish it hadn’t. Everything hurts, stabbing icicles of sharp pain that makes the gentle hand stroking my arms an odd counterpoint. Those hands pull me further back to myself, and I can hear the soft murmur of voices and the faint crackle of a fairly large fire, scent the smoke and pine, taste old blood, and see. No longer outside, I am in a large cave with the other five members of my party and all ten of Enzo’s dogs. Chia is in Alma’s arms, still limp but definitely breathing. Taoh is managing a large bonfire that illuminates enough that I can tell this place is huge, with branching tunnels and a ceiling so high as to be invisible. Enzo is holding Jae and petting the whining dog as he whispers to the animal words too soft for me to hear. That means the chest I rest against is Yoru’s.

My brother’s wine colored eyes are closed and faint worry lines wrinkle his forehead. His light brown hair, the same shade as my own, is disheveled and even has a few twigs in it. I reach out to pluck one of the larger sticks and he catches my hand in his own, his eyes opening.

“Tend to Jae first, then Chia, then Enzo, then you can groom me if you still have the energy.” He orders, and I nod. He knows what has happened, and I know there is a story that I will have to hear later once I’ve tended to the wounded. Staggering to my feet, I take stock of myself first. Bruises, a healing split lip, exhaustion, and the lingering effects of the terror that sent me into a stupor. Nothing that rest, food, and time cannot heal. Jae is not so fortunate. His right front paw is badly sprained and there is a gash that has cut the skin from the limb in a solid strip. It has been cleaned, and is a neat cut, but will need stitches and time and frequent cleaning to keep it from infection. I seek out my tool belt and pull catgut, clean bandages, and a curved needle from their individual pouches. Enzo holds the herder as I reach out to the point at the apex of the skull between the eyes and send Jae into a deep, dreamless sleep, beyond the pain that I am about to inflict.

I need to clean the wound first, and douse it liberally with alcohol to kill any infection that may already be present. Carefully, well aware that without that leg Jae will not make the journey home and that to Enzo losing one of his dogs would be like losing a child, I stitch the layers of skin back in place. It is bloody work, but there is an abundance of water with the sky’s horrendous weeping, and a large enough fire that we could all have hot baths and not need to even add more charcoal or wood to the flames. I rinse four times during the process, and once again after securing a protective bandage over the lot, then take the time to eat, drink, and rest a bit before heading to Chia’s side.

Physically, she is in about the same condition I am. Mentally, she is in shock, most likely from the same overwhelming sensation of darkness that sent me unconscious as well. Emotionally
she is locked in a fear loop that worsens each time she tries to break out of it. Spiritually, her hold on her physical form is tenuous at best, flickering into non-existence at worst, a prime candidate to become a Redead. Were we any closer to the epicenter of the source of darkness, she would already be one, and I fear for the Shaekha’ri within the borders of Hyrule proper. The Sage may prevail, but the others are most likely revenants of eternal dread. I shudder, sending a prayer to the Three for their spirits and hoping there is someone to cease their physical forms so they may be reborn, and turn to the problem at hand.

The physical I will leave, time itself enough of a cure. Mentally, until I repair the root of the problem, there is no point in addressing. She will simply go back into shock the moment I turn my attention away from her mind. Emotionally, there are things that will help while I focus on her spirit. Taoh’s drum. Alma’s warmth. Enzo’s voice. Yoru’s protection. Simple things, to calm and soothe. Once I have the other members of our party performing what they can, I turn to Chia’s soul. This is why I am shiik, not doctor, not apothecary, not chirugeon, not mortician. I can see the silver bonds of spirit and body, the red of mind and heart, and manipulate them at will. Part exorcist, part priest, part mystic, part magician, all present and attempting to first reestablish the proper bond between the four elements of the person, then strengthen and repair them. It is not an easy task, for I must learn more of Chia than any one person should really know, while keeping my own sense of self coherent and separate. It leaves no room for mistrust, hatred, or envy, and can call up compassion for even the worst of monsters.

The healing leaves me drained, exhausted, and euphoric. Chia seeks a physical bond to replace the deeper metaphysical one, curling against me and wrapping as much of her body around me as she can, followed by gut tearing sobs giving way to laughter, further tears, and finally, peace. I shed as much as I can of the overtones of her soul, and compartmentalize the rest to degrade over time. Lying next to the elemental mage, I can see her soaking up power from the mountain, the fire, the rain, and know she will make a full recovery. Taoh coughs, and that is enough for me to disengage from Chia’s now sleeping form, clean myself, straighten my clothing, and go take care of the rest of our party.

Enzo has a strained back from carrying Jae through the slippery mountainous terrain for nearly three marks before they reached this cave system, and then another within the cave itself. It requires no more than a deep tissue massage and a hot compress to keep the muscle from stiffening again as he goes to sleep. Alma’s arm is asleep from Chia lying on it for so long, though the massage to return the blood to the limb takes a quarter of the time Enzo’s did, it has the same effect, and she too is asleep moments later. Taoh banks the fire and rests a pot against the ashes at my request before seeking his own bedroll, having stayed awake through the journey, finding this cave, setting camp, and the marks that I remained unconscious. Yoru allows me to brush his hair and then braid it up and out of his face, falling asleep after the third arrangement I tinker with.

While I too, could sleep easily, quickly, and deeply, someone should stay awake for a watch in a rough camp like this, and I am the freshest if not the fittest. Stretching lightly to get my own blood moving again, I rummage through the packs that made it into the cave and find the marshmallow root and enough ingredients for a thick soup or thin stew. The smallest pot can hold a pint of liquid, and I use one of the refilled water skeins to top it up, steeping the dried and sifted root for just less than a quarter mark, then pouring the resultant tea into some of the empty bottles we have and repeating the process. The last of the new carrots, three of our five potatoes, one of two onions, the last of the deer jerky, and a handful of flour with a drizzle of oil, and the stew should soften enough to eat in three to four marks. I am just finishing with the jerky when a voice I do not know calls out from one of the tunnels in Shaekha’ri with an accent I do not recognize.

“Ho camp. Two seeking shelter.” The tone is deep for a woman, high for a man, the words crisp and clear despite their unfamiliar lilt. I cannot see anyone in the darkness of the cavern.
system, though I know which tunnel the speaker is in.

“Status?” I question. The closest village is Kakariko, on the other end of the mists, but that is three days journey at a hard pace. Wanderers are not unknown, but are usually solitary, and mildly if not entirely insane.

“Forty-two year old female of the Han clan, with a Hylian girl-child of ten under my protection and in need of medical assistance.” The voice, a woman, answers. I call on my sight, and can make out the heat signatures of two indeed, and two alone, though I cannot detect specifics.

“Come towards the fire, show yourselves.” I demand, and move to the other side of the flames from the voice and the forms, intent on waking Taoh and Alma. Enzo needs to heal, and Yoru is too hasty for diplomacy. All thoughts, however, fled when I catch sight of the woman.

She melts from the Shadows, and I get a brief glimpse of the clinging arms of the guardian-dead writhing from her as she steps forward with a bundle in her arms and into the light. Her eyes are a vibrant red, gleaming to life even before the rest of her features become visible. The dark wings of the Carrion Crow flare from her back, as insubstantial as a rumor and just as powerful. Silver hair tells me she does indeed hail from the Han clan, and the white warrior’s tattoos show she is a recognized master of her discipline.

She is favoring her right leg, and in some distress simply breathing. Holding the Hylian child swathed in a torn tent flap can’t be helping what I am increasingly led to believe is a handful of broken ribs. There is blood, too. I can smell it and the dark smear along her right side is definitely damp. She staggers, and that is enough for me to rush forward and attempt to take the child from her, but she does not relinquish her grip. I meet her eyes with my own, wordlessly asking her to trust me, and together we sink downwards to gently rest her burden on the cold stone of the cave floor.

She pants with the effort, and I know she is hiding as much of her injuries from me as she can, for the scent of blood has grown stronger and a faint sheen of sweat covers her face, her chapped lips making a lie of the amount of liquid she has the ability to lose. I stand, and see her attempt the same on legs that have been pushed to the end of their limits and beyond. She does not make it further than her knees, and reluctantly sits back down, her head bowed.

“I ask sanctuary.” She breathes out, and I snort, making her look at me sharply. The weary wariness in her eyes, the windows to her soul, show me enough. I have seen enough.

“I grant it. I am Tor Aein-shiik of Sahila village, on my journey quest with my brother Yoru.” I tell her, her eyes never leaving mine, though they are not tracking well. Perhaps a concussion then. “Taoh-eh leads us, Enzo-eh his second. Alma-to is on her third rotation of this circuit, and Chia-han her fourth.” My instincts are screaming at me to help this woman, yet she must stand down before I can do anything, her magic is so much stronger than mine it leaves me breathless.

I could tear her soul from her body before she could attack, but that would defeat the purpose of healing her and would tell me nothing on how she came to be here, in that state, and possibly lead to me having a Poe following me around until I have atoned for my actions. That route too, is fraught with dangers best not spoken of.

“Shiik?” She questions, her posture relaxing.

“Yes, Great Lady. You are safe here.” I assure her, making my posture as open as possible, hands visible and slow moving.
“Awfully young, aren’t you, to be claiming that title?” Humor is good, even if it is wry.

“I have seen seventeen summers, and have been serving as shiik for the last three officially. I am young, for a shiik, it is true. But I am old to be on my journey. Take the balance of what you will.” My bags have my supplies, and my weariness is gone as though it has never been. The spirits of intense need will do that, and I know I will feel it later when they have run their course.

“Either way, well met Aein-shiik. I have need of healing, and my charge some as well, but not to the same degree.”

“Were I not Shaekha’ri, I could see this, Lady.” I smile at her to take the sting from my words, and move to Alma’s side. “I will need to wake some of my party if I am to help you to the best of my ability.” I warn.

“Thank you.” She murmurs, and I take that as tacit permission, gently reaching out to Alma’s shoulder and shaking her ever so lightly. She is slow to wake, though alert the moment she recognizes that there are strangers in our camp. I shake my head at the question in her eyes. They are not a danger at the moment.

“Aein-shiik, what is it?” Who are they? She says, and asks with her face, shielded from a stray glance from the strangers.

“I need your help, Alma-to, to treat this warrior’s injuries and help her charge.” In these words, I have identified Alma to the woman, and told my companion that she has enough injuries that I cannot handle it on my own, meaning they are severe. Alma nods and throws off her bedroll, waiting for further instruction. “Water, to cleanse, and to make tea.” I provide, and she does not argue, simply takes up two empty skeins and fades into the dark of another tunnel branching from the one the strangers came through.

“My charge, may she rest?” The woman’s chin points to Alma’s recently abandoned bedroll, and while I do not believe she would have an issue with comforting a child with warmed coverings, I will not take without asking. Instead I set up my own bedroll closer to the fire and carry the small bundle without revealing anything of the person contained inside to lay the girl-child in a place that may be some comfort while I tend to her guardian. I have no understanding of Hylian customs, and the covering may preserve some social sanctity that I am unaware of, so I am careful with that as well as the child herself. Her guardian is Shaekha'ri, though, and I know the inter-clan courtesies well.

“Permission to touch, Lady?” I ask formally.

“Granted.” The word is hard, through gritted teeth, and I explain what I am to do before doing it through the duration of removing the minimalistic armor and the binding underneath. Alma returns with the water, and sets the large pot to boil even as I get my first glimpse at the warrior’s wounds. A club, I think, to the side, denting the armor and breaking the ribs as well as the skin over top. A hard fall, on the same side, more recent, resulting a nasty goose egg just behind her ear and the limp, as her hip and leg are both just purpling. I test the skull as well, and it is not fractured, only bruised, and let out a breath of relief. I cannot do anything that type of injury with the supplies I have, or even the ones in the way station and a real healer in attendance.

“Alma-to, can you clean the blood?” I ask, rummaging through my packs and hoping against hope, only to confirm that I do not have comfrey or willow bark to ease the pain. I can, however, provide rose hip tea to help with the bruising, and the last of the alcohol to sterilize the worst of it. By the time the warrior is cleaned, I can see that her bruising extends starting a hand’s width from her spine all the way around to the areola of her ample bust, and know that the ribs need
to be set and secured. That task takes all but one roll of the bandages I have on hand, and with a sigh
for the ruined material I tear strips from my tunic’s sides where there is no embellishment and boil
them for twice as long as I steep tea before padding and binding the hard-scraped skin of her arm and
knee. A clean sock makes a compress of chill water for her goose egg, and Alma offers her bedroll,
which the warrior takes with quiet thanks.

“I held as best I could, rolled, when my horse foundered yesterday.” The warrior tells me
as I move to her charge, her words becoming increasingly slurred. “We’d been riding so long, poor
thing. She walked for nearly sixteen hours, but passed out an hour ago and we needed to keep
moving, so I carried her. Saw the fire.”

“Peace, Lady. You have done well.” Taoh rumbles from his bedroll and I start, then
flinch as the reprimand that should be coming does not. “Tend to the child, Aein-shiik.” He orders
instead.

“Derinkuyu is close by.” The warrior murmurs. “Was heading there.” I feel my eyes
widen in surprise, and change out the water for fresh to clean the child to cover it. The hidden city,
built with the aid of the Gorons, which the last of the impure used to flee during the Hyrulean civil
war was supposed to have been destroyed in order to eliminate any temptations that the Shaekha’ri
people may have to return to the land of the Three. A city of wonder, with the pinnacle of intelligent
understanding of Nayru’s laws used to heat and cool homes, grow plants year round, purify water
and light up the night as though it were day. Once the last had fled, the Fire Temple’s Sage was said
to have melted the city to the last stone, and the Shadow Temple’s Sage have hidden all traces of its
location and shifted the magical power to a location within the bounds of Hyrule itself that was in
desperate need of cleansing. It is a story told to children, to teach them humility and patience, as well
as explain our exile and continual guardianship.

The warrior woman quickly falls into a sleep bordering on unconsciousness, and as I am
inclined to believe her story, given the wounds she has and the level of exhaustion permeating every
fiber of her being, I do not move her from the bedroll or try to learn anything more. She will need
food, water, warmth, and rest to recover at all, and careful tending to heal completely. The Hylian
girl-child may be another story, though I doubt it. Anyone pushed to those extremes is bound to be
in need of help to recover properly and swiftly.

My legs wobble as I stand once more to check on the child, and I give myself a breath to
steady before trying again to stand. Now, it appears, is when I am to feel the effects of whatever it
was that hit both Chia and I hard enough to render us unconscious for marks, using my learning and
my gifts to heal, keeping watch alone, being startled, and then healing and learning the story of the
strangers in our midst. The spirits of need have gone, my reserves replete of resources, uncertain and
aching with my own wounds, minor though they are, leave me wanting to wake one of the others to
take care of the child. I consider it, briefly, for I know that I am best suited to do so even if the others
were whole and hale, and they are not. I would be shirking the very same duties I swore to fulfill
once, when I was made a full shiik, twice, when the village helped construct my clinic and home,
and thrice, on our departure from Sahila over nine months previous.

I will honor my promises. All of them, including the ones that I have made to myself and
the Goddesses and spoken aloud to no one. A promise is a promise, and breaking one makes
breaking more much easier to do, so no single promise may be counted less than another without
risking all honor and integrity. That means the girl is my responsibility, and I will tend her hurts as
soon as I can. Centering my balance and rocking forward and back ever so slightly gives me enough
momentum to get to my feet, though I am dizzy and it takes a distressing amount of effort to once
again walk over to my bedroll where the small form of the warrior’s charge is stirring.
“Impa?” A high, childish soprano quavers even as the girl pushes back her covering enough to sit up without impediment. I suck in a breath, and let it out as quietly as possible. There is promise of an astounding beauty in her features, hair the color of wheat before harvest, eyes as blue as the sky on a spring morning, and delicate ears with which to hear the Three better than any other race. Her garments, what I can see of them, are finest quality cotton and silk, dyed with the rarest of colors and scented with lavender. The expense of her clothing only serves to show just how hard the last few days have been for her. The headscarf is smudged with dirt and sweat, lying askance on her head and no longer even partially restraining her hair. The pale blue sleeves of her chemise are torn, stained, and fraying, while her gown is no longer a pristine white and also torn at the hem and the left side’s seams. The purple tunic over the lot may be salvaged, but is no longer suitable as a show piece of wealth and prestige, though the embroidery may be copied onto a new piece. There is enough gold on her belt, neck, and head piece that she could receive an entire wardrobe in exchange, though a rupee-changer would need to be sought for the quality and quantity of the metal to be fairly priced.

“Your guardian is resting, little one.” Alma says, and the child tenses, then turns to stare at the pike-lady. After a moment, her head tilts to the side and she burbles a string of sounds that appear to be the basis for the warrior’s accent but that I can make neither heads nor tails of. The sound itself is frightened, with an undertone of impetuousness. Alma gestures to the sleeping form of the warrior, and I shake my head.

“She needs to sleep to heal. We will simply have to do the best we can.” I say, and am treated with a frown in return.

“If the girl is really that important, we should be able to wake her so there are no misunderstandings.” Alma reasons.

“If you wake her, I will consider that a direct refusal to assist in me in her care. She is Han, which means my oath includes her, and I will not let you further injure her simply because you do not care to deal with the problem of a little language barrier.” I’m tired, and grouchy, and hurt, and Alma can deal with that however she wishes as long as she does not interfere with my duties. I haven’t the energy for either Alma’s planning or the challenge this child presents, let alone both, and I can apologize later if I give offence.

“Fine.” Alma sighs after a tense moment of staring into my eyes. “What do you need me to do?”

“Take over night watch, inform the others as they wake what has transpired, and stay out of my way. That’s all.” I ask, though I deliberately phrase it as an order so as to ensure she actually obeys. She nods, and stands, walking to the other side of the fire and taking up the guard. I sigh, and turn back to the girl, whose eyes have widened and whose form is trembling. The last few steps are laborious, and as I fall to my knees before her there is more fall in the motion than I truly intended. No matter, another set of bruises will heal as quickly as the rest, and as I press my hands to the floor and my face to my hands, she calms enough to no longer be terrified, though she is still very frightened. I sit back on my heels and touch my chest with a flat palm.

“Aein.” I say, slowly and clearly. I wait a breath before tapping my chest once more. “Aein.” I smile, and am rewarded with a tremulous quirk of her lips in return.

“Eh in.” She says, then copies my gestures. “Zelda.” She says, but I am not paying attention to her voice any more, not even hearing her speak or recognizing her gestures. Nayru, too many revelations to mere mortals isn’t good for their constitutions! I’ve had too many shocks today, and this one is beyond one too many. Farore, give me courage to face my fate. Din, give me
strength to continue. No wonder the warrior was so dedicated to her charge. No wonder they fled from danger they could not contain or overcome.

The girl child has one third of the Triforce embedded within her.

Goddesses.

That hand….the hand with Nayru’s Wisdom….in a child! That hand reaches for me and I cannot gather myself enough to move away. Cannot refuse the avatar of my Devotion. Cannot even think of it. That hand reaches for me and touches my cheek, lifting my head and I meet those blue eyes and know that this girl child knows exactly what she is doing to me, the turmoil in my soul read as easily as an elementary primer.

“Resusangeul bi Hundeou.” I gasp, and hear Alma start from across the fire. Her own shout is drown out by the smile on the face of the one Chosen to bear the proof of Nayru’s love. I am lost in that smile, and as it grows a calm spreads through me as profound as the euphoria of a soul healing and as awful as the twisted darkness. I can hear the rest of the camp stirring, Alma’s frantic syllables unimportant as the Avatar of Nayru, child of Hylia’s line, smiles at me, and cups my cheek, pets my hair, touches my eyelids.

“Sheikah.” She says. “Eh in.”

That is my name.

“I am for you.” I tell her, and she nods. The other members of my party bow deep and shuffle off. Her hands withdraw, the mark ceasing its radiant glow as she once again taps her own chest.

“Zelda.” She tells me. What was I doing? I blink, shaking my head to clear the fog from my mind and look at the poor girl. Her injuries are not as bad as her guardian’s, though her bruising is more extensive. There is no broken skin that has drawn blood, only minor scratches corresponding to the roughened patches on her garb.

“Zelda.” I repeat, nodding my head. With a lot of mime and some confusion as Enzo is in Taoh’s bedroll and Chia and Alma curled up together even though it’s pleasantly warm in the cave and I don’t remember setting water to heat by the fire, I convince her to clean up enough for me to do a more thorough examination of her injuries. Fortunately, the bruising is the worst of it, and the bone deep exhaustion of being on the run for at least two days, if not three, without rest.

It takes the last of the warmed water to complete her ablutions, and she is fastidiously clean aside from her hair. The tangled mess will need a proper bath to take care of, though I can and do brush it until it is smooth, then braid it up and out of the way. She kisses my cheek in thanks, then motions to my bedroll, miming sleep. I attempt to get her to lie down and rest, and she just as insistently indicates for me to do so. Despite her age, she is very insistent, and I find myself obeying.

Arms full of a recently cleaned child, it is easy to drift off. I’m so tired. There is something I’m forgetting though. Something important. I hope I remember when I wake up.
The Seeds We Sow

Chapter Summary

Reverberations of the Dark steal upon sleeping Shadow.

Chapter Notes

“Until a seed falls to the ground and dies, it does not become a tree that later yields many fruits and multitude of seeds. We must embrace the thought of death for us to have greater lives.”
― Sunday Adelaja

Morning, as usual, comes far too early for my taste, though it is difficult to tell time here in the system of caves we are using for our camp. Fortunately, though the others are stirring as well, I am the first to wake and have time to take the stew off the ashes before it burns. The Hylian girl, Zelda, doesn’t even shift as I cover her once more in the still warm layers of my bedroll, and I smile softly. Something about her makes me want to be by her side and never leave. Her guardian, however, is more frightening for having slept and being awake and aware. The Shadow magic that seeps from her very pores is as strong as a gathered strike from me, and her muscle tells me that she is deserving of each and every one of her rank tattoos.

“Good morning, Aein-shiik.” Taoh calls, and blinks at his position from Enzo’s bedroll. Why they decided to switch is beyond me, for Enzo’s feet stick out of the bottom of Yoru’s roll, and Yoru’s arms splay to the ground on either side of Taoh’s. It is not my business, however, and I stir the thin stew so the warm parts mix with the hot and set it aside to cool.

“Which way is the water?” I ask after returning the greeting, remembering that I used the last of it to help Zelda clean last night before dropping into an over-tired and dreamless sleep.

“I’ll show you.” Enzo volunteers, yawning. “And the necessaries too.” He adds, and I am thankful. I can be relieved later, for that is becoming a concern. I hope that they aren’t too far from the camp, for I don’t want the warrior moving any more than she absolutely has to, her ribs are far too damaged to risk a long journey. Enzo takes up four empty skeins and I gather four more, and follow him away from the fire and into the shadows.

As soon as we are distant enough from the flames, I can feel my eyes shift and the cavern system blurs into sight in muted greys and browns. There is no light from any other direction, and we walk for a good seven minutes before I can hear the sound of moving water. After another three, we emerge from a low tunnel that even I have to duck to move through and into a beautiful cave filled to the brim from a waterfall that I cannot see the head of. The water is clear and pure, and siphons off through nine separate openings to flow out of the chamber. It’s glorious, and I let the sound and atmosphere wash over me.

The moisture in the air brings my other need back to my awareness, and it takes us only moments to fill the water skeins to the brim. We leave them by the falls, and Enzo shows me the
small opening that used to be yet another drain for the chamber when the water would have filled the entire thing. I am hesitant, so close to our only source of potable water, but my body’s needs take precedence and I cannot hear anything hitting the bottom of the opening, so I must assume the waste is carried off or remains a distance away that will not affect the water source adversely. A rinse, also into the small opening in the stone, and a wash from one of the skeins, and Enzo takes a moment to draw me into a hug.

“Thank you for saving Jae. I don’t know what I would have done if you…couldn’t help him.” He admits, and I return the embrace.

“Jae is just as important to the health and safety of our party as any person in it. I couldn’t let him hurt when there was something I could do to help.” My words are quiet, almost drowned in the sound of the falls, but he hears them clearly.

“You could have treated the people first, and left his injury until later. That you would treat him first honors me.” Enzo’s red eyes are moist, and I brush the liquid away before it can spill over and onto his cheeks. He, in turn, catches my hand and kisses the palm, followed by my pulse point in the wrist. The sensitive skin of his lips picks up the sudden increase in my heart rate, and then I am being pressed against the wall and kissed far more intimately. He still uses too much tongue, but the movement of his thigh between my legs is new and distracts me enough that I don’t really mind. He has such strong thighs….

Slightly mussed and strangely relieved that nothing more than some kissing, groping, and grinding occurred, I lead the way back to the campsite with the water and am pleased to see both Zelda and the warrior are awake. Taoh has placed his bowl in the strange woman’s hands and is looking pale, even for a pure blooded Shaekha’ri, and the second my sight settles back to adjust for the light of the fire he coughs, dry and hacking. Alma too, is lethargic, and Zelda shivering despite being wrapped in my bedroll, the fur lined jacket in my packs, and the tent flap she was carried in. Getting everyone fed takes a bit more effort, as we now have two more people than utensil sets, and the dogs can smell the cooked meat. There are more dried treats and butter for them, but they will need to hunt tomorrow or the day after, and today would be good if not necessary.

As soon as the stew is gone, Yoru takes the pot to be cleaned and I go about warming the marshmallow tisane, using the honey sparingly to sweeten it and ensure it goes down and stays down. It is only a matter of making sure that everyone but the warrior gets a dose, for the expectorant would strain the muscles of her chest and possibly cause her broken ribs to misalign. Enzo and Chia volunteer for a hunting expedition, and it takes them no time at all to be off.

“Derinkuyu…” The warrior murmurs, and I shush her.

“May be a hundred paces away, or a thousand, or not even exist, and I will not allow you to walk any of those distances, warrior. Not until your ribs set.”

“We cannot wait a week.” She insists. “And my name is Impa.”

“Impa-eh, we will wait a moonturn if needed. You asked sanctuary of me, and that protection includes keeping you from further injury, especially due to stupidity.” I glare. Taoh coughs out a chuckle, and I wince. “With a cough already present in the camp, I cannot condone wrapping your ribs for even a short period of time and risking the infection that shallow breathing can cause.”

“Impa.” Zelda calls, then chatters in her unfamiliar tongue, with the warrior replying in kind. When it appears that they will be speaking for some time, I make a pot of peppermint tea and start a second of warm water for general use. The stockpile of charcoal will last us another three
days, since we must keep the fire going for both heat and light. A proper shelter would go a long way for both health and comfort.

Perhaps if we can find the legendary city, then Enzo and Yoru could carry Impa. Zelda is small enough that one of the dogs could act as a mount if needed. My twin returns with the cleaned large pot, and I take stock of our supplies even though I already know what is available, just to keep myself busy.

What was enough for six people and ten dogs for a quarter turn when supplemented by daily hunting and gathering is enough for eight people, five of whom need healing, and ten dogs for barely two days if no other resources can be found. Even using what herbs and spices I have, there are simply not enough calories to go around. I haven’t even seen any evidence of insects, bats, or keese to expand upon our meagre supplies, and none of us are Gorons, to be eating the rock itself. I hope that, if nothing else, the dogs with Enzo and Chia forage enough to keep themselves healthy.

“Aein-shiik, have you some time?” Impa asks, her accent fading the more she speaks, as if she is remembering how the more she does it. I nod, and move close so she does not have to strain to be heard.

“How may I be of service?” I ask, sitting when she bids me to do so. Zelda is awake, and moves closer when she sees her guardian beckon.

“I would teach you and those of your party who wish to learn some Hyrulean words and phrases, though if any show inclination, I would teach the language itself, with Zelda’s help.” She indicates the girl, who is staring at me. Her eyes are too old for her young face, her soul too aged.

“How do you say ‘it is impolite to stare’?” I ask, and Impa chuckles, then winces.

“You must forgive her, Aein-shiik. She has been raised believing that I am the last of my race in all existence, not just the last of my clan within the boundaries of Hylia’s Descent. To see another Shaekha’ri, whom her people call Sheikah, is astounding to her, let alone a group who give every indication of being no more than a small portion of the population. You are also the youngest, which I believe she sees as the most relatable, and…”

“Yoru-ah is my younger brother, Impa-eh. We are twins, two sets apart.” I huff, and get a grin in return.

“Forgive my assumption, Aein-shiik, but he’s bigger, and looks older, and you acted as the authority to answer to upon our arrival.”

“While Taoh-eh leads us, as shiik, I have my own jurisdiction.” I remind her, and she grins again.

“I’d forgotten just how much power is given to the Feathers of the Crow.” She admits, giving me the kenning of those with the gift and proving that not only is she of true blood, but has been taught in our ways, and knows our legends. “Aye, and you use it well for one so young. But come, let me teach you some words, and you can tell Zelda yourself that she is staring a little too intensely for polite company.”

The moment Impa begins to use familiar language around the girl, the ten year old latches onto her voice like a lifeline, and I am poignantly reminded how young she truly is, and the trauma she has recently suffered. To see one’s home destroyed, one’s family murdered, is a sorrow I cannot comprehend. I cannot help but feel for the child, who, after a small outburst of words Impa has not yet taught me, bursts into tears and becomes inconsolable. Her distress sets Rhis, Jae, Kor, and Sai
to howling, and even Impa’s soothing voice and calming pettings do naught to ease her anguish. The immediacy of the situation has me gathering the small form in my arms and sending her into the same sleep I did Jae. Though the wounding is different, the source of pain vastly incomparable, the pathways of the mind treat it in a remarkably similar pattern. With her sound asleep and not generating more ache, I can soothe the raw, tormented lines into sore, but healing, conduits.

As I do so, it is almost as though there is an outside force assisting with the healing, guiding me and supplying me with the power to continue nearly endlessly. Like an abscessed tooth, there is pain in the healing itself, and a wound left behind, but the poison does not further sicken, and the scar will eventually smooth over. My withdrawal from her mind is easy, the compatibility of our thoughts remarkable, leaving me no desire to cling to unfamiliar patterns or explore the curiosity of a stranger. Perhaps not peculiarly, after that the words Impa gives me are easier to understand, to place, to give sense and purpose and meaning to. Yoru joins us, though I send him back to his bedroll with a second cup of marshmallow root tea when his coughing obscures his words. At noon I make a thin soup with the last onion and one of the two potatoes, saving the flour and most of the oil in case Enzo and Chia are successful, and flavor it with a fine paste of a single clove of garlic. It is not much, but it is warm, and the liquid is good for those with that cough.

Afterward, with Taoh sleeping as deeply as Alma, Zelda curls against me with her temperature elevated but not concerning, not yet. Impa too, rests, though I am not sure if she is truly sleeping or just deeply relaxing. I take the time to give my muscles a thorough stretch. With little left to do, and Yoru’s flute providing a soothing sound as I allow myself to sink into a trance that at once allows for deep introspection and heightened awareness of everything exterior. There is a song echoing through the entire cavern system that calls to me, asking me to join in, and it is not until I open my eyes to the multitude of ghosts that glide through the camp that I understand what I am hearing.

The exodus of a generation flows around and past me, past the camp, one after another, Human, Shaekha’ri, Hylian, Goron, Geru’do, and what I have to assume are Zora. I have never seen one of the water-borne, but I have seen fish, and other creatures of the water, and pictures of all of Farore’s intelligent creatures. They are thin, large-headed, with appendages that are at once arm and fin, all the colors that water can be, and beautiful for it. They move slowly, but with purpose, packs and bags carried by all able bodied, dogs and cattle, horses and great birds moving with more of the same. Cats and birds, reptiles and creatures that appear half-plant weave between the legs of the larger creatures. The earth rumbles, and the ghosts pause, heads bowed, and continue on until the last is only an echo of a footstep taken decades previous.

I do not know whether they are heading to or from Derinkuyu, or what their final destination is to be, for they are nothing more substantial than memories and I cannot interact with them in any way. I can, however, watch them as they pass, taking in the silent transit until my trance is broken by the return of our beast master and elemental mage. Slung over Enzo’s broad shoulders and heavy enough to cause him to stoop with the weight lies an old buck deer. Chia carries a brace of rabbits, and from the lack of whining the six dogs that went with the hunting party display, I must assume that they too, were successful.

“Enzo-eh, Chia-han!” I greet, and attempt to go relieve them of their burdens, only to find my limbs do not wish to obey, asleep from the lengthy trance and general exhaustion. The aborted action does not go unnoticed, and Yoru frowns at me before assisting the returning members of our party. I want to reassure him, yet the lethargy that has overcome my limbs is slowly encroaching on my mind, drawing me to yearn towards sleep. I should be tired, yes, but not this tired. Something is wrong, and I drop into other-sight as quickly as I can manage to find out what.

The camp is awash with colors, as expected, each member of our party pulsing brightly in
individual patterns and forms. The fire gives off dancing sparks that twine about the flame spirits even as the wood spirits are consumed. Earth spirits abound, which is only normal, being so deep within the earth itself, and the occasional metal spirit flashes about. The chatter of the water spirits echoes from the waterfall tunnel and a second offshoot pathway to my right. The ghosts I was watching continue to flow by, over and over, showing me the cyclic memory that is their entire existence.

Impa is Shadow. It is strange, with my other-sight fully engaged, to see power at once cloaking in darkness and shining with a brilliant light. She is both darker and lighter than the space around her, and the impression of wings leads to fluttering hands around her injuries, keeping them stable without interfering with her breathing as no physical bandaging could. It is fascinating, and I must forcibly tear my gaze from her to continue my explorations. I no longer am tired, but I can feel the power flowing from me much as blood from an open wound, pulsing with each beat of my heart and draining me faster than I can replace it.

Closest to me is Zelda, and the brilliant radiance of her presence is blinding. I cannot gaze at her directly, only indirectly, through nearly closed lids, and that is painful enough to have me tearing up. I recognize the Triforce of Wisdom in a detached way, knowing what it is and knowing just as well that it means no harm and that I am to pay no attention to it aside from that basic acknowledgement. I move on, and turn my focus onto my own energy patterns.

My body is whole, the small injuries a sullen red to my other-sight but dulling quickly, being consumed by that Darkness that terrifies me. I am also separate from it, and the sensation is curious, though not painful or frightening. I watch as it eats into my body from the ground up, using the only areas not visible as a base and moving outward from there, much like the spirits of the influenza do. It uses up my body’s own power to propagate itself even as my form slumps to the side with a soft rustle of cloth and no more. I am not breathing, my heart still, and I know that this is Death, come to take me to the first gate at the end of the River. There were things I had wished to do before my passing, but the call of the Goddess is far more than that want could ever hope to be. In Her, there is peace, calm, certainty, and the path to the Silent Realm where all that is good and lovely waits.

The Darkness, twisted and corrupt, reaches towards Nayru’s Chosen, and the child stands, parting the members of my party hovering around my body without touch or sound and bursting forth a pure light filled with the compassion that I can find after a soul-healing. It reaches towards my body, forming blades of gently glowing power to cut away the Darkness, excising the putrefaction of hate and greed in great chunks. The wings around Impa, the Sage of Shadow I now know, flutter from her to my spirit and keep me from answering the Shadow Lover’s persistent call. I do not fight their hold, but watch, fascinated, as the Goddess works through her Avatar to drive the Darkness from my body so completely that the tiny foothold present in my mind dissolves as a grain of salt in the ocean.

“He is cleansed.” Zelda intones, her voice holding two tones, two beings. Yoru clutches at my corpse even as Enzo strokes the slack face and Chia presses her fingers tight around a limp hand.

“Why does he not wake?” Taoh murmurs.

“His spirit is gone from his body, driven out by the Oath of Demise.” Impa tells them, moving to take up my other hand.

“He’s dead?” Alma whispers, and Impa shakes her head.

“Not precisely. The bonds holding him to his body have been damaged, but they are whole still, as I have him held from the crossing. He simply needs a reason to return and rebuild
them. As shiik, he knows how, he just needs a why. Has he a lover?” She asks, and four heads turn to Enzo, who flushes under the scrutiny, particularly Yoru’s.

“I…we…we’re not, yet. Probably not ever, if I’m honest with myself. We’re friends, and we’ve been somewhat physical, but not lovers. Nothing so great as that. Friends with benefits.” He babbles, and I find myself agreeing. I do love him, but…no. Not as I would a lover.

“His heart was guarded against you, Enzo-eh.” Yoru says softly. “I made him promise to be careful with it around you.”

“He kept that promise, Yoru-eh, and I did my best not to interfere. He’s attractive, affectionate, and sensual, but he’s so much younger than I am it wouldn’t feel right to ask more than shared pleasure from him.” Enzo tells my younger twin, and his words are truth, though it does sting my pride somewhat to admit that there really is no future for us. Just because I could not picture one does not mean that it had never crossed my mind.

“Would family count?” Chia asks. “I know when he helped me that he used my family to help reestablish the bonds.”

“It would help to strengthen those that are completely solid, but not enough to repair damage. Love for family is innate, something we are born to do, and there must be an element of choice for the power of it to be effective.” Impa tells her, and she slouches in disappointment.

“He is mine.” Zelda says, the Hyrulean clear and completely understandable to my mind. “He pledged himself to me, and I am not finished with him yet.” The words are a promise, and a threat that causes my non-existent heart to pound.

“Call him, then.” Impa tells her, pulling me towards the cold flesh that used to house me. The Hylian girl-child, and so much more than simply that, nods and takes Enzo’s place, her tiny hands moving to hold my still face and lift it enough to place a small, dry, chaste kiss on blue lips.

“Aein, return to Our service.” She orders, pouring power into my form, and I cannot disobey one of the Three. I cough, then cough again as air returns to my lax lungs. A full body spasm shakes all but Yoru and Zelda from me, and I know that the dampness on my scalp is from my brother’s weeping. My over sensitized skin reads the fabric of my clothing as abrasive, the air as heavy pressure, the grip Zelda has on my face as a blacksmith’s hammer striking out, hot and hard and heavy and I cry out. It is as if I have suffered the worst sunburn of my life over my entire body from the inside out. Sight comes next, indistinct blurs becoming the souls of the living and the dead, the patterns of life and their lack the only distinguishing feature between them. The blue of Zelda’s eyes call me, and I focus on their commanding insistence that I do as asked. That I keep my promise. I always keep my promises. I am for Her, and Her avatar by extension. I remember, and in remembering, find the places and the textures to firmly anchor my spirit in my body once more, the bonds indeed damaged but not severed.

“Baboka.” Yoru drools into my hair, and I reach a hand up and back to grasp at his hair, but pause as the dark tan of my skin catches my vision. Both Yoru and I have always had the near pearlescent skin of the Tor clan, so pale that even throughout adulthood the veins beneath can easily be seen. That I would be as dark as a Geru’do makes me wonder if this body is mine. Enzo shifts to catch that hand in his own, and I can feel the pressure of his fingers, the brush of his lips, hot from being clenched together, against my palm. The cool dampness of his tears wetting the skin confirms that if nothing else, the sensations of this form are mine.

As the power of Nayru’s Triforce withdraws, Zelda slumps forward onto my chest, going
from vessel of the Goddess to sleeping girl-child in a heartbeat. My skin, too, returns from the warm luminous gold that I’ve always pictured the Sacred Triangles being to its familiar corpse-like pallor. Most of the pain leaves with it, and I find myself exhausted, slipping into slumber nearly as quickly as the girl against my torso, her weight a reassuring presence and comforting warmth.

As impossible as it is to tell time with any certainty in the cave system, I know it has been a long span of marks, perhaps a full day, since the last time I opened my eyes. The camp is quiet, Chia and Impa keeping watch even as they murmur to each other, too softly for me to distinguish actual words. The scent of lavender fills my nose, and thick blonde hair peeks around the edges of the tattered headscarf Zelda wears as she snuggles deeper against my chest. Beyond that, Yoru lays deeply dreaming with one arm thrown over the both of us, his chest rising and falling deep and steady. Behind me the still form of Enzo, radiating heat and snoring softly. Taoh and Alma lie in their respective bedrolls, and I blink sleepily, wondering what woke me.

I am rested, pain free, and content, and still seeing things normally invisible unless I am deliberately using my other-sight. The ghosts of the eternal exodus flow around the barrier wards that Impa has set up about the camp, and the ephemeral wings of Mokara fluttering restlessly about her. That Hylia’s half-sister would show Her blessing so obviously is all the proof I need to consider Impa as the Goddess of Death’s chosen. The direct comparison of Her power next to the corrupt Darkness of Demise’s Oath hissing and spitting at the edges of the barrier tells me why I woke.

“Impa-yana, forgive my impudence.” I breathe out even as I sit up and shift the tiny form of Hylia’s legacy to let her burrow under Enzo’s bedroll and against Yoru’s warmth. Falling to my knees before the Sage of Shadows I bow my head in supplication and pray she grants my request.

“Hush Aein-shiik. The Sages are as mortal as their charges, and depend on those they are to guide for all of the mundane aspects of life. You are still learning the tact that comes with your calling, and I was in need of the direct speech you presented me with. All is well.” Impa reassures me, loosening some of the tension I carry. “As I am certain your instructor told you, you will make mistakes, so try and learn from them. You do not need to have my forgiveness, but if it would serve you to have it, it is yours.”

“Thank you, Impa-yana.”

“You are both welcome, and well come. Chia-han has progressed to a similar understanding of Hyrulean as you managed before the excitement, and so I would have you join us for more language lessons.” The Sage speaks, and I shall obey. The flow of words and the linking into sentences are much easier when I can see their meaning in Impa’s posture and body language, learning not only the meaning of words but their implications and nuances at the same time. I find I tire easily, however, and know that it is from my inability to withdraw my other-sight. Chia-han has been at the lessoning for longer than I, and we start to lose the ability to retain any further instruction at nearly the same time.

With a stew on the fire, I am free of duties, and decide to take the time to bathe. The waterfall chamber is calling me for more reasons than that, but cleaning myself will take the most time. I smell, and could use a change of clothing. Bap is sleeping near my pack with the last of my clean clothing, and he yawns and curls back into a ball of fluff as my rifling disturbs his slumber. That reminds me to clean some of the bandages so I can replace the binding on Jae’s leg, and I snag up an empty water skein to carry with me and fill with fresh liquid. The path to the waterfall is narrowly encased by further barrier wards that I can see writhing against the void of Darkness that seems insistently grasping towards whatever they contain. I am careful not to break the boundary.

The chamber’s single brazier is dark and cold, but takes a touch of flame easily enough
and as the light grows I remove my boots and wade into the crystalline pool. It is not as cold as I had anticipated, though not warm by any means, and filled with a fine sand bottom. The lazy current draws towards the few runnels I can see, and I set to washing my clothing. My tunic is tattered beyond proper repair, though I may be able to salvage the embroidery and painting if I can keep the ragged tears from further fraying. The bindings in my hair are disgustingly filthy, and I tie them to a rock and let the speed of the water itself drag the grease and dirt from them. My shirt and leggings are not as bad, though they still bear the marks of days of wear, and my small clothes join the hair binding before I turn to my person. Handfuls of sand and furious scrubbing leave me feeling well scoured and much better.

I tend to other necessities in the small hole, then return to beat the oil and dirt from my shirt and leggings, working up a sweat that I then rinse off as well. I am laying the garments on some of the flatter stones when shuffling from the tunnel back to the main camp warns me of approaching people. Rather than don my clean clothing while being soaking wet, I paddle out into the large pool and let my hair float out about me. Unbound, it reaches the bottom of my shoulder blades, and turns a rich brown in the damp. I am thankful that, when Zelda and Alma round the last broad corner, it is only to use the privy before returning to camp and taking the water skein I brought with them. Yoru follows moments later, with Enzo waiting patiently out of sight.

“I’ve been thinking.” He admits as he washes his hands after taking care of business.

“Did it hurt?” I tease, and he snorts.

“Always. We both know that you got all mother’s gifts in that area. No, I…I have had much to think about, these last few days.”

“Hmm.” I agree, urging him to continue.

“When we get back home, we will be men, officially. I will be losing you hannuhn, to your duties as shiiik, to a partner, to growing up, and eventually, to Mokara herself. I would prefer that it happen decades from now, but I will be losing you regardless. The flow of time is cruel, but if I lose you because I have held on too closely, then that is twice the sorrow. I will not stand between you and any relationship you choose any longer.” He sighs, his wine red eyes meeting mine clearly and his use of the formal “elder brother” telling me he is serious. I float, idly kicking myself from one end of the pool to the other, collecting my thoughts. Enzo admitting that he thought of our relationship as friendship, with the added bonus of sexual attraction, only solidified my own understanding of it. I enjoy his company, and the pleasures he can teach me are something I definitely wish to explore, but he is not a partner…and I need a partner to consider forming a more permanent bond.

“I like Enzo-eh, Yoru-ah. He makes me smile, makes me feel wanted, and is considerate of my lack of experience. He is not someone I would take in making a household, though he is someone I would take in making my bed. Even had you not intruded on our relationship in any way, he would not have had the ability to call me back to my body, the bond between us does not have that power, even in potential.”

“Yet Zelda did. When did you swear yourself to her, hannuhn? She is but a child.” My younger brother asks, the hurt in his posture apparent, shoulders slumped inward in misery. Again, it takes me a few laps to formulate a response.

“I feel as though I have always been hers, nuhnah, from the day of my birth.” I whisper, the truth hard to bear, harder to hide, impossible to deny. “I was born for her, Nayru’s chosen Avatar, an instrument for her playing. She makes my spirit sing in triumphant joy. Within moments of her waking I spoke my pledge, but it was an affirmation of something I have always known.”
“At least your mystical babblings haven’t changed.” Yoru grins after a moment of deep silence, and I snort a laugh, which turns to outright chuckles, drawing my brother in as well. It is good to hear him laugh. Once we have caught our breaths, I splash my way from the pool and squeeze as much water from my hair as I can. My small clothes are easy enough to tie, even with my skin damp, and I let him brush and braid my hair, coiling the bindings around the results and pinning the lot in place. With that mess out of the way, it is easy to slip into clean trousers, smock, and apron, fresh socks, and tug at my boots until they clear my feet without having to undo their lacings. My tool belt is back in the camp, and I make the return journey with my twin and my clean laundry.

Our fast is broken with venison stewed with leeks and small flat bread that uses the last of the flour and butter. I am not surprised when, after clean up, Taoh calls for us to continue on. A travois has been set for Impa, and Zelda has an easy seat on Ree’s back, leaving the people to carry a bit more gear, but the dogs’ pace is an easier set to bear the injured. I take the time to boil bandages and change Jae’s dressing while the others pack up. Chia smothers the flame, and a bucket of water followed with one of sand ensures that the fire is well and truly out, and Impa directs us through the cavern system. We weave against the ghosts of our exiled ancestors, Enzo’s leading lantern appearing far too similar to a Poe’s for my complete comfort. The active spirits of the deceased are nominally capable of interaction, though so few of the living pay attention to them they often turn violent simply seeking acknowledgement.

I insist on frequent rest stops, for Impa, Zelda, and Jae respectively. Enzo does not argue, and Taoh and Alma haven’t the breath to. Though not ideal, I seize a water skein after the third stop and measure out licorice root, straining it at the forth stop and making sure that the two ill members of our party drink deeply from that skein. We have to slow our pace to accommodate their coughing, but the spasms are productive and much of the rasping and choking breaths cease. The marshmallow seems to have prevented the cough from catching in anyone else, though I will make another dose of the tea when we stop for the night to make sure.

The air in the cavern tunnels is warm and dry, and I am reminded that Death Mountain is potentially active. The thought is not a comforting one, and I could wish we had one of the small songbirds that miners take into their mines to check air quality. We travel for six hours before stopping long enough to eat a small meal and take a nap, then continue deeper into the unknown.

Had we continued on the regular patrol, we would be meeting with a small delegation from Kakariko in neutral territory at the base of Death Mountain in the mists. Our altered course, however, seems to be taking us further towards the Zora’s Domain than the Goron’s City, away from the great peak of the mountain and into the remnants of previous eruptions that have left the range pitted and scarred. Our path is subtly, steadily downward, and with minimal illumination difficult to anticipate even for a race known for their sight. Enzo’s pack manages admirably, their ability to see into the infra-red spectrum an asset equaled only by their ability to scent individual footsteps.

Were it not for Ree’s superior sensory skills, Zelda-hanyana would not have been able to make one hour of the journey, let alone the eight hours we’ve been on the move. She is fatigued, as are Taoh, Alma, and Impa. Enzo is tiring, as is Yoru, as am I. Chia is currently the best of the lot of us, and has taken point because of it, better able to adjust to any situation than anyone else, her magic scanning the terrain ahead of our weary shuffling. She carries one tiny flame, borne of her own power and not any of our supplies directly, though she will need to eat more to maintain the power to the light steadily. I am the next in line, and so when she stops after a large incursive chamber lined with flecks of quartz I catch up easily.

“What is it?” I ask, peering around her shoulder into the next area and sucking in a hiss of breath. It’s beautiful, and so very, very frighteningly potentially lethal. The large chamber we stand in is minuscule in comparison to the gaping maw of emptiness before us, stalactites and stalagmites
that have yet to form complete pillars of stone fill the rough circle, and the only path to the other side where a second mage-light hovers is a narrow ledge. Water spills down the left hand side, slowly eroding the same ledge that encircles the lot to the point where it would not hold a quill laid flat, only to rush away further down than I want to contemplate. I step back, swallowing hard, and turn to the rest of the party, tugging gently on Chia’s clothing to get her to step away from the pit.

“We’ll make camp here, today, and move on once we’ve rested. The next chamber is too dangerous to attempt as we are.” I inform the expectant faces of our party, and Chia moves to stand next to me.

“I second that, we rest here. There is a ledge that we will be able to use, but that means traveling the entire circumference single file and in relative darkness. I’d like to give each of us, including the dogs, a mage-light to guide their steps, and need to sleep to have the power to do so.” She says, and Taoh nods.

“Granted.” The word costs him in a coughing spell, and I ache at the raw sound of it.

“I’ll take first watch.” Alma volunteers. “If you’d make more of the tea, Aein-shiik? It’s vile enough that I’ll be alert for a few hours wishing to rid myself of the taste.” It takes her five breaths to get through her words, and I nod. I will use my time and skills as best I can here, to keep everyone going.

“I’ll set up filtration sand.” Enzo offers, and that leaves the rest of us to set bedrolls, unload dogs, start a brazier burning, and prepare the last of the deer for both the beasts and people. I set a pot to boiling while Yoru cuts venison into bite sized pieces and make tea, then tilt the empty water skein against the trickling wall of water to hopefully fill enough for some wash water.

Laying out my own bedroll, I call first Taoh, then Alma, then Zelda over, and either massage or apply point-pressure with my needles to ease some of the tension away. I cannot get rid of all of it, but I can soften some of the pain. By the time I’ve turned my attention to Impa’s ribs, there is a thin broth ready, and we break for the minimal nourishment. Jae’s leg is scabbed over well, and not hot to the touch, which leaves only preventative treatment and morale as concerns. The oppressive atmosphere leaves little desire for storytelling, and there is no space for dance. I can, however, sing, and so I do even as I set up another dose of tea for when we wake and the remaining oats for breakfast. Water, too, will be a concern tomorrow. Hopefully there is enough in the trickle to help.

Yoru joins me for three songs before he tires and curls up to sleep, and I notice that most of the rest of the party has already done so. Alma remains awake, grimacing as she sips her cooled tisane and coughing rarely. Impa and her charge are also still awake, and I can hear Impa murmuring translations of my songs to the blonde child between verses. Two more songs, and they too, have succumbed to slumber, curled against each other as though they were blood kin. I smile softly at Alma, and let myself drift off as well.

Chia wakes me for morning watch, which is just as well, seeing as the last of our oatmeal is about to burn. I pull it from the coals and stir hard to cool the whole down, and dump the rest of the honey in. That’s it, then. Aside from a bulb and a half of garlic, roots that can’t be eaten only ground and steeped, dried leaves dehydrated past the point of reconstitution, and the leather of our clothing and bags, we’re out of edibles. Either we find some way to resupply today, or turn back and hope for the best. Fortunately, the trickle of the water wall has been enough to fill not one, but three water skeins, so we won’t dehydrate before we starve. There is plenty of coal to burn, and as the end of my watch closes, I encourage everyone to put on an extra pair of socks or tunic. Warmth will keep the hunger at bay a while longer, and I scrape the pot clean of every last drop of
nourishment.

Mostly fortified, if not content, Taoh has us break out coils of rope and lacings, securing each member of our party plus two together. That way, should any of us slip, the rest will be able to pull them back up. Hopefully. If too many crest the edge, they will drag the rest of us down with them to our most likely very messy deaths. I swallow, and focus my eyes on the path ahead, where each foot will be placed, and ignore the vertigo that could lead me to lightheadedness at best, dizziness at worst. Outside, where I can see where I will fall, my fears are easily manageable. Over a deep enough body of water, there is even an illicit thrill. Here, in the deep darkness broken only by Chia’s mage-lights, visual acuity is at a premium even for my fully activated and steadily draining other-sight. My heart beats double time, and I can only breathe shallowly as we shuffle along, one ilm at a time.

At least I am no longer the one with the shortest stride or slowest pace. We must keep to Zelda-hanyana’s measured movements, and for a Hylian this must be absolutely terrifying. Their eyes are not even half of ours, let alone half of mine, though they can hear far, far better than any of us could ever hope to. Perhaps it is that hearing that allows her to place her feet so assuredly, to move forward with only the barest occasional hesitation. Perhaps it is Nayru, guiding her chosen. The presence of the Goddess is palpable, so I would not be surprised if She is taking pains to ensure that Zelda-hanyana does not misstep. Perhaps that all of us don’t, bound together as we are. The thought is enough to calm my racing heart to a simple agitation instead of the gut roiling fear that has threatened my breakfast more than once. Carefully, we move onward, desperation alone the only guide that would lead us towards such uncertain ends.

And yet, it does end. Nearly three hours after setting out, we are once again coiling the rope and breathing easier for only having one slip, one scare, the entire way around the cavern. The chamber we stand in is small, barely enough room for the living beings, let alone our gear, but no one wants to stand near the previous chasm and no one wants to take lead for the only path that continues onward. There is a drop, the height of a man and the circumference of two, that leads to a tunnel that we will have to crawl through. Enzo, the largest of us, will have to either drag or push his pack along before or aft, as he is only just small enough to fit. Should the tunnel decrease in height or width at any point, he may be in trouble. We must move onward anyway, and I am grateful that Chia says she can hold the mage-lights for hours yet. Bad enough to descend into such claustrophobic environments, to do it without being able to see would be torture.

It has been nearly a year since I have addressed any of my prayers to Farore specifically and solely, but I take the time now. My nerves are already shot from the ledge and chasm chamber, this tunnel will take everything I have to attempt. Yoru has no such difficulties, preferring the tight, confining comfort of enclosed spaces, and Zelda is so small she could comfortably sit. Impa’s ribs are a distraction, and I remove all her baggage in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure they will be forced to bear. She in turn, assures me that it will not be for long, that she can feel Derinkuyu’s seal beckoning her.

I hope that it is the seal and not some other Shadow magic holding the mountain from collapsing on us all.

Alma draws a short straw, and Enzo the longest, setting them as lead and last. Zelda-hanyana and Impa-yana have the guarded middle, with Taoh and Yoru ahead and Chia and myself behind. Five of Enzo’s dogs go first, to dig and scent trouble before Alma even arrives, and five behind, to push as needed. Water keeps hunger at bay for a time, but as we descend into the narrow tunnel the ache of an empty stomach is a constant companion. It does provide something to focus on other than the mountain surrounding us, and for that I am grateful. Better to fret about a future that I can do nothing about than concentrate on my present misgivings and have a panic attack. If all
peoples must complete so harrowing a journey, I am not surprised Derinkuyu remains no more than a legend. I may stay there for the rest of my life, if we arrive, simply to avoid having to travel this path again.

There is a fine layer of grit beneath my hands and knees as we crawl forward, and that turns to clay after what seems like hours but is probably no more than three sets to a full space of time. The fine grain ensures that the paste adheres to our clothing and skin even as it clumps and matts the dog’s fur, and washing it out will be a task that, while unpleasant, is something other than the current environment for me to focus on. Despite the mage-lights, it is difficult to see ahead simply because the form of the person blocks most of the light. My limbs ache from the unaccustomed strain of our movement, and I hear Alma and Taoh coughing more and more frequently. Should either of them fail, there is no way for us to turn around or drag them from the tunnel, which would effectively trap us here as easily as the tunnel itself collapsing.

My mind is numb with that cheery thought for the next full mark, and even when we emerge one at a time at the other end into a large chamber too low to stand upright in, it stays paralyzed and blank. We take a longer break, to drink, to rest, to recover as best we can before pressing on. The clay has left our party one uniform grey-brown from chin to toe, allowing individuals to blend in with the walls and ceiling as it dries, and the floor where it remains damp. The heat from the earth itself keeps a chill from setting in, but that does not prevent Alma and Taoh from shivering, even though they are warm to the touch. Sickness is an enemy I do not have the tools or ability to fight here, would not even if I had been called to the path of a chiurgeon or physician instead of shiik. All I can do is keep them hydrated and ease muscle strain with massage and delicate use of my needles.

We continue. Surprisingly, Impa takes the lead even though her trance is deeper and more pervasive than my phobia induced blankness. Yoru falls behind to watch our backs, and the dogs range out to the sides even as Enzo takes up the packs of our pike-lady and our leader. While we no longer have to crawl, the stooped shuffle is little better, even if we cover more ground in less time. Chia lets three of the lights fall to conserve her own energy, and then Impa is stopped in front of a fissure in the wall that glows faintly, waiting for the last of us to arrive and focus on her.

“Pay no attention to what your eyes tell you.” She murmurs, the silence of centuries of stone pressing down around us. “There is a passage here, less than four strides long, that leads to the entry chamber of Derinkuyu. Simply guide yourself with a hand against the rock, and come swiftly.” Instructions given, the Sage places her own hand against the luminescent rock and moves surely through the opening. Hesitantly, Chia follows, then Taoh, and I realize that they cannot see the gap as I can. Their eyes are not as strong. Alma is next, then Yoru, and I turn to kneel next to the Hylian girl who is the hope of my heart.

“My hand, you have. Together we go.” I say in poor, accented Hyrulean, and am rewarded with a solemn nod and a small palm placed in mine, the dirt and grit covering soft skin and faint trembling. I step first, using that hand to guide Zelda through the fissure in the stone and into a chamber that has clearly been touched by intelligent hands and modified to suit their purpose. The sigils of the twelve clans lie equidistant apart from the center glyph of a large weeping eye, three triangles forming the lashes and the pupil filled with an amethyst easily the size of my head. It amplifies the magic swirling through the entire chamber, wisps brushing against each living being as though testing us.

That thought is confirmed as Impa places her hand on the stone and the faint lines leading from it fill with power, the crazed fracturing of stone shifting to regular patterns with a grinding of hidden gears and a small explosion of dust. That dust in turn rises in the faint light to coalesce into a large form, half again taller than Enzo. The brown of the stone itself lightens and solidifies into the
strange creature taking shape before us, and a pair of eyes as dark and glistening like obsidian open with apparent good humor.

“Who calls me from my resting?” The words are clear, the voice deep, but the ghost Goron’s mouth does not move. Perhaps it is old enough to not require the motions of life to communicate, or perhaps he, now that I can see the markings on the surface of his stone body, has forgotten what breath is. Though linguistically there is no separate identifier for gendered pronouns, the rare female is painted with swirls of fertility, while the males have more abstract and angular designs in the current fashion, though they all bear the mark of the jewel that is theirs to guard. She is impressive, and there is power here, warm and comforting, and I feel my muscles relaxing under the gentle heat.

“Han Impa, Sage of Shadow, daughter of Han Kiyou, who was the niece of Noh Shiah, the previous Sage of Shadow, calls upon Tarakin Cor Gorko in place of Darunia Cor Amoto, the current Sage of Fire, to open the pathway to Derinkuyu for refugees from Hyrule and the Shaekha’ri Federation.” Impa intones, and I note the names she gives, hoping that in my exhaustion I can recall them with enough accuracy to ask about later. Even if I cannot, I see the glint in Chia’s eyes, and know that between the two of us the information will be recalled.

“I have felt a great perversion steal over the Temple, have you news of what happens in the land where the Goddess first came to us?” Tarakin questions, and I am impressed with his ability to function without physical form. Most ghosts are either the same type of repeaters as I recently encountered, or become so focused on the task or situation keeping them from crossing over that they cannot break from it, or, often, become Poes. That this ghost remains so coherent is impressive enough, when I think that he has lasted the length of a Goron’s lifespan at least, it boggles the mind. The only decay of personality is the lack of motion in speech, and the distinct lack of feet beneath the knee. Having no need for either breath or walking, those organs responsible slowly degrade. When my grandchildren’s grandchildren have forgotten their youth, Tarakin may be little more than a wisp of light, but it will probably take longer than even that.

“I have word, and will tell the tale once these with me have had a chance to recover from our journey.” Impa promises, and Tarakin nods.

“I will open the way for you, but it will be a full cycle of the seasons before I will have the strength to return for your story, Han Impa. Next time, use the front door if you would.”

“I will endeavor to do so, Tarakin Cor Gorko.”

“Mmm.” Tarakin rumbles, and his form dissipates into the stone itself. The ever present warmth turns to real heat as the wall behind the glyphs turns from dark grey to sullen garnet, through blood red and into white hot that stings my skin even from across the room. In the space of nine slow breaths, the stone is once again cooled, but an arch wide enough for us to pass three abreast remains, the floor so level water would puddle instead of run. At first, I am convinced that the process is repeating further on, that Derinkuyu is still hours away on our journey, as the other side of the archway is filled with near blinding, brilliant light. It takes walking through it for me to realize that, for the first time in days, I am seeing the light of the sun.

The spill of rocks we emerge from is a part of an immense caldera made larger yet by the conjoined caldera to the east. The entire interior is filled with green, growing plants in every stage of development. I recognize the overgrowth for what it is, at the edge of an orchard of a strange yellow fruit that I have heard of and seen one hastily sketched picture in the sand for recognition. Chattering humanoid creatures with large heads and eyes with fur of a variety of shades of violet break off their conversation to stare at us. We stare back, until one of the smaller ones, most likely a child, plucks a
bunch of the fruit from the tree and scampers over to present it to Zelda. She in turn, takes the gift with a formal bow and words of thanks, then hands the long yellow bundle to her guardian. The mauve juvenile returns to the group it had previously been with, chittering excitedly.

“Aein-shiik, if you would be so kind?” Impa asks, holding the fruit out for me to take. I do, already noting what the fruit is telling me by color and texture. The skin is thick, smooth, and the soil beneath me seems to welcome it, though my intuition is telling me not to eat the skin itself. It smells sweet, slightly starchy, and fibrous, and I pull the worn scalpel I use for harvesting from my belt and slice through the skin of one, giving off a second, more powerful burst of scent. Inside, the flesh is firm and white, almost creamy in texture, and free from pits or stones.

“What can you tell me?” I ask the fruit, the spirits of the tree itself, and the little gods of this place. Taking a small portion of the fruit from the skin, I place it just into my mouth, clasped in my teeth ever so gently, and taste. Slowly, moving the piece though my mouth and touching each area of my tongue and teeth, paying attention to the sensations that arise, I learn much. Chewing the fruit teaches me more, and pleasure comes from consuming it entirely. I nod to myself, and hand a fruit to each member of our party, with the rest going to Enzo for each of the dogs to have some.

“It’s safe to eat the fruit itself, when the skin is ripened to a yellow with few to no brown spots. Green will cause digestive stress, and overripe fermentation nausea and intoxication. Like most fruit, there is a good deal of sugar, so it is a quick source of energy, and seems to have some stomach-soothing properties. Regular consumption helps with the heart and the bones, and will produce a mild spirit of happiness.” I tell them, the words coming from that place inside me that holds knowledge I have no right to access, but I am told is a part of my gifts. I trust it unquestioningly, and take a firm bite of the fruit I have already broken both to inspire confidence and because I am hungry and it tastes good.

Once the fruit is consumed, I bury the skin and encourage the others to do the same. Task complete and feeling much better for the sustenance, Alma holds out the lot sticks for us to draw. Before any of us can move, however, slow clapping echoes across the clearing. Yoru goes for his daggers, Alma for the staff of her pike despite the lack of a head, Taoh for his bow, and Enzo his short sword, even as the clapping turns to laughter.

“Good show, good show!” A voice calls, and from the foliage three people emerge, seeming to melt out of the shadows themselves. I find myself relaxing at the sight of them. The one that spoke takes the place of a leader and spokesperson, a step ahead and centered between the other two. She wears the garb of clan head, though instead of one of the twelve clan symbols the weeping eye adorns the front of her tabard, the red dye nearly identical to the shade of red of her eyes. To her right is a scout-ranger, dressed much as Taoh is, though her garb is designed as camouflage in this particular environment. The last, to the left, holds a drawn blade steady and with great competence, his stance relaxed and ready.

“Sohna, why am I not surprised you are here?” Impa asks, sounding exasperated. Zelda looks at her guardian with no small amount of shock, for her tone is familiar and ironic, and the child is no sluggard when it comes to picking up words in our tongue. How much she understands is debatable, but I am certain she will have mastered Shaekha’ri long before I have an even moderate proficiency in Hyrulean. At the familiarity, though, all drawn weapons are returned and a wary respect offered in the postures of the warriors present.

“I am surprised it took you so long to recognize my gifts with Resusangeul bi Hundeou as your charge.” This Sohna returns, grin wide and fixed in place. “The only thing I do not know is the how, the names of your escort, and how quickly you must all be seen by a healer.” I would take offence at her words, but we are truly a sorry lot. Covered in dirt and grime from our journey,
insufficiently nourished, ill, and with wounds that I can do nothing about, the concept of being
tended to by an actual healer is more than a little appealing. My skill is enough to sustain and
ensure that someone gets to the help they need, not to treat major injuries or cure illness rapidly. A
true healer would be a blessing, and I nearly sag in relief over the offer.

“The how can wait, and introductions can be conducted on our way to your healer.” Impa
insists. Her ribs are the worst of our ailments, though we could all benefit from attendance by a
professional.

“Our home is perhaps a space distant, then. If you would follow me?” Sohna instructs,
and with her two attendants falling in behind her, it is a simple matter to trail behind.

“My charge’s name is Zelda, of Hylia’s line.” Impa begins, though walking, talking, and
breathing seems to tire her quickly. “Taoh is eldest and leader of the party I stumbled across on my
way here. His second is alternated between the pike-lady Alma and the beast-master Enzo, who will
have to introduce his pack himself, as I am only certain of four of the ten. Chia-han is an elemental
mage of fifth rank ability. Yoru and Aein are twins, on their journey late as Aein is shiik for his
home village and had to wait until there was another to take over his duties there. Yoru is a master of
both dagger and sword.

“Welcome, all, to Derinkuyu.” Sohna calls, her voice strong and steady, clear in the early
evening air. “I am Yin Sohna, master of the sealed city, though our population is no longer what it
once was and we are lucky to call ourselves a town now. We maintain this place as sanctuary in
times of extreme duress, and have taken vows to never set foot through the connections to the land of
the Goddesses on pain of death of both body and spirit. You are not under the same constraints, and
thus, should those of us that remain catch you attempting the journey without divine precedent, we
will not hesitate to cut you down where you stand with no warning and no quarter given.” She
delivers the words in the same nonchalant tone as one would discuss regular, pleasant weather, and I
feel myself pale.

“I am Su Kairi, scout and ranger.” The smaller woman adds, not looking back.

“And I am Dar Hahron, weapons master.” Given his ease with the blade, one of five I can
see on his person, I am not inclined to doubt his word, and know that Yoru will want to test himself
in the circle against this man.

“If you choose to obey our laws, we will offer you a place among us if you are so
inclined. If that is not to your preference, we will allow you to heal, provision you for a week’s
journey, and escort you to one of the exits that lead into the mists or back to the lands held by the
Federation. As you are a fully formed party so distant from known settlements, I am certain that I
will not have to encourage you to hold your own and contribute to our population as best you can if
you choose to stay. I am also certain that those duties will require some form of communication with
your masters at the least, and our birds are at your disposal.” Sohna informs us, and, as she continues
to drone on about duties and responsibilities and laws and expectations I find myself recalling
seemingly endless hours of the very same at my studies back home. Verbatim.

Confident that I will not miss anything of great import with only half my attention on the
small welcoming party I allow myself to drift, my mind observing but doing nothing beyond that
simple task. Making no judgments or suppositions, neither anticipating nor lingering, the journey to
the actual settlement within the twinned craters passes quickly. There are perhaps sixty, maybe
seventy people living here, and aside from Zelda herself, Yoru and I are easily the youngest present.
It is also obvious that this was once, truly, a city. The derelict buildings and massive overgrowth of
plant life alongside the calls of wild and feral animals lends a sense of desolation to those that
remain. The thought of so many people together is as wondrous as the fact that this place features prominently in many of the legends we were told as children.

Sohna leads us to a building fully five stories high, made of stone and brick and mortar and, at the base level at least, a substance that I must assume is cement. Hard as stone, grey-scaled and smooth, there are no signs of cabling or laying, no cracks at all to be seen. The amount of limestone that would need to be transported makes me pale at the expense, though I can tell why it would be seen as necessary. Tile lines the walls, and there is not a speck of dust to be found no matter how hard I look. The cleanliness is impeccable, and when tending to wounds or illness, such measures are without peer in maintaining the health of the patient. We are abandoned to the ministrations of the resident healers, Juen-sai and Darak her apprentice, whose homes are the fourth and fifth stories respectively. Darak is human, and I marvel at the blending of elemental influences in his person. It is a precarious balance, but harmonious all the same.

He leads Enzo and his pack back out of the building to a two story structure across the roadway that he says is the same type of facility but for the furred, feathered, and four legged, with a doctor specializing in their care in residence. It pleases me that Jae will be seen to by the best type of healer possible for his injuries. Within the space of an hour, just as the sky is beginning to darken, Taoh and Alma have received treatment and will be spending the night in the small rooms for patients that Juen-sai has stocked with a cot and little else, but for such a short stay nothing else is really needed. Enzo’s strained muscles are being massaged by a professional, Chia’s exhaustion treated through something I’ve only heard of.

She lets me taste some of the blue potion, and I am immediately thankful that I probably won’t need any. Hopefully. Please. Yoru just needs food and rest. Impa is placed on the second floor by means of a lift, and will not be leaving until her ribs and the bruising and broken skin is healed completely. Her red potion smells better than Chia’s blue, but better does not mean good, and I learned my lesson tasting the first without smelling it beforehand.

Zelda is given a green potion and a cot is brought into Impa’s room when it becomes apparent that Juen-sai’s book-learned Hyrlean is insufficient to communicate effectively with the small girl. Finally, it is my turn, and Juen-sai is merciless in her examination not only of my physical person, but of my treatment methods of the rest of the party. I learn much from her in a very short amount of time, even though she mildly terrifies me with her level of skill. I could never hope to match her, and am glad that I will not have to try. There is no shiik here in Derinkuyu, which leaves my areas of expertise as inexpertly treated as the physical wounds I have dealt with over the last few moons. Darak brings a thick, mild curry for each of us, filled with turmeric and tasty, for all it has us yawning nearly constantly after we finish. He takes spoons and bowls from lax fingers and guides Yoru and myself to empty rooms on the third floor just in time for us to seek out the cots within and fall asleep.
The Sweetest Sorrow

Chapter Summary

Virtue. Love. Measure.
Choose.

Chapter Notes

And let the content requiring tags and warnings commence.

To have been fortunate enough to spend a full turning of the moon from dark to light and back again here in the City of the Lost is an honor beyond my wildest imaginings. To have explored her abandoned streets and vacant buildings and encounter the tendrils of memory that remain a true blessing. To see a recollection of my grandparents’ generation being bundled and carried as children from here to the far flung reaches of the Federation where the ashes of their bones now rest is a treasure of incomparable value. To witness the suffering of those that remained, to guard what could not be erased, tears at my very soul. To see Zelda-hanyana bring them hope once more…

A child, amongst these Shaekha’ri, is unwise, for their small population requires a dangerous level of inbreeding if it is to propagate, and none wish to risk the warping of mind, body, and spirit that such things can cause. Though past their prime, nine of the women and their partners have requested that I fulfill all the duties of my position while the others of my party recovered, and five of them will grow round in the coming moons as a result of that fulfillment. I am delighted in my ability to provide this type of service so rare for one of my calling, for normally the creation of life is a duty of a couple and not the shiik who walk the line between life and death. Though our Goddess holds Death and Rebirth in each hand, life is the domain of others. She is the crossing, transience and transcendent for us mortal creatures. I also greatly appreciate the gifts the women have given me as I cannot in good conscience accept payment. That they would house, heal, clothe and feed us all is payment enough, in my mind.

Taoh’s drumming has netted him a handful of admirers, as has Alma and Yoru’s foray to the far eastern quadrant of the double calderas to control the population of wolves. Chia has been comparing training techniques with the other elemental mages here to the benefit of both, for a student may need a differing method of instruction than the teacher learned from. Even Enzo and his pack have made themselves useful, ranging the far reaches and bringing in feral stock for the pot almost daily. He left two days ago to fully provision every larder left, for we leave tomorrow morning to head back on our circuit. Impa and Zelda will remain, for the dark clouds over Hyrule have not dissipated once since our arrival, and Impa’s connection to the Temple there is telling her of atrocities occurring with regularity as the taint from a thief of a Geru’do King spreads.

But these are not things that we can help with, without breaking the oaths of our ancestors, and I have made promises that I must personally keep or their breaking will bruise my individual honor, and my reliability as a professional. I can, however, ensure that Enzo receives a welcome he will not soon forget. Using the opportunity presented by not only a proper bed, but oils that are not
regularly available on the trail, I intend to seek the carnal sensuality in him before I am no longer able to without consequence. To this end, I have done my utmost to prepare for the evening. When Taoh’s cough lingered beyond the first week, I began a slow but effective method of preparing my body. At the full moon, I started gathering items. With his waning, both brother moon and I learned to let free the things that poison us and clean as thoroughly as possible. Now, on the second night of his waxing, I have performed my ablutions, prepared a meal, and turned down the sheets.

Turning to the gifts I have been given, I select a few subtle cosmetics, and apply them with minimal error, requiring only one full cleaning and restart. Having cleansed myself marks ago, and not eaten since, the scent of the meal held warm by a small flame makes my stomach rumble and I brush the freshly shorn skin with my fingers, delighting in the smooth, soft texture. My hair I bind with delicate chain and indigo dyed ribbon, and slide into the silk wrap-robe of the same color. This shade, worn only by the shiik and those dedicated to Mokara, brings the brilliance of my eyes into sharp contrast, and a dab of oily wax lends a subtle sheen to my lips. I will not have to use the rouge to give my cheeks the flush of youth or arousal, for the oil soaked leather buggerclaw brushes near my prostate once it is firmly in place, making me move carefully and glad of the thick silken cord to physically aid me in not ending the night before it begins.

Despite having tended to the results of arousal from eager anticipation earlier, I have become well acquainted with what Enzo can do with his mouth and hands, and without some sort of aid in keeping my body ready and wanting I would have needed no other stimulation aside from my mind to find my pleasure. Even with that cord, between the buggerclaw and my imagination, it is a close thing. I must pause in my motions, recite numerical patterns, and think of what would happen if Impa and not Enzo was the one to arrive for my carefully planned and presented sensual offerings. The memory of his weight on me, lips on my skin, fingers exploring is enough to have me fairly vibrating with want as I wait for his arrival.

It is late afternoon when he returns, his pack bringing a bull Ordon goat and two bull feral cattle on travois behind him, with three grouse and one rabbit gutted and cleaned on his shoulder. He will not have to butcher any of the meat, those in the city far better at using all parts and cutting without destruction than he is, though his dogs will still get their fair share of the offal and the livers and hearts will be quickly baked and dried for them for tomorrow. I watch through the small window of the sturdy home I’ve been housed in that held the last shiik Derinkuyu had until he passed nearly a decade ago. The lack of naturally occurring weather has kept the place sound, but the dirt of years is difficult to be entirely rid of and some of the books show water damage. The animal-healer Hanya points Enzo towards my temporary home and I duck out of sight before he turns, knowing that she will have relayed my message of bath, food, and massage awaiting him.

The bathing room is on the ground floor, the second room that any clients I am to see must travel through to reach the treatment area. The first is simply a change room for their personal effects that locks behind and must be opened from the inside to ensure that no thieves grow overbold. He will spend a quarter mark sluicing the dirt and blood from his person in those baths, and the clean, patterned robe I have left out for him should show his shoulders well and compliment his coloring.

I wait, listening for the sounds of water emptying from the large washbasin fully deep enough to cover Enzo to his shoulders if he so wishes, and when I hear it, snuff the flames and uncover the series of dishes I either prepared myself or requested from others in exchange for services rendered beyond their asking. Ranging from a song or dance, sending memories to their dead, and creating barriers for storage to the opportunity to see the first attempt at using the leather-sheathed wooden form of the buggerclaw, I count them well worth the expense as Enzo’s crimson gaze alights on the spread before him.

I was right, the robe conforms to his profile well, though I cannot judge the fit as he has
left the sash tied quite loose and the fabric gapes open from neck to navel. The low growl that comes from his throat is hungry, though I did misinterpret that need drastically. Instead of joining me at the low table to eat of his favorite dishes and rest from his journey, he strides from the door to my side in three swift steps and kneels to take my face in his hands and kiss me breathless. I don’t really mind, but as he presses me back and down the buggerclaw shifts and presses in a most interesting manner and I gasp out a breathless cry against his lips.

“Aein-ah?” He questions, his face still close enough to breathe my breath and taste my scent. He smells of clean skin, canine, damp hair, and arousal. I pant through the rush of blood and the blocked burst of desire before I can answer him, and my whispered words have him moaning and further ravaging my lips before leaning over me enough to shift his arms beneath my thighs. He lifts my legs upward and out, splaying the bottom of my own robe open wide. I roll back and feel rather than see him test the base of the toy inside me, then pull it out in a quick yank causing me to arch up. He uses the opportunity to roll me to my knees. I would cry out, but I have no air to do so, and then he is undoing the belts and ties of my robes, the hem flipped over my back. I struggle to help, only to be distracted by the sight of his arousal standing tall and proud between his spread thighs and the parting of his robe. Red and thick and already weeping with want, it clashes horribly with the yellow tones of the fabric and I couldn’t care less.

That glimpse is all I get as warning for his girth before it is breeching me steadily. The smooth slide of heated flesh is exquisite as he fills me past all yearning, and then more. What minor pain of stretching muscle I feel is quickly covered as he conforms his chest to my back and uses those powerful thighs to drive me one ilm at a time across the floor. I know my knees and palms will be pink for days to come even as his hands grasp my hips and he pulls back, hauling me with him to place me fully on his engorged cock. The oil of the buggerclaw is fading, and I am glad he has the presence of mind to reach for the small flask I’d placed near the cushion and reapply at the point of our joining. That addition of a drop more lubrication turns the friction within me from good to wonderful and I murmur my enjoyment between thrusts. Having him pulsing within my body is a sensual pleasure that I am fiercely glad to have experience of, and feeling his release coat my inner walls nearly makes up for the lack of my own completion.

He lays, panting, across my back, pressing me into the floor, his dick a hot and heavy penetration to my very core that pins me down, for longer than it takes our heart beats to return to normal. Eventually, I shift, discomfort making itself known by the burning need between my legs, and manage to undo the cord keeping me from finding my pleasure. Enzo sees, and groans, the rumble starting in his belly and clawing its way out his throat, the entire process echoed through the skin of my back. I feel him moving, and his cock slips from my reddened hole long enough for his hands to spread my buttocks and line up again.

The drive of his dick deep into my center is slow, leisurely, and I know he is watching my body part for this most intimate invasion. The moisture of his first release aids the slick motion and lends a squelching sound to each press of his hips. They are spaced well apart, for he seems to delight in pushing inward as far as he can go, his thighs and balls pressed against my own, and seeing if he can get me to moan by making his cock move within me. The flex and press of those small muscles soon has me writhing and drooling, fighting the fabric that still binds my arms if only to get some sort of hold on reality aside from Enzo’s penis doing its best to touch my lungs. The withdrawals are just as achingly patient as he pulls back enough so that just the head remains in the tight grip of my anus and left there as he contemplates the mysteries of the universe.

He’s already found his pleasure once, and, annoyed, I want to find mine. As he slides to the apex once more, as far away as he can be while maintaining the connection of our bodies, I snarl and surge forward enough that he falls from my body, the wet splat of semen on my legs a sign that I will have enough lubrication for what I want, now. Startled by my sudden action, seemingly stunned
that I would be more than a living, breathing fuck toy, I shove him back, straddle his waist, and use my hand to guide him back where he will do me the most good. That pressure-filled glide as he bucks upwards is delicious, and I use my own thigh muscles to ride him, and ride him hard.

While he is surprised by my motion, he is not at all adverse to it, and manages to come inside me again, the hot load buried in my bowels enough to finally, finally set off my own climax. I spasm around him, and, oversensitive, he mews softly as I slump onto his chest. Sweaty, tired, and aching in new and interesting ways, I grumble my discomfort as he goes flaccid and falls from my body to smear oil and semen across my inner thighs. Recovery turns to a light doze, as we both cool down and the moisture between and on us and in me starts to dry and flake. Our robes are ruined, and will have to be thoroughly cleaned before they will be good for anything, and that limited to tasks involving menial labor. The food is cold, but most of it is fine. Fowl roasted in rosemary and root vegetables, cabbage in a vinegar dressing. Buttered yeast bread. Baked apples. Enzo’s stomach rumbles, and I laugh softly.

“Sorry Aein-ah, I completely ignored your meal.” He apologizes, face reddened.

“Plans rarely last past the first engagement.” I quote the book of Din at him, and lever myself off his firm torso. Since my clothing is probably going to the rag heap, I have no qualms about sitting on the stained and…yes…torn fabric to portion myself a plate, leaving the majority for the beast-master’s hunger to be sated now that other appetites are satisfied. So placid after orgasm, neither of us speak as we chew our way methodically through the meal. It is tasty, and somewhat restores my energy levels, which is good because I desperately want a bath before bed. I am not expecting that it would restore enough energy for Enzo to join me before I am done a preliminary rinse in the near miraculous bathing facilities here.

Water, at any time of day, hot or cold, at the turn of a spigot. The two men and their apprentice who look after the plumbing explained water-pressure, geothermal springs, and hydraulic bearings to me when I asked, and I understand that no true magic is involved, but such things are unheard of anywhere else that I know of. I find I prefer the steady stream of rain-like water from the shower to the tub, but after Enzo uses the last of the vial of oil and I discover the texture of the tiles on the wall, the tub and a longer soak seem in order to soothe my aching muscles. I hope I can walk tomorrow. Enzo solves the problem tonight by carrying me to the bed, kissing my forehead, and leaving me to my dreams.

It is the herbalist of Derinkuyu that gently shakes me from my slumber, her wizened visage so much like my own grandmother’s before her crossing that for a moment I forget where and when I am. Sitting up, however, reminds me quite poignantly of not only where I am, but what I did that resulted in being here. I ache, and she cackles, causing me to flush. The soothing lotion she presses into my hands is both a relief and an embarrassment, for while I had thought myself ready to accept the size and shape of another man within me, I had forgotten that the shape and size in question shifted and moved for the duration. Sweet Nayru though, this is a lesson I will not soon forget. Impaz instructs me on the usage of the lotion and scolds me gently when she is finished, leaving a basket with breakfast by my bedside for me to consume once I feel ready to sit on my tender behind.

A few deep breaths and pain-blocking exercises later, I find two small cakes filled with berries, a link of cold sausage, and two hard boiled eggs. They are arranged rather crudely, and I laugh at the older woman’s coarse humor. Her daughter is one of the five women that will be bearing a child a cycle from now, and so I take the gift for what it is. The Book of Nayru says that “The one who can laugh at her own foolishness will never be without joy”, and it is rather funny. I eat my breakfast, dress, and check my packs one last time before heading towards the town square. Thanks to Impaz’s intervention, I am not the last to assemble, but I am by no means the first. Chia bids a laughing farewell to Enzai and Hora, kin-cousins that she had never thought to exist before
coming here. Truly, there is nothing that occurs without cause, especially in the realm where the Triune departed and Their chosen Guardian descended.

That reason may be that an individual is stupid and makes poor decisions, but that is still a reason. I do my best not to be one of them, and am quiet as we wait for Alma to join us. She arrives, flushed and happy, and I feel my eyes widen in surprise at the life stirring within her. If all goes according to plan, then we should be home before she starts to show, but if all went according to plan, we wouldn’t be here in the first place. I make a mental note to ensure she receives a fair portion of our meals for the duration, to protect that precious potential, and draw the long stick when Taoh passes them around. We have been assured that the gate we will be using is much less arduous than the one we took on our arrival, and I am thankful for it. We will emerge somewhat further from our original circuit than is ideal, but I count it a small price to pay and know that the leaders of our party concur.

Sohna and a contingent of representatives accompany us to the gate, including both Impa and Zelda. My soul aches in parting from her, yet I will be allowed to run a small deviation from this circuit again if I ask, and from the state of Hyrule as seen through Impa’s informants and the small delegation present in the land itself, the conflict there will take many years settle. If she is my age when she can return to her homeland she will be most fortunate. I hope to return here many times during that time, to see what kind of woman she will become.

Farewells given, all that remains is for us to traverse the gate. This one, rather than being a shadowed crevice in an obscure wall difficult to reach and impossible to stumble upon, is a perfectly cut circle placed in the stone itself. Etching of the twelve clans mark the edges, and as we approach I feel the power to activate the warping of space and time being pulled from the Shaekha’rì around us, but not our party itself. That power fuels the magic wells and grooves and sets the gears into motion, causing the entire structure to glow with the violet energy that my people are known for. That power coalesces into a round shield of an inverted triangle with a small circle at each side, then fades away to reveal a plateau in a valley that seems remarkably familiar, though I cannot place it.

“It’s the northern face of Mount Lana.” Taoh murmurs, then grins. “This is not nearly as far from our circuit as I had anticipated! My thanks, Lady.” He bows to Sohna, how returns the gesture with a wry smile of her own.

“The routes taken by our kin seem to have changed in the intervening years. Mount Lana was not originally part of any circuit.”

“A rockfall, from Brynna, and Runala’s yearly flooding have altered the courses. Lana’s face now features not only in our circuit, but the 43rd party’s as well. Here, we will only be a half turn behind schedule.” That is more than good news, and the spirits of our entire party lift further still. It will be good to be home, and relatively on time at that. The sooner we return, the sooner I can arrange my affairs, and the sooner I can return to Zelda’s side. Ummai will not believe that Yoru and I were fortunate enough to set foot in the legendary city, let alone that we met Resusangeul bi Hundeou and one of the Six Sages. Most manhood journeys are not nearly so eventful.

Chia is the first to gather her courage and step through to no seeming ill effects, though we cannot hear what she says from the other side. Enzo sends Ree, Sai, Kor, Tan and Rhis before him, and Jae and Bap rub against my leg before following their master and the rest of the pack. Taoh is next, then Yoru. My connection to him allows me to feel some of the disorientation he experiences, though it passes quickly and is mild enough to be trivial at best. I am much calmer about my own warping after, and watch as Alma and the potential life she carries are sucked into the vortex and emerge in the same breath. Biding a final farewell to the people I have lived amongst for a full moon turn, I let out a breath along with any residual tension, and step over the boundary between spaces.
My muscles lock as a bolt of energy passes through my body and back again, making all my nerves seize as muscle control fails for a fraction of a breath. Illusory flames rise to bar my path and I feel their blistering heat though they have nothing to burn and no air to feed upon. From those flames the violet inverted triangle rises and solidifies, closing off any view I may have in either direction and trapping me in the space between planes. I barely have enough time for fear to form before the shadowed circles break and form the triple triangle of the Goddesses. Their brilliance hurts my eyes and set them to watering, forcing me to raise an arm and shield my vision. It doesn’t help.

Brighter and brighter, burning away all of my superficial sense of self, the Triangles glow. Eyes closed, arm raised, cowed and filled with awe I tremble before the least remnants of the Goddesses.

.:Choose:. It is not a voice, to be heard with the ears, but rather an imperative demand not to be questioned, only obeyed.

.:Choose what?!:. I cry out beyond words from the core of my being.

.:Virtue, love, measure:. The words echo until they are all I know, and I start forward only to fall to my knees, hands splayed out before me.

.:DONE:. The words beyond language, beyond speaker and listener, reverberate. Were I not already kneeling, the weight of them would force me to grovel, and I press myself yet further down, face to the floor, searing my skin without pain, flaying my flesh without agony. I curl inward, silently screaming, too overwhelmed to cry, and feel my back burst into flames, smell my own skin cooking, as the seal of my geas is bound into the muscle and bone.

As quickly as it formed, the three Triangles shatter and swirl into the cold, inert circles surrounding the inverted triangle which appears now as simply negative space to my dazzled and nearly blinded sight. A rushing fills my ears even as the shield thins into the air and melts into the shadows of the surrounding space. I do not hurt, and am on my own two feet standing just on the Derinkuyu side of the warping gate. I know, with perfect clarity, that should I attempt the gating again, I will simply return to this place. Before I try anyways, dread sinking my stomach to my knees and knocking them together, Zelda screams, and the sound seems to trigger a chorus of similar sounds from the gathered representatives. Instead of trying my luck with the gate, I turn in response to the shriek, and agony explodes along my spine, twining around my limbs and drawing my extremities to claws.

On my knees again, wondering if I should just remain so for the rest of my life, my back feeling like so much chopped meat, I gasp in a breath and am rewarded with warm wet dripping down my torso and sides and smelling of copper and salt. I don’t need to look to know that the shape of my divine binding is staining my clothing for all to see, the rivulets of blood running down my arms is enough of a sign. I never wanted this. I didn’t ask to be singled out so obviously. Bad enough that my gifts manifested before I left the nursery, that I surpassed all my age-mates but my brother in the basic forms, and even him in learning my letters and legends. Distressing enough that the full burden of a trained and tried adult shiik fell to me just as puberty sent my concentration winging to the clouds. Ruinous for any chance at living a normal life, which is all I have ever truly wanted. Extraordinary ability requires extraordinary discipline to properly manage, a lifetime of that lesson has it engraved in my soul as the mark of the Triune is incised in my flesh.

Impossible though I knew it to be, the destruction of any hope for the dreams of a lifetime is as battering as the trial before the Three, as guiding my first soul through the crossing, as the restructuring of my outer shell. My arms tremble, give, but I am not aware as the ground becomes a
Lucidity is long in returning. I fight it, every step of the way. I do not wish to wake, to face the journey that my life’s path has taken. Juen washes me as Darak holds me up. Impaz pours liquids and pastes a spoonful at a time between my lax lips, massaging my throat to get me to swallow. Sohna speaks of the parting of the party I arrived with and I lose more days to melancholy and regret. Fierce homesickness and a longing for my parents that I have not felt for nearly a decade wrack my heart and mind. Chiol visits, laying my hand on her belly and drawing me to feel the life there, her hope and dreams given form. I weep, great heaving sobs that she wipes with patient, gentle hands, clearing my face of tears, snot, and drool. The catharsis is palpable, afterwards, and the next morning she brings her husband, sharing their simple joy, their expected lives, and reminding me that it is a gift that I have given them, that they could not have achieved any other way. Is it not, then, that in helping them attain their dreams, I have made them my own as well?

Alhan, Hana, Hora, and Innah bring tea and cakes the next afternoon, and if I am made to drink the revolting blue potion to speed recovery, the taste and the spirit of their offering make the small treats that much more delightful. That night, I am awoken when Hanya’s white and brown booted cat decides that she will have her kittens on my pillow whether my head is there or not. Two marks and three kittens later, Cheesecake is finished clearing the caul from the tiny squeaking balls of fluff, and, though I am exhausted and ache with fatigue, I am no longer sunk in depression.

That morning, Zelda trails into the room I have been placed in on the second floor of the hospice with fresh cucco meat for Cheesecake and a bouquet of hand-picked flowers for me. We go for a walk along the maintained roads, then further into the city where the small population has been unable to keep the roads clean and the homes and businesses sound. I find that I must rest frequently, and resolve to rectify the problem gradually but starting immediately. I will walk with the exiled Princess for as long as she lets me. Impa trails along behind us, unobtrusive but present, and I am reassured by her presence. Finally, we seem to reach the young Hylian’s destination, and I wince in expectation as we cross the threshold of Nayru’s altar in the large temple here. My anticipation of pain is unfounded, and I relax in the space of the Goddess who claimed me in childhood and reiterated that claim recently.

“I have dreams.” Zelda says, her Shaekha’ri clear if still awkward and slow. I make an encouraging motion to show I am listening, and she nods to herself before continuing. “I dream of what is to come. Last year, I began to dream of dark clouds over Hyrule, of a man with red hair, and a boy with a green stone. The man came to my father to offer his pledge as King of the Gerudo, to follow my father’s guidance for Hyrule. He was lying.” She pauses at the unfamiliar Hyrulean word, and I turn to Impa for clarification.

“The deliberate speaking of an untruth, or declaring an oath without effort to keep it.” She clears her throat, uncomfortable, then presses on. “It is usually for personal gain at the expense of one or more others.”

“Lying.” I try the word, not liking the way it fits in my mouth.

“The Gerudo man was lying, he wanted the Triforce for himself. Not even for the good of his people, just him. I tried to tell my father but he would not hear my words. After seven suns, the boy came to my….flower place….with the green stone I had seen in my dream. His name was Link, and the stone was the Kokiri Emerald. I asked him to help stop the dark clouds.” The girl chokes, sniffing, then wiping her face and nose on the sleeve of her tunic. “He helped, and made friends with Darunia and Ruto. They gave him the Goron’s Ruby and the Zora’s Sapphire, and he opened the gates to the Sacred Realm. We meant to set traps, that the Gerudo man could not gain access, but instead we opened the path for him. He took up the Triforce.”
“And it broke.” I murmur, knowing that such a one who would do lying could never have a balanced heart.

“It broke.” Zelda agrees, her small face grim and serious for one so young. “Power was his greed, and so Power stayed in him. Courage went to the boy from the forest.” She holds up her right hand, with the Triforce of Wisdom glowing warmly. “Obvious now.” She mumbles.

“What of Anak Silar?” I ask, and she turns to Impa for clarification.

“Master Sword.” Impa says, and I note the Hyrulean term for the Goddess’ ensouled Blade.

“Link grasped the sword and pulled it from the pedestal. He, we, were too young. It has sealed him Between, until he is ready. He has been alone there for nearly two full moons.” She whispers. I know now why she wished to speak with me. What I do not know is if I can help.

“His body?” I ask, wondering if it is splayed before the altar that would hold the Master Sword or if it has been moved.

“Taken Between, the aggregates of his person as one.” Impa says, worried, and with good reason. I feel myself pale. Between is no place for anything but the spirit. Body atrophies, mind deteriorates without stimulation, heart…dies. Even the spirit decays when left too long.

“I need your help.” Zelda says, her blue eyes ancient and deep. I swallow.

“How?”

“We have discussed it, and only ask you to try.” Impa comes forward and sits at Zelda’s feet, placing her eyes beneath mine, which are already below the Princess’ when she stands. “Wisdom is knowing what to do next, virtue is doing it.” She quotes the book of Nayru, Chapter Four, verse Thirty-six, line eight.

..Virtue, love, measure:. Whispers across my mind and I freeze.

“Virtue is the active face of wisdom.” I exhale, and part of what has been assigned as my geas becomes clear.

“Your mind and Zelda-hanyana’s mesh remarkably well.” Impa begins. “And I am certain that you are one of, if not the only one in all Hyrule, who can house two spirits in your own form without corrupting either. She cannot set foot in Hyrule proper without Mandrag Ganandorf knowing, and as she is, he would destroy her utterly in the hopes of acquiring her portion of the Triforce. Yet she cannot abandon Hyrule and all the people her father gathered under his banner, nor can she walk away from her responsibilities in opening the Sacred Realm.”

“I am at fault, if I had not asked Link to open the door, the Gerudo man could not have stepped through.” Zelda hangs her head, but we are all responsible for our own choices, and the weight of this one is hers alone to bear.

“What we ask of you is three-fold.” Impa continues. “Firstly, that you go in place of Zelda to survey the land and gather information for and from the people. Secondly, that when you are secure, you keep Link whole and hale. Thirdly, that you allow Zelda’s mind and heart to ride with you in your body, so that she may see her land and people and rally them against the Darkness, while at the same time protecting her from Ganondorf’s detection.”

“May I think about this?” I ask, needing time and calm and finding neither. Any of these
tasks they have asked of me would be enough of a trial, yet I can think of no one else that could do it within all of Derinkuyu. Perhaps there are others within the Federation, but it will be nearly a cycle of the seasons before any of my party can return, and a cycle after that at best before any specialist could be found and sent. If this “Link” is truly Between, he has a few moon turns at best.

“Do what you must, we will wait for your response in the shiik’s house.” Impa nods, and Zelda places a small hand in her guardian’s as they turn back the way we came. I watch until the derelict buildings swallow the path they follow and resist the urge to run after like an abandoned puppy. I have been granted the time for contemplation, and I shall use it for the intended purpose.

I have always felt called by Nayru over either Din or Farore, the cerebral, spiritual center the surest and most comforting path for my magic to flow. Even though my job entails close work with the lesser Goddess Mokara, Wisdom is what drives me. The heart center, Farore’s dominion, has always been strong, feeding from the core of my spirit and connecting me to those around me. It is something that I have had trouble expressing, my courage lacking. I have never been comfortable with the base center, power something I have been told I will grow into and the confidence that comes from contentment in it no more than a façade supported in sand and air. The appearance of assuredness and the casual wielding of power are inspiring to those who seek me out for my skills as a necromancer, though that is only a portion of my skills as a shiik, and so I have learned to display what I do not have.

For this reason, when I sink into the depths of my self in seeking answers, I begin by activating the spiritual center first, feeding the magic in and down to the heart, and from the heart to the base. The warmth flaring there is reminiscent of the best of the times I have had with Enzo, though the sheer ecstasy of the connection to the Goddesses overwhelms the sensation so drastically as to make it a negligible disturbance. Rooted solidly in both the physical and spiritual realms, I throw myself inward and outward, down and up, and leave this plane of reality to walk the Umbral Lines. Here, where past is present and future is seen, I travel first down the path of nothingness. To not choose, and let fate do with me what she will. It is not pretty, and the Hero who is to come is not given the opportunity to awaken.

Backtracking, I note the divergent paths and how they fade into nothingness, the vestigial remains of the choices of others. This path, alone, is truly abandoned. I will not take it again. Returning to the present is swift and sure, for it is the place where the path of Light entwines for nearly every branching. What of serving Zelda? As a spy, informant, priest of Nayru and travelling storyteller? Zelda has her information, yes, but second or third hand and little better than hearsay. The Hero awakens, but it is to a realm who has recently lost their Queen and has abandoned hope. He never makes it out of Castletown, and neither do I. At that point, however, I am so firmly the Dark King’s that it does not matter.

No, then. While certain aspects are favorable, the inevitable outcome is not. I neglect that path entirely, and seek guardianship of Link in the Between. It is a short journey, peaceful even, when our location is discovered and overrun with the minions of the King of Thieves. We die, having not lived for nearly a full cycle of the seasons. Protecting Zelda, then, is crucial, and I move to start over, finding myself growing fatigued. The energy I expend here is limitless, connected as I am in the plane of reality, but my ability to process it is limited by not only my physical stamina, but my ability to mentally adapt. Two, maybe three more journeys, and I will be finished. I seek the path of guarding Zelda by allowing her to essentially possess my physical form, and am heartened by what I see.

Moreso than the other paths, there are decisions of others that align and reinforce this choice. The loss of life is staggering, and though the Hero awakens and cleanses the Temples, it is too late to save the land itself, bereft of all but those who have sworn allegiance to Ganondorf. We
arrive at a battle where the Triforce yearns to reunite, and I cannot see beyond that. No matter the outcome, Hyrule is gone. I retrace my steps, heartsick and depressed, to take one of the remaining, intricate ways lying between those I have already chosen to see. There are many things that I cannot affect, choices made by others that are fundamentally decisive in the final outcome. Zelda, possessing me while I am at times with Link in Between, fares well. She is witness to horrors that I would have shielded her from on the other paths, but weathers them well, all things considered. She learns.

The Hero returns, and cleans the Temples. Choices made before, during, and after, change how damaged he is after each, and I ache with the need to soothe his hurts. I choose to follow the path after the third that allows me to do so, the Shade within causing injury that would otherwise be disabling at the cost of my ability to See while Zelda is in control. I count it a small price to pay. This way, this series of choices, leads me to a desert oasis, watching the Hero playing a small blue instrument whose magic pulls him through Time itself. I am found, subjected to incredible pain and degradation, and killed long past the point of begging for it. But he lives, and she lives, a large percentage of all the races of the Goddesses live, and Hyrule has hope. That I am no longer present to enjoy that hope is irrelevant.

The conscious choice to be a knowing sacrifice is one that I have made before, though never has it been so extreme or so certain. I will die here in Hyrule, never returning to my home or my people. My choices lie only in honor, and how many deaths I bring with me. I take the remainder of my time in Umbra to carve the path of this decision in my mind and heart, so that when I return to the living realm it will be something I know. Details are always lost in the transition, for a mortal is not meant to know destiny, however mutable it may be. I let myself fall outward and in, up and then down, and take a deep, steadying breath. There are tear tracks on my face and lingering nausea in my belly, and an answer for the morning.

True night has fallen by the time I have returned to the used living space in Derinkuyu, and a light has been left in the old shiik’s window to guide me. Juen-sai must feel me ready to be living on my own once more, and I will have to remember to thank her later. I recognize the scent of Hora’s baking as I tip the small side door leading to the living quarters open. The bathing rooms need to be cleaned after my extended absence, and so I forgo their use in favor of following my nose. The kitchen is clean, fresh flowers decorating the table where two sausage rolls and a covered tureen await. The fresh meat, raw and bloody on the counter, makes much more sense when Cheesecake brushes against my leg and mews pitifully.

The sausage rolls will keep until morning, and I slice the goat liver into tiny pieces and clean my hands and the counter before turning to the tureen of stewed vegetables. The proud cat cleans her plate and wanders back into the bedroom where I can hear the high pitches squeaking mews of her kittens discovering their source of warmth and food is missing. Finishing my own meal, I leave the dishes for the morning, knowing that my sought visions and their outcome will be clearer with dreaming, and snuff the lantern in the front window before heading to my own bed.

Making my way to the back of the building in the dark is not difficult, the place has been my home for nearly two moon turns, though I have spent the last in the healer’s care. There is small beams of half-moon light to illuminate the furniture and surfaces, and the ghosts of memories to show me the way. My other-sight no longer drains me, but neither does it leave. I can use it to find the cat and kittens on my bed and not jostle them at all. Large enough for Enzo to have spent the night comfortably even though he didn’t, the bed is filled with goose, cucco, and duck down compressed into a firm layer nearly as thick as my palm is long. After sleeping in a bedroll or the cots in way stations for nine months, the bed had been a luxury I did not feel I deserved, but now, seeing the sheer number of such things left behind to rot, I have no qualms in its use. Shedding my clothing one article at a time, I crawl beneath the quilted cover in nothing but my small clothes and am asleep.
The gentle tug and pull of a rough, tiny tongue on my sleep-mussed hair pulls me to greeting the dawn with grumbles and a jaw popping yawn. While I know I need a bath, having it delivered by a cat is not the method I would have chosen, if given the option. I roll and bury my face in the fresh-smelling pillow with a groan and receive a paw to the back of the head and enthusiastic purr as reward as Cheesecake continues her caretaking of her large, clumsy, inept Shaekha’ri kitten. Sighing, resigned to the process, I wait for the warm, wet tongue to finish my hair before levering myself up and out of bed. Cheesecake huffs, then begins her own grooming process as I stretch the sleep-stiffness from my joints. That is not the only morning stiffness I am experiencing, but I have no desire to do anything about it and it will fade on its own, given time.

Rubbing at my hair, already mostly undone from its braids, I yawn again and wander out towards the kitchen and the sausage rolls I left there, rubbing at my face, only to freeze and the high pitched squeak that was not a cat coming from the table. I have never heard Zelda make that sound before, but Impa’s snickering is something I am all too familiar with. Suddenly very aware of my state of near nudity before two women vastly my superiors, I feel a blush work its way up my chest and face and stammer an apology before turning around and closing the bedroom door behind me.

The snickers become full-fledged laughter as I frantically grab whatever clothing is nearest at hand and pull it on. My arousal fades quickly in the face of both shock and ridicule as I tug at a tunic that should be at least relatively clean. My hair I abandon as a lost cause, though I do tie the lot back with one of the longer slim under-sashes before emerging once more.

“Apologies, Princess. I was not expecting guests.” I enunciate in my best Hyrulean.

“We come not as guests, but, perhaps, as petitioners.” Impa replies in the same tongue, and Zelda nods.

“Perhaps.” I agree. They are waiting on my decision, then. I sigh. “It will not work.”

“But…” Zelda beings, then hushes at my raised brow. Crossing my arms, gathering my thoughts, and leaning heavily on what my instincts are screaming at me, I rest against the counter top and focus inward.

“It is too much, and not enough. I am not trained as a spy, and do not speak your tongue well enough to detect small things. There is no sense in trapping me Between with your Kokiri boy-child. There is also no sense in trapping you in me. It is…not quick? Not useful? No good.” I shake my head, and continue in the language of my people. “To do this would be a waste of resources and highly inefficient when taken as individual tasks.”

“What do you propose?” Impa returns, able to respond more quickly than her charge.

“Firstly, that I attempt to contact the boy in Between to see if the task is possible.” I begin, not entire certain that I will be able to hold steady at the space between places and the time between heart beats long enough to locate an unconscious child.

“Zelda has seen…” Impa begins.

“A possibility. You guard Resusangeul bi Hundeou and yet cannot fathom Sohna’s sight. Nayru’s gifts were never meant for Shaekha’ri to control, or was the sundering not enough of a lesson?” I snarl, unsure of where my vehemence originates but certain and confident in it. Zelda is a child with a child’s understanding of the world, no matter who has bestowed their benediction upon her.
“I am her guardian, not her teacher or her mother. It is not my place to…” The Sage of Shadow prevaricates, and I interrupt her again.

“Guarding her includes keeping her from dangerous situations in the first place, does it not?” My voice is low, soft, and as sharp as my scalpels. “I would think that includes teaching her how to think for herself and control her abilities. If you did not feel capable, you should have sent for a teacher for her.”

“There were none within my ability to summon, and her father thought them the dreams of a child.” Impa whispers, taking the momentum I have built and dashing it to the ground.

“I can learn now?” Zelda’s tremulous words are loud in the quiet of my kitchen, and I am reminded that she probably understood every word that we’ve said. Impa looks to her charge and nods.

“Yes. Yes, you can.” She whispers, then turns to me. “And I will take you to the place where the boy is sealed, that you may find him easier. What of the other tasks? Are you capable?”

“No.” My answer is honest, and takes both Impa and Zelda aback. “I am no warrior, no trained spy, and my mastery of the language is severely lacking. I would not be effective either spreading or gathering the information you would require. It would take years we do not have for me to develop any of the skills I would need. Nor, though I already have the skill for it, would Zelda possessing my form be a permanent solution. Perhaps as occasion warrants, but it is not something safely done for an extended period of time, for either of us.” My own limitations are something that I must be aware of, and I must strive to move beyond, but not at the risk of others.

“Yet Zelda must be able to see and interact with the land and people of Hyrule, and even all of my magic is not enough to hide the Triforce of Wisdom from the one bearing the Triforce of Power.” Impa admits.

“I do believe that would frighten me beyond all reason, if you could, Impa-han.” I return truthfully. She’s already so powerful, and smirks slightly at my words. “But I am not saying that the idea itself lacks merit. Only that how it is done needs adjustment.”

“Go on.” Zelda, for all she is young, has grown up surrounded by the trappings of royalty and all that accompanies such a station. Her posture shows her for the Princess she was and the Queen she will become, her bearing that of one much, much older and wiser than those twice my age. This is the Avatar of Wisdom, Resusangeul bi Hundeou that the legends spoke of. Strange how they never mention that she is a delicate girl, beautiful and poised, yet so fragile that a strong wind could knock her over. Or how Resusangeul bi Aiyuu is a boy too young to wield Anak Silar when it is needed.

“Should I find your boy in Between, I will be Between as well, and my mortal form unoccupied. If, and only if, you are secure in location yourself, you may use that time to familiarize yourself with possession, Zelda-hanyana.” I will have no use for my body, sleep a necessity of the mind to process and recover, so she may as well grow accustomed to moving about in it, speaking with my voice, and leaving her own form behind. “So, too, am I willing to wander your lands and speak your words, if you would do me the courtesy of giving those words to me beforehand, or again, speaking them yourself from my mouth.” With Zelda’s mind accessing my body’s senses, then my deficiencies would be accounted for. I told Yoru I was an instrument for her playing, though I did not mean it as literally as perhaps it appears I will be used. I consider this no different from the service I have provided for the women of Derinkuyu wishing children.

“Show me how.” She demands, and my stomach interrupts with a roar of frustration. I
smile self-depreciatingly.

“It seems that I must take care of myself first, hanyana, before I can tend to anything else.” I admit, and she smiles in return, standing and straightening her skirt before moving to tug at my arm so I stoop before her. She takes my head in her hands and kisses my forehead, then wrinkles her nose.

“Please bathe as well as eat. Your head smells of old fish.” She informs me solemnly, then takes her leave, Impa in close attendance.

Blinking in bemusement at the little leader, I turn to the cold sausage rolls first, then set a small fire to bake one of the last of the withered winter apples. Though the trees outside bear much fruit of a variety I never thought possible, it is still only late spring, perhaps early summer, and the current crop of apples are green and small enough to be a minor digestive disaster. While I am kindling the flame, the tiny house-spirit that tended to the previous shiik comes to natter at me about the state of the building, and I scour the bathing room before the sweet treat has cooked through. Leaving the still bubbling juices to cool enough to eat, I pick an outfit of somewhat finer material than I would normally wear and locate a sturdy apron and sash to wear over it. New boots, and clean underthings set aside, I savor the sweet and head to the bath.

Clean, freshly shaven, and smelling like the cedar that my current clothing had been packed in, I take the time to braid my hair in the one large tail before setting out into the midday sun. Zelda-hanyana is not difficult to find at this time of day, for her lessoning continues even now. Far less formal than the instruction she would have received before her exile, it is nonetheless as important and intensive. Instead of learning embroidery, she applies those same stitches to the hide of a recently slaughtered stock animal, in preparation for stitching the hides of wounded people. Rather than learning the proper forms of address for visiting nobility, she learns the language of my people, who in turn attempt the same in reverse. As an alternative to entertainment pieces, she plays the history-songs and learns our legends. Most importantly, rather than studying the application of cosmetics and how to lace a corset, she is finding out how to hunt, how to ride, how to run, how to hide, how to seek visions, and what magic we can teach her to help.

Though I have withdrawn from that lessoning for far too long, I still know where these tasks take place, and the spirits of the land itself flock to her as deer to a salt lick or mice to a grain bin. I need only follow my eyes to the largest congregation of such beings to locate my mistress. Today, she is waiting by one of the functioning fountains close to the edge of the city proper where the majority of the people live. Taoki the butcher has sausages grilling that smell heavily of garlic, pork, and sage, and I use some of the small coin that I carry for just such occasions to purchase a split link to share with the Hylian girl. Like most of the food she has been presented with, she smells it first and I try and fail to keep from smiling as she devours the meat from the skewer and sucks the wood to get the last of the caramelized fat. I have a small meal packed for her if this task grows long on time, for she is noticeably taller. I am thankful that Impa has charge of her for now, for there are certain changes that will happen that are better explained and dealt with by another woman than any man.

She asks for help pronouncing some of the words she has learned today while we wait for Impa to return, and the Sage of Shadow is prompt. She carries two packs which I move to relieve her of, for though her ribs have set they are not as sturdy as I would like, and we begin walking in a vaguely south-western direction around the edge of the city and slightly more south than we would take were we returning to the gate Takarin Cor Gorko let us pass through. We walk for a little more than two marks before stopping at a circle much like the one that my party passed through and barred me from leaving. Why, I still do not know. I remember pain, confusion, and loss quite well, and flinch at the sight of it.
Impa raises her right hand, palm outward, and I can see the Shadow magic working as it turns the cogs of the gate to moving. What took a dozen Shaekha’ri to accomplish doesn’t even make her break a sweat, in fact, seems to require no more effort than breathing. The formidable warrior draws a small flute and plays a six note sequence that resonates all the way to my core. I watch as the warp gate shudders to life, the channels of magic filling and churning, the gears falling back and revealing a tunnel. It takes me a moment to realize that the tunnel does not continue on forever, but rather opens up onto a room filled with stone masonry and ablaze with light.

“Good luck.” Zelda says, and I turn to see her seated on a small cushion with a scroll in hand. Before I can question her, Impa seizes my wrist and pulls me through the gate. I think my heart stops, but its pounding is loud in my ears and I realize that I am standing on an expertly cobbled floor, facing but not within the beam of afternoon sunlight that illuminates a stone dais with a strange structure in the center. There is nothing else in the circular room, and only one visible way in or out. The sanctity of this place is heavy on my shoulders, and I can’t help but curl them inward even as I move from Impa’s side, around the room, and towards the stairs leading to the dais’ peak.

The moment my foot touches the bottommost stair magic flares up before my eyes in six pillars of colored brilliance, weaving between each other tighter than even the most waterproof basket to consolidate into one dazzling pillar of power. The vivid colors merge and swirl into a beam of blinding white light that is at once familiar, comforting, and awful in majesty. I can feel myself trembling, shaky in my stance and purpose, when a firm hand shoves me forward. I stumble up the remaining three steps and am made to kneel by that same hand on the circular shield of the inverted triangle and three circles. It bursts into violet light that soothes my agitated spirit and calms my heart, familiar and safe, as Impa’s booted feet step into place at the edges of the sigil on either side of me.

I listen as she raises the flute once more and breathes a different set of six notes, watching as the other symbols light up in turn. I cannot make out more than a solidifying of the light over each circle, but I know that we are no longer alone, and I am being judged.

“No more than a boy.” A nasal, feminine voice dismisses me, and I bow my head further to watch the back of my hands splayed on the stone of the dais.

“What could you be thinking? He’s too soft.” A shrill, burbling voice grumbles.

“Such a gentle spirit will break.” A deep tone, masculine, murmurs.

“Ah, but is not Brother Link even more of a child? And yet we have all entrusted him with a task of equal, if not greater, difficulty.” The low, steady voice of a Goron rumbles from the one symbol I do recognize, that of a three pointed flame.

“A gentle heart is not a sign of weakness, but of strength controlled.” These words come from a child, younger than Zelda and just as girlish.

“He is Virtue.” Impa declares, and the mutterings of the others cease. With their full attention, she quotes the book of Nayru, chapter and verse, for them, and the chatter starts up again almost immediately.

“A necromancer? Really?” The nasal voice, louder than the others, cuts through the babble.

“Who better, than one who guides through both the beginning and end of life? A leader, bridging the one gap we must all cross?” Impa returns, and I know that I am missing something important, but dare not look up or ask for clarification.
“If he is Wisdom’s agent, he will need an equal part of our aid.” The young girl adds.

“She will need a means to call him.” The voice is less shrill, but no more pleasant for it, as though whistles and trills, wails and barks were more natural than speech.

“She is working on it as we speak.” Impa assures the shrill one. “Though she will have need of the Rian Liahr’s magic to ensure success in her song carving.”

“The Guardian Lyre is her birthright, she is welcome to it.” The child-voice is assured and calm, and I find myself liking her more and more. Her words precede silence, and I feel as much as hear Impa chuckle, though this time it is not at my expense.

“Any other objections? Questions? Concerns?” With a pause after each word the silence remains but for the last.

“What is your name, son?” The man’s voice asks, and all of the attention of these great beings is once again directed at me.

“Tor Aein, son of Ren Amai and Tor Mela, shiik of Sahila village, Eldin province, of the Shaekha’ri Federation.” I say to the stones beneath my hands.

“He’ll do.” The nasal voice admits grudgingly, and I exhale in relief. The weight of their presence dissipates as quickly as it came and Impa helps me to my feet, brushing my clothing free of invisible dirt and wrinkles. It takes all my courage to look up and meet her amused crimson gaze.

“You did well, Aein-ah.” She tells me, the affectionate diminutive shocking me into speechlessness. “Very well indeed. Now, the Sages will open a path for you, all you need to do is walk it.” She tells me, and bodily turns me back to face the few stairs leading to the strange outcropping in the center of the dais. I cannot see the details of it, for the dome of rainbow light enshrouds the peak and hurts my eyes to look at directly, but seems to be swirling in the same type of pattern that the warp gate held, though infinitely more complex.

I do not need her hands to guide me through this. It is a step that only I can take, for my own sake and the sake of the one I mean to find. There is nothing on the other side, though when I look back I can clearly see the Chamber and the silver cord tethering me there. The dream spaces, the umbral paths, the seeking ways, the Shadow, they all translate to a separate, tangible reality. Here, Between, coincides with the world I think of as the most real, but I am unable to interact with it, and it is strangely colorless and flat. From what I have heard, I must assume that it is the way Hylians and Humans must see, and wonder what Between looks like for them. I must seek a boy in green.

Green is something faded, lichen-pale and murky. A boy is small, and difficult to find. I touch the red cord twined about the silver one binding me to the real world and know then that it is what binds me to Zelda, and through her, Nayru.

Virtue. Love. Measure.

I open myself to the devotion I feel to my Goddess and her avatar, and the cord thickens, widening beneath my hands and giving me part of a hint to an indication for an answer. I know not how one increases measure, but love...love I can do. Relaxing my hold on virtue, I call up memories and feelings. My family, gathered together for the Harvest festival. My parents, singing Yoru and I to sleep. My brother, holding my hand as we stared at the stars the day before our journey began. Taoh, helping bandage my blistered feet three days after leaving Sahila. Alma, petting and holding me while Yoru was on watch and homesickness struck hard. Enzo, with his
kisses and hugs and more physical, sexual energy. Chia, meditating by my side and helping me wake the next morning. Impaz, with her crude humor and peckish advice. Zelda’s cuddles and accepting joy. Impa, for all her amusement at my expense, gently encouraging me to stand on my own.

The cord under my hands is now the width of my thumb and twining out towards the gate the Sages built to allow me here without using my own power, keeping me steady and secure and safe. All but one strand, leading deeper into the dullness. I follow, hand over hand, the scenery an indistinguishable blur as I pass. The gleam of the Triforce the only point of reference, and it is not Wisdom at the source. Nor is it Power.

Courage is a small boy, leaving all he has ever known, facing fierce and powerful enemies with no one by his side to help. Courage is not the absence of fear, but continuing on anyway. Courage is named Link, and he is awake, standing in a featureless field, turning at the sound of my footstep in the grass. He wears a crude wooden shield on his back and has a short sword he wields like a club with sharp edges, no refinement in his movements whatsoever. Yoru would be appalled. He is wary, watching me with blue eyes the color of the clear summer sky. I smile at him, and hold out my hand.

“T’ve been looking for you, Hero of Time.”
The Call of the Dead

Chapter Summary

Fledgling wings and rumors grow stronger as they fly...
...so says the cawing of the Carrion Crow.

Chapter Notes

Less direct references for things requiring the plethora of joyful tags this story has. F/M/M and F/M particularly, though possession, canon typical religious references, murder, and injury are there too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Link is a remarkably cheerful boy, all things considered. His fairy friend is excitable, loud and simple for all of her extensive knowledge. She is frustratingly earnest and enthusiastic. He is not what I expected from the legends. Knowing Zelda thrills me, makes me wish to bow my head and obey, to please her if only for a moment. The bearer of the Triforce of Courage is a child, active and curious, and I am content to simply be in his presence.

They tell me the story of their journey together while I listen carefully to what they are saying, the accented Hyrulean at times baffling me until I can learn the shape and place of the words from the ones around them. He seems to have as much trouble with my own accent, though the syntax is more likely the source of his puzzlement. I am not used to structuring my thoughts and words in such a way, and even Navi seems confused at times by my responses. What I do manage to convey however they seem to grasp quickly, and I wonder if this is how my own teachers felt when their pupil took the lesson and applied it with nary a misstep. He’s brilliant, only the lack of formal instructors amongst a people of eternal children has kept him from true genius.

Within an hour of showing him how to anchor a thought made tangible by a meshing of our magics, light and shadow both, he has a small room built in which he can play and rest. I give him the meagre meal I had intended for Zelda-hanyana and am surprised at the care he takes in its consumption. At his age, with the hunger called by rapid growth, I would have made a remarkable mess in an effort to eat everything at once. Instead, he is careful not to waste a single crumb, and I resolve to provision him appropriately, for these are the actions of starvation, and stunting this child’s growth in particular could only spell disaster for us all. Any of his growth.

For that reason, after assurances that I will return, it takes a bit of effort to get him to lie down in the bed he’s conjured from memory and hope despite his frequent yawns. Navi flutters, her light pulsing with each flap of her wings like a candle flame, and eventually flies under the boy’s cap. In time, his murmurs turn to soft snores, and I follow the red cord back to the place where Impa is waiting. The pillar of light around us no longer blinds me, but the intensity of the colors cause me to flinch before my eyes can adjust to the solidity of reality once more.

“I assume you were successful?” Impa asks, her power as the Sage of Shadow bleeding
through the pillar as the other colors dissolve away. I nod, and relay as much as I can of what I found out about Link. At the mention of his fairy, she relaxes and the tightness leaves the corners of her eyes. His hunger is unsurprising, given that he is still conscious, she tells me, and will arrange for both water and food, perishable and not, to be ready when I next attempt the journey. Only then do I realize I am on my knees, exhausted to the point where breathing is an effort. It feels as though I have run for days on end, and only just stopped. Muscles aching, I can’t help the low moan that escapes as gravity becomes too difficult to resist.

How much more will going Between cost when I am not sent, but must go alone?

The familiar sound of Impa’s chuckling is a comfort, and I am surprised when she lifts my arm over her shoulder and curls my frame inward to bend over her back. Hands secure on my waist and under my knees, I feel the muscles in her strong thighs flex as she lifts me into a carry. We do not go far, simply move from the center of the dais towards the violet inverted triangle sigil, where she sits with my limp form still in her arms. It is not the same lethargy that preceded Mokara’s calling, but rather a deep contentment, a milder version of the satisfaction and rightness that comes from a successful crossing. It is similar to the lasitude that comes after orgasm, but that passes quickly and this seems inclined to linger. A moderate death, then. I laugh at my own humor, which makes Impa shift and pet my hair gently as she sings. A nocturne, to welcome the moon cresting the stained glass windows on the eastern wall.

The flute she carries is small, and made of some alloy that has it shining a deep indigo, the same color as the sky. That nocturne sounds mournful from the throat of the wind instrument, sadder than from the Sage’s own voice. I close my eyes and let the comfort of her arms lull me to that point between waking and sleep, where dreams can seem as real as waking. It is the only explanation for some of the things I see. Illusions, misdirection, false walls and floating eyes that hover in the gloom, the ground moving, the creak of sails, the scent of incense, and everywhere I find the face of the Carrion Crow. The throaty caw of Mokara’s messengers echoes from the Shadow, and I feel their wings flutter around me, through me, calling me to join their flight. Sliding into place, between one as like to me as my twin and another his double, I feel the wind pass under me and lift to the sky.

One with the wing, we soar from the chamber towards brother moon. Spiraling upwards, the beat of the wing becomes the beat of the drum, drawing us back towards the ground. There, embraced by the mists, six centers, and there, three Golden Triangles. There…pain. Darkness, spreading outwards from around the pillar of light. It is not the Shadow, natural, normal, the other side of life. This is corruption, greed, hatred, poison, taint. Wrong. The wing turns, banking steeply and sharply, diving hard. We strike, once, twice. Again. Driving the Darkness back. But we are one and the Dark is strong. Powerful. It strikes us, separates us, and I fall, a feather ripped from flight. Caught in the violet light. Guided. Downward. I come to the resting place, the Shadows hiding me from the Dark, and sleep.

Yawning, I shift, enjoying the feel of the weave of fabric against my skin. It is very fine, smooth and soft and comfortable. The air is cool though, and I wrap myself further in the warm blankets. It smells of incense and oil, with undertones of must, water, and old blood. Like a tomb, however well maintained. Not Derinkuyu then, though the surface I rest on is far too soft to be a bier, it is not too much to assume that I am in rooms for a caretaker or priest. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes I roll to my back and find myself looking up at the smoothed stone of a seamlessly carved cavern. There is light from the lanterns of Poes, though they seem to be uninterested in my presence and remarkably coherent. I nod greeting to the one by my bedside, and it laughs before dipping in a short bow of its own.

Before the dead, my nudity is unremarkable, my form a cloak for my spirit as fabric is a cloak to my form, and I cross the small space to the washbasin and chamber pot before returning to
don the tight fitting bras and shirt in the color of my profession. That alone speaks to whoever is in charge here knowing what I am. Though the fit is odd, I am able to move well and stretch my limbs in preparation for the day. My stomach grumbles, but my hunger is habit and not need, and will wait. I retract the woven folding door and step barefoot out into a corridor lined with lanterns and skulls. Warm flames flicker, and inscriptions tell of who rests here. The Hylian nobility, the Human elect, side by side, to be watched over by the guardian-dead. They are the only races who bury their dead, to cling on to the physical remnants of departed souls. My people and the Gorons cremate, and spread the ashes so the spirits of our ancestors may be reborn without the mistakes of their past carrying over with them, and the ashes nourish the earth. The Kokiri and Zora expose, letting nature reclaim their forms. The Geru’do and Yeh’ti mummify, allowing the Serpentine Goddess of the Sands in the desert or the Goddess of the Snows in the mountains carry the burden of freedom for them.

A map of the area is carved into the wall, and I judge from it I am beneath a large temple dedicated to Shadow, which is itself beneath a place of premature death needing cleansing. That would explain the number of chambers for priests, monks, and shiik that I have walked by, and the presence of so many coherent Poes. There is a village above as well, though it is not named. I will have to ask there for information, unless I encounter another living spirit on the way. Or disembodied one, capable of communication beyond laughter and light. Judging from the location of the lift, it is used for freight and little else, and I am young and feeling remarkably rejuvenated, so I have no qualms about taking the stairs.

Nine stories later, I am regretting my decision as well as my bare feet. The chill of the Temple is pleasant with the physical exertion though, and various familial crypts line the topmost layer. Some have been visited recently, with fresh flowers or tokens of remembrance left behind. Others have fallen into disrepair, with dust and misaligned remains all that can be seen. The doorway closest to the village emerges from the graveyard, but that is clear on the other side of the maps on each landing I pass, and will require, if I am reading the old lettering correctly, some controlled use of fire magic to prove the caster is among the living.

Much easier to simply walk out into the herb gardens. Sheltered from the wind by cedar and birch, plots of lavender and mint, rosemary and sage, thyme, Din’s tears-of-heart and yarrow grow in neatly tended rows. Below me, the stepped fields cut into the mountainside hold more than enough to sustain the inhabitants, including a sheltered grove of purely ornamental flowers. The gardens are protected from the passage of man and beast along a wide stone stairway that leads both up and down from this point, and since I know the village should be slightly behind and to the left, I choose the upward path.

The stone is rough on the skin of my feet, and so I use the grasses on either side to make the ascent. Even with the dark clouds overhead, I know it is close to noon, and can hear the chatter of voices long before the gate guard of the village spots me. He wears some type of uniform, though I do not know what it is for I can recognize the look of one easily, and seems friendly enough despite the fact he holds his spear with a competence I would not like to challenge. I do not increase my pace, though that is more out of consideration for the skin of my feet and tender toes than a desire to appear harmless.

“Ho, sheik!” He greets once I am close enough to not require him to raise his voice. “Welcome to Kakariko Village!” The greeting tells me that the clothing was intentional and he does know what it means, though his way of pronouncing my occupation is heavily accented and the welcome itself sends me staggering in shock. Kakariko. The Shaekha’ri embassy before our exile in shame at our sisters’ forsaking of their sworn duty. The last remnant in Hyrule proper of the reason for our tears. Recovering quickly, mindful of appearances, I focus on the pronunciation and order of my words instead of my location.
“Good day sir, may I ask where the head of this village may be found?” From the look on his face, I am not as successful as I could have hoped. He cocks his head, looking at me closer, then lets out a breath of laughter.

“A Sheikah, huh? Makes sense I guess, since the Lady Impa is visiting for the first time this year that another one of you would show up, and barefoot at that. If she’s still here, she’ll be either in the Medicine Shop or her house tending to her cow. Shop’s straight ahead, her house is up the stairs to the right and then up again, top level of the southwestern block.” He tells me.

“Thank you sir.” I bow my gratitude, but am stopped with a hand on my chest as I go to move past him.

“What’s your name, boy?” He asks, his ice blue eyes behind the helmet kind but resolute.

“Tor Aein.” I respond, and am surprised when he kneels before me, the hand not holding his spear reaching forward to brush the tender, abused skin of the soles of my feet. I have not been barefoot for long in years, and it shows.

“Well, Aein, if you head to the Medicine shop first they may have a salve to ease the bruising you’ve got there. Tell ‘em that Conrad sent you and they’ll give you bit of a discount, eh? And it’s just mister, not sir.” He stands, and pats me on the back.

“I will endeavor to do so, mister Conrad.” What, exactly, I am promising, I am not sure of, so I make my reply purposefully vague and non-committal before heading down the long tunnel that leads to a village cut into the mountainside itself. Defensively sound, should invaders attempt the village, they can attack from above or block the path itself, and since one of the first things I see upon entering the village proper is a structured well, with enough food, they could simply wait out their attackers. There seem to be far more people than there should be, given the number of buildings, and most of them are Hylian.

I stick out like a sore thumb, with my red eyes and form fitting clothing. There are some other young men whose brais are as tight, but they wear tunics that are loose enough that it does not matter. Then I notice that a great many of the garments are much mended and worn, and nearly everyone shows signs of having lost a good deal of weight recently. Most are lined up in front of a staircase that leads to the only house on the southwestern side of the village, top level. Impa’s house. The petitioners, for I cannot imagine any other reason for their presence and attitude, shuffle forwards steadily, one at a time. I take a place at the end, and wait my turn.

If this is indeed the first time she has visited since the Autumn Equinox, I can imagine there is much she needs to be told, and my situation is not as desperate as many of those before me. I can wait. While I do, I take the time to observe and listen. What I can see makes my heart hurt, and what I hear is not pleasant. These people have come here for refuge, from Castletown, having been chased from their homes and livelihoods and even families by the usurper King Ganondorf and his minions nearly three moon turns previous. They had been crammed into every possible shelter available, with carpenters and other craftsmen erecting as many more as was safe within the time allowed, though there is some grumbling about individuals. I paid no attention to the last, for basing my judgements on another’s opinion before meeting someone was almost as distasteful as doing lying.

The family in front of me stays quiet up the first set of stairs, across the terrace, and halfway between the stairs and the door the human woman I assumed was the mother of the five littles sways slightly, then collapses. A man easily ten years her senior who had been holding the smallest gives the child to the largest of them and kneels by the woman, patting her cheek and calling what I take for her name. Unresponsive, she remains limp in the road as the line moves forward.
once again, shifting around us and pushing me forward with a rough hand in the middle of my back. Shocked, I shove back.

“Move it or lose it, boy.” A large man without the signs of deprivation about him growls down at me. Already attracting unwanted attention, keeping my eyes down and hidden, I bow deeply.

“Yes sir.” I enunciate clearly, and turn to kneel next to the man, meeting his eyes squarely. He recoils slightly, swallowing hard. “May I help?” I ask, and he nods, his eyes never leaving my form. I take the gesture as permission, and bend over the woman, checking her pulse and breath while using my eyes to track her energy patterns. Truly starving, the strain of nursing the youngest while still damaged from the birth has taken more than she has to give and she simply does not have the energy to stay awake any longer. Familiar with bone-deep exhaustion, I gather some of the abundance I received in the catacombs beneath the Temple and lean to breathe it into her. Her lips are chapped against my own, dehydration another difficulty compounded by slow bleeding and supporting another life. Were she capable of it, she would be feverish, but anemia and extreme fatigue keep her from that.

What kind of people are these, to risk a mother and infant, a family, when the smallest amount of care would not only remedy, but prevent such an occurrence?

“Johanna.” I whisper as I lean back on my heels, using her name to call her to consciousness once more. She stirs, and with the man’s help, we have her standing. It quickly becomes apparent that she cannot walk under her own power, and so I act as a crutch the rest of the way, steadying her as we are let into Impa’s house by another man in a uniform like Conrad’s, one and two at a time as others leave. Inside is not what I expected. Long tables of rough-hewn planks and benches of the same cover the entirety of the lower floor, with what look like Impa’s personal effects piled haphazardly on the second. A hearth-fire blazes with a large kettle in the back, and a milk-cow in a cage rests on the other side, Impa herself milking steadily.

I seat Johanna in one of the empty places on a bench as close to the fire as I can manage and retrieve two bowls under the steady eye of a Hylian man easily twice my weight and a full head and a half taller. That look softens when he sees I only intend to feed the frail Human I nearly carried in. The soup is thin, watery, but from the way the people here are cleaning their bowls, even going so far as to lick the last of the broth from them, it is the best they will have today. Perhaps all. I shudder to think of it, and promptly feed my portion to Johanna. She is looking better for the food, though still incredibly weak and unable to track the spoon, only responding to touch and sound. As we near the last of the second portion, she smiles.

“Thank you, stranger.” She mumbles.

“You are most welcome, Miss Johanna.” I murmur in return. “It is my honor to assist you.” Lifting the spoon once more, I place the smooth edge against her lips and am pleased when she is able to lift her hand to take it from me. My voice has allowed her to lift her head in my direction, but not to look at me. She tilts it to better hear, her white eyes cloudy. I feel my face fall in sorrow at her loss, unable to fathom what a trial she has faced while blinded, and recently at that. Long enough to heal, but not long enough to be confident. She must be so strong. Her hand reaches out and finds my thigh, tracing upwards to take my hand in her smaller one, the spoon held upright in the other.

“What’s your name?” She asks softly, fingers rubbing the back of my hand. I swallow hard.

“Sheik!?” The large man from outside bellows, causing my head to snap up towards the
sound where he is standing next to Impa, his hand extended to point at me with a single finger.

“Yes, Doylan.” Impa sighs.

“HA! Sheik, of the Sheikah, that’s original!” He guffaws, and the gentle touch of Johanna’s hand on my face returns my attention to where it should be.

“Sheik, huh? Would you help me find the children? We need to get back to the orphanage.” She says, and though I am unfamiliar with the word, I can extrapolate enough to understand. So there are those to care for the weak here, just as there are those who are loud to impress themselves. I smile beneath her touch. Doylan is talking at Impa, who looks closer and closer to taking him somewhere to put him in his place.

“It would be my pleasure. Allow me a moment?” I ask, and with assent I find the man Brant and the children, taking the smallest from him and back to the woman nursing him. Relieved of infant duty, Brant is swift in cleaning his own bowl. I take the tiny bundle back to Human Johanna and look at his ears and blue eyes, the light dancing through him. He is fully Hylian, so not her son, and I know what that means. My heart aches again for her, but the joy she feels at my return and the love she has for the small baby are palpable. With her brother Brant to play herder and myself to lend a steadying hand, we wind our way through the town to a building built into the hillside itself. Inside, it is obvious what function it serves, and I am pleased in discovering my leap of linguistic prowess was correct.

I am quickly sobered by the number of small beds. It is clear this place is no more than a storage room for young people. There are few toys, no books, and only a handful of blankets for the bare mattresses. There is no illness, which surprises me, for the sixteen stacked beds are the only furniture there is room for, and I have to be careful walking between them to not bark a shin against their rough frames. Resting Johanna on the last, the babe tucked against her side, I go about cleaning the ashes from the hearth, sweeping the floor, scrubbing the windows, and straightening the bedding while the others play a complicated game of chase-and-run outside. Dumping the last of the wash water into the outside drain, I sit on my heels and huff out a sigh to the sky. There is nothing more I can do here.

“I’m sorry, Aein-shiik. Three times sorry.” Impa calls in Shaekha’ri from the steps leading to the water pump.

“Whatever for?” I turn to her, puzzled, replying in the same.

“Firstly, for forgetting I had asked the Temple to send all shiik in its range to battle the darkness. You should not have had to form a wing with the others, as drained as you were. It shouldn’t have happened, and I apologize. I wasn’t thinking. Secondly.” She holds up a hand when I start to respond. “For abandoning you in the catacombs. I should have brought you with me, or at least thought to leave you boots and clothing. I did not expect you to wake for days. So, for underestimating you, I am sorry. I also must ask your forgiveness for leaving you to deal with Johanna and the orphans alone. I brought milk for them, but they are my responsibility and you should not have been forced to put up with them.”

“I wasn’t putting up with anything. Johanna is a lovely person, and I enjoyed my time with her.” I return, daring her to contradict me.

“You…liked cleaning?” She seems startled, and I laugh.

“No, Goddesses no! But it needed to be done, and I could do it. I can’t heal Johanna’s hurts, I cannot restore her sight, nor can I call back her dead baby. I cannot bring toys or books or
blankets for the children, and their games are not for adults. I cannot feed any of them, for I have no coin and no immediately needed skills to trade upon. But I can comfort. I can ease the way. That, Impa-yana, is not only my job, but it is a gift that is useless without being shared.” She seems stunned at my words, then bows her head.

“Twice I am rebuked by you, and rightly so. But your clothing is clean and I have salve and socks and shoes. If we are to return to Derinkuyu by this evening we must leave within the hour, and there is a healer to see to your feet waiting.”

“What of Johanna? She has need of healing far greater than my own.”

“She is blind and serves no useful purpose here, whereas you are healthy and have duties you must attend to.”

“You’ve lived too long amongst these people, Sage of Shadow.” I whisper. “If you have forgotten the usefulness of a mother to children. She may have blind eyes, but you have been blinded by expediency and the opinions of self-important braggarts.” I know I will pay for my tone, and flinch at the raised hand that does not connect. Tentatively, I peer out to see her tense back turned to me as she trembles in her temper. Conflicting duties pull at her, and I do not envy the balancing of them, but she did not strike me down in pique which means she will not. At least, not now.

“Three times rebuked, then.” She says finally, and I relax, knowing that verbal attacks will not come either. “I will pay the healer to look after the woman as well. But come, there is work to be done and the longer we stand here the more rumors will circulate about you. Not that this is a bad thing, but I think if we can keep the people guessing by giving you an air of mystery then they will be more receptive to Zelda’s guidance.”

“What rumors? There are rumors?” I have been cleaning all afternoon, what possible rumors could there be?

“Only that your kiss can revive the dead.” Impa tells me, and will not say more on the subject. Stunned, I follow after her towards the graveyard, into the Temple, and downwards through it. Were it not for my vision, each layer of initiation would be terrifying, and I can see where it is to be sealed up upon someone challenging it. The magic itself is tied in with the chambers of torture where greed and hatred have sat stagnant for years, decades, if not centuries, and the sundering is a recent wound. There are even a number of restless dead, too dangerous to be allowed free and too powerful to be sent on. Some of them from the sundering itself, though some are older than even that.

Those Shaekha’ri that chose to seek the Triforce inflicted grievous wounds and untimely death upon their brethren to gain the magic and energy to attempt the gate of the Sacred Realm without the jewels of passage left behind so much agony that by the time we have reached the bottom level with its tumbling-floor for warriors training I am openly weeping. How we are to cleanse this deep stain is beyond me, and I despair of the Temple ever serving one purpose, and tell the Sage so. She remains quiet, though her eyes speak of a terrible grief as well.

“It heals itself, Aein-shiik, we just speed up the process.” An unfamiliar voice says in my mother tongue, and I am relieved at the sight of some of the priests and temple attendants. “Welcome home, Impa-yana.” The voice is from an older woman in a robe and stole clearly marking her as the Prioress here, and she is the only one who merely dips her head to the Sage. The rest bow deeply, and I flush to think that I was venting at the same woman less than two marks ago in a public square.

“Come, I will tend your hurts.” A priestess perhaps a decade my senior says, turning to
lead me through the catacombs to the cells of the novices once more. I see beneath her vestments she wears brais and shirt much like my own. The room she brings me to is slightly larger than the one I awoke in, and the moment my feet are off the cool stone I wince in pain. The bruising is visible, and there are a multitude of tiny cuts and abrasions that I did not notice scabbing over the soles. The bench is wide enough to be a narrow bed, but I let her clean my feet thoroughly before lying down for further treatment. She removes the plug of a jar of vulnerary salve that smells somewhere between pine and sage and applies a small patch which is then massaged in, causing me to yelp and jerk as the bruised nerves are touched. When the massage is finished, she slathers on a thick layer and wraps the lot in bandages dense enough to cushion my feet from the heat of melted wax that is applied over the base.

Bandage, support, medicine and shoe in one, once the wax is cooled I am lead back to Impa-yana’s side near the surface. She waits with the Prioress and three senior monks, who give me a whistle of the same shade as Impa’s small flute.

“It requires the breath of will and intent of destination, and will only take you to the places your spirit has attuned to that are open to such things.” One of the monks warns me, pointing to the stone platform beneath my feet.

“The Shadow Temple will always welcome you.” The Prioress adds.

“This is a melody that will draw you into the infinite void that absorbs even time. Listen to this, the Nocturne of Shadow.” Impa intones, and I can feel her power shifting the air around us even as the platform beneath my feet begins to glow. Seven notes stand apart from the rest, and I lift the whistle to my lips, heartened by the simplicity of the instrument. There are no keys to press, no holes to cover, no strings for me to fumble, only the reverberations of my voice are required to make the instrument sound. The music settles deep in my spirit, and I know that I will remember this melody for as long as I live.

Opening my eyes and staring at the metallic sheen of the instrument, wondering at the skill in its crafting, I hear but do not register a series of eight notes that seem to possess the same pull even as Impa lays a hand on my hair. The caress is gentle, and I am pleased that she no longer seems to hold any anger towards me. I am surprised by the soft moan the touch calls from my throat, and tense in her hold, glancing up and expecting admonishment. Her own widened eyes tell me that it was not her intention to wring such a sound from me, but are continually assessing my responses even as she does it again. This time no such noise is provoked, but when she leaves the physical and reaches for me with her metaphysical presence focused and engaged I am left gasping.

Her infernal chuckle will haunt my dreams for years to come, even as she grips my head to look down at the platform we stand on alone. Instead of the inverted triangle and three circles overlaid by the Triforce near the entrance to the Shadow Temple, there is the weeping eye symbol with each triangular lash containing an elemental stone, surrounded by the twelve clan sigils. No longer do the stone walls carved from the very body of Death Mountain surround us, but instead a pool of steaming water from which vines of amethyst and quartz emerge show the faint illumination of fairy’s core lights. The fairy fountain is further enclosed by a circle of message stones chattering relentlessly.

“Weary souls and battered hearts, gather to hear the Lament of the Lost.” Impa intones, and the notes that I heard in the Shadow Temple ring a clarion chord as I lift the whistle to my lips once more. The music settles within me, finding a place in the tangled chords of my binding and laying itself to rest. More than the Nocturne, this Lament fills me with an existential knowing of my place and purpose. I am for Her, and, through choice and circumstances surrounding that, for Him as well. The Mistress of my Soul seeks my company, while the Master of my Heart waits patiently
for my return. There is no conflict of duty, at least not at the moment, and no conflict of desire, at least not yet.

Impa leads me from the warp chamber into the basement of a small home, from the looks of it no more than friends or siblings sharing the two bedroom abode before a situation beyond their control forced them to abandon it. A thick layer of dust coats everything but the space next to the chimney where the roof has caved in, allowing a small handful of flowers to find purchase in the cinder bin and reach towards the heavens. I touch one of the small blossoms and it tells me a tale of healing and rejuvenation borne in its stamen and the pollen it releases on the night of the full moon. The ochre stains my fingers as though I have dipped them in blood, though the flavor is mild and herbaceous.

“Aein, come.” Impa demands, and, embarrassed at my own distractibility, I follow quickly, leaving the delicate blossoms to grow near the entrance of the warp point in the heavily swirling magic, and promise myself to return. The Sage of Shadow guides me through the worst destruction of Derinkuyu that I have seen, my wax bottomed boots providing next to no traction and my damaged feet slowing our pace to a crawl. Though we arrived in the late afternoon, sister sun has sought her bed by the time we see the flickering lights that indicate civilization, and the constellations shine brightly through the clouds as I reach the shiik’s quarters.

Again, someone has left the light on for me, though this time they have remained to await my return.

“Aein-shiik, welcome home.” Rahla-sai greets, the apothecary flushed in embarrassment, her red eyes downcast but bright. Her husband Yaru-eh is also flushed. Zelda is humming to herself at the table, chalk and slate in hand as she scribbles.

“I have returned.” I nod, feeling Impa’s presence at my back.

“Come Zelda, let’s go get ready for bed.” She orders, and with minimal whining convinces the princess to put away her tools and toys. Zelda is tired, I can feel the fight between wakefulness and exhaustion pulling her towards sleep, and also know why she has pushed herself to stay up when she knows it is past her bedtime.

“We’ve returned home safe, hanyana. All of us.” I tell her, and she smiles in relief before flinging herself at me.

“Thank you so much.” She enthuses, and kisses me wetly on the cheek. “Good night Aein-ah!” Salutations given, the Hylian girl takes her guardian by the hand and all but drags the statuesque woman out the door.

“Try and get some sleep, Aein-shiik?” She murmurs at my threshold, and I nod.

“I shall do my best.” I assure her, and then they are lost to the night. I return to the couple waiting in my kitchen, and accept their offer of a late supper with quiet thanks. Rahla confirms my suspicions as to their presence and that she is indeed approaching the highest point of fertility within the next week. Unlike the other women of Derinkuyu who have come to my doorstep for this very purpose, her husband wishes to participate, and from the red tint to his skin and other, more direct signs of arousal, I know that their lack of a child is not from an absence of activity or inclination.

“How closely are your bloodlines tied?” I ask, already cleaning myself of the remnants of the meal and checking my energy levels. If I am allowed to sleep in, all should be well.

“My grandmother and Rahla’s were second-cousins, so we are not as badly off as most.”
Yaru reassures me, and his wife nods her agreement.

“We did not want to risk misfortune though, and I have already miscarried twice since we decided to have a child.” The apothecary adds, then flushes deeply. “Your...forgive me, but Hana and Innah have spoken well of you, and I could not lose my chance at a baby through inaction.” The rosy tone does not leave her face.

“I too, would like to know the comfort of your embrace.” Yaru says formally, and his eagerness is unmistakable for anything else. His attraction to both sexes was apparent when he required only the sight of his tool in use at my request for a buggerclaw, I must assume he modeled the toy after himself. It has been more than a month since I have last used it, however, and I will need time. I tell them as much, and Rahla shakes her head.

“I...I want to help. With that. It is something I enjoy.” She admits, and much of her hesitancy disappears.

“Well then, let us adjourn to the appropriate space.” I acquiesce, and stand to lead them towards the smaller, working bedchamber in the building. The massage and pressure-point table is still set up, and I collapse it quickly as the couple disrobes and heads into the bathing room. There is no sign of disease in either of their bodies, though the wear and tear of age is apparent in both of them. Rahla’s wrists and hands will ache already in cold weather, and tremble as she grows old. Yaru’s as well, though the tanning dyes have permanently stained his fingers which disguises some of the swelling of the joints. They are rough against the skin of my back as I go about a rapid cleaning of my person, the texture sensitizing my skin far more quickly than Rahla’s gentle caresses.

Even when her fingers find that place within me, I prefer the feel of Yaru hot and hard and heavy to her gentle and altogether timid movements. As with the others, it is enjoyable, but I cannot abandon myself to sensuous pleasure as I would wish. Ensuring her comfort and gratification is foremost, followed by his, and I leave them sleeping curled around each other to clean the oils and other fluids from my skin. The next few days will tell. I am sore enough that I may ask Rahla for some bruise ointment instead of meals, clothing, or any other form of payment. The ache in my feet is enough that I forget entirely about the kittens until they are swarming around me, and I fall asleep surrounded by tiny purring balls of fluff.

The next six days are filled with more of the same. Lessoning with Zelda from mid-morning to noon, letting her grow accustomed to separating her consciousness and spirit from her body without losing all coherence of personality, then reaching for my form. It is not easy-going, for her magic is diametrically opposed to this type of work, focussed on bringing growth and seeing through time instead of dividing and partitioning in the present. A quick, light lunch is followed by Impa calling me to the Temple of Time where Rauru opens the pathway and I spend my afternoon and early evening with Link, teaching him what I can of music and legend, history and ethics. His fairy helps, but there is little either of us can do as his lessoning is leched away Between every time I interrupt the flow of unreality. He develops muscle and instinct, but I could tell the same story twice over and he would recall no more of it than the fact he knew it, but unable to continue the plot on his own. I will need the assistance of others if he is to progress at all. Evenings, after some recovery time in the Shadow Temple, are devoted to Rahla, though Yaru joins us twice more. The seventh day is different.

Zelda is successful.

It is as though some unseen barricade has dissolved, for as I thin the connection I have to my body to the furthest point I can without losing focus, clarity, or sensation, I feel something so much more than myself wrap around the three springs, seven vortices and three hundred sixty energy
points of my body. I am thrust from control and shifted back for my heart and spirit to hover over my own left shoulder, the red threads clearly visible tying me to those I care for, and the thin silver line anchoring the aggregates of my existence together is strong and steady.

:Aein?: The voice calls, and startles me for it seems to come from my own mind.

:Z…Zelda-hanyana?: I think at myself, and am rewarded with simple joy suffusing the bond forged by the Goddesses in my dedication and her acceptance. Never, in all my studies and extremely limited experience, has the possessed ever been able to communicate with the possessor. Granted, most possessions are not intended for it. Even those that the possessing spirit has been invited to enter usually do so in order for the spirit to communicate with others, not to communicate with it themselves. It is much easier to simply speak with the spirit than invite them in. In non-voluntary situations, it is not often that both spirits end up remaining on this plane.

:It worked!:. Her excitement is contagious, and with gentle coaching she does more than simply sit on the meditation cushion in my small sun room. Careful though she is, we are as awkward as a fresh foal, and stumble more than stand. It is mildly disturbing to see her still form, staring straight ahead without blinking on the cushion opposite mine, but it is also unsettling to watch my body move with another’s mannerisms. There is no submission in Zelda’s straight back and direct gaze, no trace of the deference of one born to serve. I am somewhat alarmed as I see my hair lightening to settle on a bright blond, and my skin darkens to that of burnished gold by the time she has made it to the water-mirror.

The pain of a finger touching the red iris of my right eye makes me wish I could blink, and I further relax my associative sensations from their grip on my form even as Zelda lets out a small ‘ow’ and allows the eye to tear up in reaction to the tiny injury. I am glad that the bruising of my feet no longer pain me, though a faint yellowing is still visible where stale blood from broken vessels is being absorbed. The minor aches and vacuous feeling from Rahla and Yaru’s visit last night are another story, and I am glad that she is young enough to not know what those sensations mean. I continue to follow and remain quiet, if curious, as she explores the use of a late adolescent body, nearly fully adult in stature. She begins by moving about the room, touching nearly everything and reaching for energy patterns that adjust to her interference.

:Is it always like this?: She asks of me, and though I do not say anything in reply she senses my confusion and clarifies the question. :Do you see everything like this?: As I have not noticed anything unusual about my vision as a spirit, I must answer the affirmative. She hums under my breath and then pauses only to repeat the sound. Her hand goes to my throat, and she hums again, louder and with intent.

"Impa can go suck a frog." My voice rings out with her words.

:HANYANA!: I shriek at her mentally, praying that it is not so late in the day that the Sage has returned from setting up the morning meal for the poorest in Kakariko to hear such things in my voice.

“Hush Aein, I can’t hear her anywhere nearby.” Zelda assures me using my own vocal chords to do so and it is the oddest juxtaposition I have ever had experience of. “Plus, I bet you’d like to tell her that sometimes. You’re too polite.”

:Zelda-hanyana, please, please say no more. Impa is the Sage of Shadow, the foremost of my people, and deserving of my respect. You shouldn’t…I mean, when you are me, you shouldn’t…she’s… Your guardian is...: My thoughts jumble together and lose their coherency as I catch sight of a smirk and brilliant crimson eyes a second before Zelda, in my body, does.
“I… Impa.” At least she manages to stutter effectively with my lips and teeth and tongue, I think in despair.

“Impa-yana, Aein-shiik.” The warrior grumbles. “Remember your place.”

: *I am going to die.*: I think. : *Painfully and slowly.*:

“I…” Zelda begins, then flushes like a small child caught in mischief. Which she is, and I am not. Goddesses. Painfully and slowly.

“When you are in control of Aein-shiik’s form, be conscious of your language. Either be a voice for the people, to the people, or let him speak for himself. As shiik though, part of his job is to give comfort, and that means being polite and open. You should recognize and respect that, Zelda-hanyana.” Impa scolds, and had I a body I would be weak in the knees in relief. She knows. Of course she knows. She can see to the heart of a person in a glance, and it must be clear that I am not the one in control at the moment.

“Yes Impa-yana.” Zelda mutters, pouting, and I hope I do not look that young when I do the same. Not that I pout. Well, not often. Not because I’ve been found out. Much. Oh, Nayru.

“Let Aein-shiik have his body back, Princess. You’ve been at this long enough.” Obedience to that tone of voice is something that Zelda has ingrained, and is something near instinctual to me, so there is no disagreement or protest as she carefully sits me down on the cushion once more and relaxes her hold. Her spirit slides back into the blonde Hylian child’s deeply entranced body with ease, and I check her bonds before returning to my own form.

Blinking rapidly to dispel the last effect of the poke to the eye, I let myself have a moment to reorient and wait for Zelda to do the same. As she has not has as much practise, it takes her longer and she is clumsy and lethargic once she does. She will also be cold, and I wrap a light cloak from the front closet around her before heading to the kitchen. I do not listen to the conversation she and Impa share, though I do make enough of a quick vegetable soup for three. Slicing a hard-boiled egg into each bowl, I check on Cheesecake and her kittens, sleeping soundly after nursing and the ensuing results. Fortunately, there are a great number of towels and pads that I can replace the soiled one beneath them with fresh. By the time my hands are washed and the laundry set aside for later, the simple meal is ready to be dished out and set at the table.

Returning to the sun room, I knock lightly on the door and find the Sage and Princess on the other side. Zelda is tired, which is not in the least surprising as I feel as though I could use a nap myself, but brightens at the offer of a meal. While there are other means of grounding oneself after journeying, food is easy and appropriate. Wandering back to the kitchen, we sit and give thanks. By the time Zelda’s bowl is empty she is continuously yawning, and I am not much better, though my skin has returned to its natural tone and no longer feels lightly burnt.

“Rest. We can be a little bit late, today.” Impa encourages, and rises with both her bowl and my own, indicating the bedroom with her chin. I do not argue, knowing that if I were to attempt Between as I am I may very well be stuck, and would like to avoid that if at all possible. What it is doing to Link is bad enough, and I have no portion of the Triforce, fairy partner, Sagely guidance, ensouled blade, or blessings of the Goddesses to keep me safe. Lifting Zelda, who is already mostly asleep, is no great effort, though I am careful to put myself between her and the kittens. I am used to sleeping with the tiny creatures, only now opening their eyes to blink blearily at their limited world, and worry that she may roll and crush them. She is still cool to the touch, and so I gather her close before closing my eyes.

It does not take long to doze, and less time still to dream. The world is oddly flat, and
though I know I am dreaming I do not have the control I normally attain when I am aware of my state. I do not know where I am, for the oak floors and brick walls are arranged in unfamiliar patterns, much grander than I am accustomed to. I stop before a portrait of an older Hylian man, starting to bald, in profile, and study it as though I must commit every brush-stroke to memory.

“Ah, there you are!” A man’s voice calls, warm and gentle, and I turn to see a Human I do not know but feel as though I should walking towards me with his arms wide open. His skin is the color of steeped black tea with cream and his eyes a startling shade of green. His thick, wavy hair is flowing loose as a maiden’s and as dark as blackened oak, and his hands touch my bare shoulder even as his lips meet my own and I startle into waking. Beside me, Zelda mutters in her sleep and Cheesecake makes her displeasure known by digging her claws lightly into my skin to keep me from moving. The kittens are still asleep, but I know I will be unable to return to that state any time soon. It felt so real, I can almost taste his lips.

Resigned, brushing the lingering sensations off and dismissing the dream, I pull the whistle from under my tunic by the cord around my neck and focus my intent, breathing my will and calling on the notes that will take me to the Temple of Time. Only Rauru, Sage of Light, is physically present, though the others’ energy is awaiting my arrival. I have yet to meet any of the other Sages, but with Shadow and Light to balance me, I know that I am welcome here. Climbing the stairs of the dais has become routine enough that I no longer hesitate, though the impact of the power of the Sages still leaves me breathless even as I am flung down what is becoming a well-worn path. Soon I will be able to travel it alone.

“Aein!” Navi greets, then flutters over to her charge and bats at his nose with her wings. “Hey, Link! Hey! Listen! Aein’s here! Link! Hey!” She chirps, and I resist the growing urge to shut her in a bottle and cork the mouth if only to get her to be quiet by the barest of measures. How the boy can stand it is beyond me, though he must be accustomed to the sound after living as a Kokiri for all of his known life. He is doing better than I had hoped he would be, the food and drink Impa provides and the small toys and puzzles available from the residents of Derinkuyu have given him something more tangible to anchor himself to than the magical constructions we created on my first day here. Normally, such illusory objects would not stand up to one or more of the five senses, but here, Between planes, all that is real is illusion and illusion is as concrete as, well, concrete.

He mumbles something I cannot hope to understand and rubs his face into the pillow I brought two days ago, a small dot of saliva darkening the fabric when he pushes himself upward to stretch and scrub at his face. The azure tunic he wears, intended for one of the Ren clan, bears scrolling embroidery in their rune over the neck and sleeves, with a simple straight border at the hem. The color intensifies the shade of his eyes and alights his blond hair to a lustrous gold, throwing the worn green cap that restrains his hair into even greater disparity. I resolve to see if I cannot come up with a replacement, even temporarily, so I can wash the fabric. At least Between there are no insects, to take up residence on his scalp. Blue eyes, thick with dreams, blink sleepily at me, and a moment later I have an arm full of energetic boy.

“Aein! You came back! What’d you bring me?” Link chatters, though with his accent and nap-muddled tongue, it sounds more like ‘Eh nyu keim bukwhad jubrin mi?’ than the clear, measured syllables of Zelda, or the familiarly accented words of Impa. Still, I have grown accustomed to his relaxed enunciation, and am too new to the language to correct his form on my own. I smile and tighten my grip briefly before releasing him and sinking into the composed seat of a professional history-teacher.

“A story, if you will listen to my words.” I tell him, and am pleased when he immediately falls to a cross-legged seat, leaning forward in eager receptiveness. The toys and puzzles remain after I am gone, and even if he cannot remember my exact words after, he can identify the salient
points, and if he forgets the lesson by the next day, I would rather he lose my lessoning than any aspect of his personality or self. So far, it appears he is whole and healthy. If it is the only thing I can do for him, I will keep him thus.

“Story!” Navi chirps, and situates herself comfortably on Link’s head, using that dubiously sanitary cloth and his hair beneath as a cushion. At my stern gaze, she flickers, and promises to be quiet for the duration. I breathe deeply, preparing myself for the long recitation of one of the most important history-tales my people keep as treasure.

“This is a tale that has been passed down by the Gorons and Shaeka’ri through uncounted generations. It tells of a war of unmatched scale and ferocity, the likes of which we hope to never see again.” I begin, and launch into the legend of Hylia’s ascendance of Skyloft, saving the people she could from the brutal destruction on the surface. I speak to him of a young man, not much younger than I am and not much older than he is, who could hear the call of the Goddesses’ Sword. Of the young woman, the same age, that was the Goddess Hylia, taken mortal form to hide from the divine agent of chaos, Demise. I tell him of the Great Lady Impa, guardian of the Gates of Time, who aided both the boy and the girl, giving the length of her life and all her magic to the task. The tale of Hylia’s descent and the creation of Hyrule is a full three hour recitation, and by the time I am finished my throat is dry and sore. Tomorrow I will continue with the songs of their time on the surface, but today I am worn out.

“Is that why the Princess was wearing a picture of a bird?” Link asks, and I have to think as to what he is referencing. When I take too long to answer, he clarifies somewhat. “On her apron, there was a picture of a weird bird.”

“I would assume so.” I nod, placing the tattered remains of Zelda’s embroidered purple tunic firmly in my mind. The crest of the Hyrulean royal family could very well be a loftwing, for it resembles only the great eagles otherwise, though inaccurately. Having never seen a loftwing, or picture of one, I have only correlations and assumptions, and do not want to misguide the young Hylian with my lack of knowledge.

“Why would they stay on the surface though? It would be so scary!” Navi chimes in now that it is clear the tale is finished. I am pleased that she has managed to stay quiet for so long, as though she herself has not heard this tale.

“Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.” I quote the Book of Farore, Chapter Nine, Verse Eighteen, Line Two. “There was a great love on the parts of both the Hero and the Princess, for the land and each other.” I find myself quoting from Her book more often around him, unsurprisingly. Though young, he is obviously Her chosen. Bidding farewell to the burgeoning Hero, I take my leave and emerge once more in the Temple of Time. Rauru is there waiting with cool water and kind hands to revive me enough that I can warp myself to the Shadow Temple. Beyond the psychic scars of torture, greed, and hatred that the residents are working to cleanse, the Temple itself soothes me and restores me as no other spiritual object or place can. I join both Kaki-shiik and Charin-ehna in meditation in the bottom level of the cells.

Charin’s vow of silence means that her company is intensely still, and Kaki has only been dead for a decade. Before being summoned to serve the Call of the Carrion Crow, Kaki had been the retainer of a Hylian household, giving his life to his Mistress and her young son to allow them to escape a focussed raid on their estate. Mokara rewards those whose devotion defines them, and this was his choice. Rather than being reborn to a new life and new circumstances, he has remained to ensure that the ills of his generation do not spread to affect those of the next. I respect him, but he is as intense as Impa and his gaze as piercing. When he fixes it on me after I have restored myself, I
shrink back before I can help it. His lips quirk into something that would be a smirk if it was any more evident, or lasted longer.

“Virtue, Love, Measure.” He tells me. “You’ve found the balance between.”

Shocked to stillness, I freeze in place even as he draws himself upwards, fading through the ceiling into the upper levels. It is hours before I think to wonder if he meant between the three parts of my geas, or Between. With Link.

Chapter End Notes

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage. - Lao Tzu
The Definition of Insanity

Chapter Summary

Finding treasures not looked for
Looking for treasures not found
The flavor of a favor leaves a bitter taste behind.

Chapter Notes

So, minor/original character death, mild blood and gore, looting a Temple,
sacrifice/suicide, m/m sex, maybe foreshadowing possibly if you squint maybe not, and
close contact with dead bodies.

Hi Saria!

An expectedly unproductive summer has left the Harvest abundance particularly drab.
With a tyrannical usurper on the throne sending raiders out to terrorize the population and ravage
their settlements, it isn’t really a surprise. Across the hall from me at the head table, Lord Artura
watches over the inhabitants of Krisidi Keep. His Lady Emilya tends to their youngest, making sure
that more peas end up inside the boy than on the front of his tunic with remarkable success, though
the nine older siblings may have something to do with that. Practise, says the book of Nayru, makes
perfect. I am particularly happy to not be on the dais that holds family and honored guests. Zelda’s
spirit left my body yesterday evening after receiving all the intelligence that the Hylian Lord Knight
possessed, and, my purpose fulfilled, I intended to continue on towards the Forest Temple first thing
in the morning. Though I travel quickly compared to both Hylian and Human paces, it is still three
days between Kakariko and Krisidi Keep, and a further three days to the Lost Woods.

Were it not for the girlish voice of the Forest Sage assuring that I would have guidance
upon my arrival in her place of power, I would be even more reluctant to attempt the journey. The
Lost Woods bears the name for a reason, and unless one is raised amongst those that dwell eternally
in the shade of the Great Root of Green, it often means death. At least Link is not alone, for the
servants of Han Impa, Ruto XVII, and Darunia Cor Amoto have been able to trail the path I have
forged Between to visit the boy-child, whose sanity remains difficult to maintain in a place that no
one is meant to remain for any length of time, let alone long enough for his body to be capable of
wielding the Master Sword. Years. Perhaps the better part of a decade. It is madness. Yet the
spread of Darkness over the land of the Goddesses is insanity enough. The ever present clouds over
the skies obscuring the heavens are largely responsible for the poor yields of crop and herd, and it
will be a lean winter for all as a result.

That, in part, is one of the reasons my departure has been delayed. Artura-han is concerned
for his people, and rightly so. Zelda-hanyana promised that she would see what she could do, and
left before either the Lord, his advisors, or even I could ask what she means. The abrupt leave taking
left me weakened enough to collapse, scrambling for control of a body no longer mine alone. Since
that ungraceful slump, I have received no call from my Mistress’ spirit directing me in any way. Do I
stay, and wait for her response? Or do I continue with my assignment to visit the Temples and learn their songs? Impa cannot carry me with her magic, for part of the Darkness that assails the land is attacking the Temples relentlessly. None of the Sages can afford to abandon their places for even a moment. It leads a cold lump of terror to sit, waiting, in the pit of my stomach, urging me to move quickly so I may be of greater service. I need to know a place, learn it for myself, before the music will come to me.

That collapse has led the old man to my right to hover, for he is the resident healer here and his ability is limited for true healing. He usually uses only the physical tools and medicines available to him, and that has lent him a deft hand with their application. Arik, to my left, has no other purpose being there than his personal interest in my person, or rather, my race. Fancying himself something of a scholar regarding my people, he is using the surprise opportunity as he calls it to study me as one would a bug. It is distinctly uncomfortable, and I catch him watching my mouth as I speak and murmuring my words to himself silently enough that the Hylian ears about do not hear him, but I see it and it makes me reluctant to do so much as ask for more water.

I eat with the small court gathered here, the servants will break bread afterwards, and then are free to take the broken meats to their families. I should be seated with them, but my task as Zelda’s messenger seems to be enough to elevate my status among these people. The meal is simple, squash cooked with butter, mutton from the Krisidi flock, potatoes roasted whole and plain, and small segmented berries who take their name from their black color, though they appear a deep intense violet to my eyes. Ale is offered for drink, but at both my own and the healer’s request, water has been provided instead. My stomach is always touchy after a lengthy possession, and the amber tint to my skin takes longer to fade.

It fascinates old Holt, who continually touches the exposed skin at my wrists to check the even, full body sun-burn. Arik says it is because the Shadow Folk are not meant to house the Light, and I wish he would shut up. Shadows are born of light, without it we would not exist. How better to protect those humans She could not raise to Skyloft than for Hylia to cast shadows on the land as guardians? He does not even afford me the respect of my proper title, and so I refuse to offer him any in return. It is petty of me, but were it not for the expectation of social obligation keeping me here, I would already be out in the night.

Thankfully, the meal ends without incident and I am able to flee to the relative safety of the guesting rooms. I do not lock the doors behind me, for there are others who are to use the chambers beside myself, but I do remove the cowled stole emblazoned with my identity in a heraldic tradition that even the illiterate drudges of Hyrule can comprehend. I understand the need for it, but that does not make me comfortable in wearing it. The ankle length robe is white, declaring my station as a caretaker of the dead, though it is emblazoned with the weeping eye that the Sheikah who did not seek the Triforce’s power for their own have come to wear, on a field of blue to show my devotion to Nayru being foremost of the Three. There is a repeating scrolling pattern in Farore’s green at the cuffs and hem. That the eye is in Din’s red is enough of a representation in my mind for a Goddess whose key attribute is something I am not at all at ease with.

Beneath the robe the form fitting shirt and brais in indigo show me as an attendant of the Shadow Temple, and I remove these as well, storing them in my satchel and removing a long sleep shirt of plain, undyed cotton. There are no embellishments, no designs, no heraldry or clan symbols to mark me and declare my purpose for all to see. It is the one article of clothing I possess that I made myself, and the one garment I feel truly comfortable in. I have not spent the time in study to count myself among Mokara’s scholars, nor have I anything but a royal decree, penned in the hand of an eleven year old princess in exile, to show me as a servant of the royal household. There is some magic in the crafting, true, that any may witness its authenticity, but I have not trained in the duties I now perform. The only thing I am good at is walking, and that alone comes from my incomplete
journey quest to attain adult standing amongst my kin. Not for the first time, I question my ability to fulfill the tasks my Mistress asks of me.

Sighing to myself, I reach upwards to undo the binding holding my hair up and away from my face, letting the still damp strands loose to curtain my face from the world. Having access to a proper bathing chamber is a courtesy that I find particularly welcome, and for the first time in days I have been able to cleanse my skin and shave the meagre wisps of near translucent facial hair that all men of the Tor clan are gifted with. It looks ridiculous, like so many strands of delicate spider silk floating in the slightest breeze, and so I rid myself of it at every given opportunity. My hair however, is thick and straight and only now returned to its proper shade of light ashen brown. I take the time to comb it fully, allowing the teeth of the tool to separate the strands and the air to dry it fully. Sleeping with a damp head in early autumn is not a sure means of acquiring illness, but it does little to maintain health.

One hundred strokes later, I quickly braid the lot to run close to my scalp while I sleep, and tie the end off at the nap of my neck with the smallest of the binding wraps so the plait will retain shape through the night. There is not much to the beds here, down and sweet-grass reserved for those visitors of higher station, but the fire is warm and the drawn shutters seal out the wind. The mattress is a burlap sack stuffed with coarse straw, covered in rough linen, and blanketed by piece-quilts of no particular pattern or material, laid out on worn rugs too used to be of any help elsewhere but fully capable of protecting me from the cold stone of the floor. Still drained from remaining outside of my body for so long to allow Zelda to give her full message, I snuff the lantern by my chosen pallet and crawl under the quilt. I am tired, but not sleepy, and so lay burrowed in the borrowed warmth and let my mind still. The power of Shadow Temple brings me a measure of peace, and so I am bleary eyed when one of the other guests to share this room arrives.

Human, young, and somehow familiar though I know I have never met him before in my life, he is obviously fresh from the bathhouse and as exhausted as I am. I sit up enough to alert him to my presence, and his feet drag him from the path to the nearest bed to the door and towards the pallet next to mine where he collapses gracefully face down with a groan.

“Oh, yesssss.” He hisses, his face smushed into the bedding a moment longer before he turns silver-sage green eyes towards me and smiles lazily. “Hello there gorgeous.” He greets, his bow shaped lips parting in a smile that reveals straight teeth. His thick brown hair falls in soft waves to frame a heart-shaped face, and his robe parts enough that I can see the smooth teak skin is free of blemish from crown to navel. Unexpectedly, given my current state of apathy, I feel a rush of arousal and the beginnings of a blush work their way through my cheeks.

“I could say the same.” I return, emboldened by the appreciative look on his face, as intent as Arik’s but much warmer and personable, with an edge of hunger not for food. He laughs at my sally, a rich sound that settles at the base of my stomach, awakening a noticeable reaction.

“Vidkun, of Chuki’s traders.” He introduces himself, then tilts his head to reveal a single marquise cut gem dangling from the piercing in his right ear. “You’re the Princess’ Voice, Sheik of the Sheikah, right? My master spoke of you to us, though he did not mention how fetching you were.” His words make me flush for a different reason. I am, when I wear the uniform, these things. But they are not my name. I don’t want to be Sheik of the Sheikah to everyone. I want to be me, too, particularly when it comes to situations such as these.

“You would think that someone of such importance would be housed in their own suite.” I return, using the truth to suit my purposes. “My name is Tor Aein, brother to Tor Yoru, son of Tor Mela and Ren Amai, of Sahila village.” I want him to see me as more than Zelda’s messenger. Or, not just Zelda’s messenger.
“Tell me then, Tor Aein, are all Sheikah as breathtaking? Do all your people’s eyes shine with secret hidden treasures?” He breathes, pushing himself up on strong arms to lounge on the space he has claimed for his own, the firm muscle shifting beneath smooth skin.

“I cannot speak for any but myself…” I tell him, and it is true. Zelda can speak for herself, using my body, but when I am in control it is only me.

“And what of your treasures?” He asks. “Is there a price, or do we mere mortals know only yearning for a glimpse?” What he means is very clear, for his hand reaches across the small space between our beds and caresses my face, a single finger lingering to gently part my lips. I am no stranger to paid bedmates, for they instruct each child in proper care of future lovers at the onset of puberty, and give very personal demonstrations.

“I am not for sale.” Though I know of them, I am not one. My affection is limited to those I feel affection for, though lust is not reserved for kindly held companionship.

“You are his alone, then?” Vidkun sighs, those lips downturned. “Sheik does not share your favors with others?” The sorrow evident in his face grows towards displeasure, a frown forming. “But you are here, alone. A bedmate who does not share his Master’s bed.” I understand his misconception, yet I still want. I feel as though I must correct the error, and yet, wish to hope on the chance presented.

“My Master does not wish to have me as a bed warmer for any other purpose than to actually warm his bed.” I say, and it is true. Link is too young for such urges, though he still has a child’s tendency to cling to trusted companions and those that give him comfort, and it will not be long until they develop. “And I am for more than him alone.” My Mistress, too, is too young for such things. I serve them both.

“Oh, good.” Vidkun whispers, close enough that I can breathe his breath. Moments later I taste his lips, feel his skin. Much later, he shows a facility with plundering my treasures that leaves a smile on my face and an aching reminder all the way to the entrance of the Lost Woods.

It is not what I am expecting. Though there are trees, a veritable forest surrounding the lands to the far east of the place where Hylia chose to remain, the Lost Woods are deeper still. The roots of an ancient tree hold open a path of nearly perfect circumference, barely large enough for me to duck into and so overgrown that my eyes cannot penetrate its depths. I hesitate, for though I have arrived at this place barely past noon, once I enter it I will not come out until either the Sage of Forest’s agent finds me, or the Carrion Crow enfolds me in Her wings. My choices are varied, but my honor will only be satisfied with one. Grasping the strap of my pack tightly and whispering a prayer to Farore, I step through the tunnel.

It leads to a space that is cut into the earth itself with surprising regularity, opening in each direction through a hollowed fossil of the same great tree if the grain and color of the wood is any indication. It is smooth beneath my fingers, as though thousands of hands have done the same and taken all roughness from the surface. The rustle of dead leaves on the hard surface reminds me of the clatter of bones. It is more comforting than it probably should be, for it tells me that even here, the cycle continues. If the leaves can wither, die, and dry, then perhaps not all who are lost roam the woods forever. I may not be entirely forsaken.

Logically, if I stay to the path in one direction, I should be able to find my way back. In theory, there is no reason why I could not retrace my steps easily. If it were that simple, however, this would not be called the Lost Woods. I take a single blade and etch my clan’s rune in the wood to the right of the path I have just come from, and do the same to the left of the tunnel I enter, directly ahead. Left on entering, right on exiting, and if I come across a mark I have already made, I know I
have been there before. As I am moving continually east, directly in front of me, I should not be staring at a mark freshly carved on the right side of the tunnel I have just come through. Turning around, not leaving the hollow gate. I retrace my steps to the previous enclosure only to discover there is no marking on the wood anywhere to be found.

I cannot see any of the lines and sigils of warp magic, nor can I find any indications of growth in the wood itself. There is no sign of animals or people of any race, and I cannot see the sun to orient myself. There are no dried leaves here, no new growth, no ripened grasses or fruit or flowers. No sound, no sight, no feeling to find my way, only the unchanging scent of wood and earth and green. Even my connection to Zelda as her thrall is inaccessible. Panic will change nothing, and the Forest Sage swore a guide would find me once I was deep enough. I will continue on. The next chamber, where my mark was, is the same as the last. Virtually identical, now that I am paying attention to what my eyes are telling me. As is the next, and the one after that. I count.

When I reach one thousand chambers, each indistinguishable from the others and none bearing my marks, I stop to rest. Eat, drink. The sun has not changed, and it has been marks. I continue moving, though I cannot say if I am traveling forward, backward, sideways, or even truly moving at all. The silence is oppressive, and when I am standing still I can hear my heart racing, my lungs drawing air. How horrid this must be for Hylians, whose ears are orders of magnitude greater than my own. The rushing of the blood through their veins could drive them mad. I know my sight is beginning to wear on me, the perfect replication of the one chamber leading me to question whether I am moving at all, even though my feet ache and I tire. The very definition of insanity, to attempt the same task and expect a different result, is exemplified here in this place.

I take the path to the left. One hundred chambers later, I turn east once more. I think. I cannot tell from the sun and the stars will not reveal themselves in the day. The day should be coming to an end, but there is no change to the sky above me, not even a cloud to break the monotony. Dejected and more than a little frightened, I slump against the wall of the next tunnel somewhat out of the sunlight. My internal clock says it is evening, and so rather than continuing until I collapse, I wrap my cloak about me firmly and close my eyes, waiting for sleep to come. I am not sure if it does, for if I dream I do not remember it, and when I feel refreshed enough to have my stomach growl I am still between one chamber and the indistinguishable next. I drink, eat, relieve myself in a chamber corner, and move on.

Water may become a problem. Food I can do without for a few days, but water…water I need. The cloudless sky burns down, suffocating and empty, and I walk, unsure of my direction and growing increasingly agitated. One hundred, two, five, turn. Five more, turn again. Head straight for another three hundred before drawing on the emptying flask in my bag, and feel the cool metal of the warping whistle brush against my fingers. Abruptly, all the tension leaves my body and I relax. Ultimately, I can leave, and try again. My failure would be a serious setback, but nothing irreparable. Seven days travel from the Shadow Temple to the entrance. I laugh softly at my own foolishness, and sit in the center of the chamber to slump over and lie on my back, staring at the sky. It does not change, still. There is no scent, no texture that I have not experienced thousands of times over. I close my eyes briefly, and ignore the relieved moisture gathered there.

When I open them again, the indigo dyed low boots and hem of a white robe is new.

“Hello Sister.” I greet Mokara’s monk, noting her indigo surplice and fine quality tippet embroidered with four green angled lines equidistant from each other in a gentle round, the diadem on her brow showing she is of high rank in the ecclesiastical order and highlighting the amber eyes and ochre skin of the Gerudo.

“Greetings, Feather, and welcome.” She returns. “I am Meg, sent by the Sage of Forest to
guide you to her place of power. If you would follow me.” Her voice is deep for a woman, and she waits for me to be steady on my feet before turning to what I think is the west. We make three right turns, go straight across twice, left once, and enter a small grove through which a stream babbles, birds sing, and a stone monastery three stories tall at the outer wall rises. She guides me to a single small wooden door, where vines carved in relief twine through the center and a brass handle grants her entrance. I follow, and the door closes behind me with a soft click. The wainscoting of the hallway features stone carved leaves, and leads to a large octagonal room of stone walls and wooden pillars. Sconces line the walls and standing candelabra light the way, leaving the gentle scent of beeswax to perfume the air.

We cross a square carpet and move around what appears to be a lift, heading through and down a hallway that twists through my vision and makes me mildly nauseous before coming to what appears to be a storage room, if the barrels and chests, bottles and boxes are any indication. Sister Meg takes the time to open a number of chests, piling my arms high with fabrics, and only continues on once a series of boxes burden her own grasp. We continue to the right of the door we came in from, and take the first left into what appears to be a bed chamber, though the furniture that would give it the name is missing.

“This room is for your use while you remain with us Sisters. If it pleases you, there is a bathing chamber further down the hall on the left hand side where you may remove the signs of travel from your person.” She instructs, and I get the distinct impression it would please her greatly, regardless as to my preferences. I smell bad enough that I can scent myself, and the thought of a bath pleases me very much indeed, so in that we are of accord. “It is one hour before our evening meal, and we would wish you join us then.” Her formal manners are gracious, and I bow my acceptance.

“It is an honor I will not forego.” I respond, and with a handful of parting pleasantries, she leaves me to sort through the items I carry and find bedding, a towel, and the working trousers, short sleeved tunic, mask, and apron of a shiik. Perhaps it is the only proper attire they retain for one of my calling, but my intuition is telling me that they have work that must be done and I am best suited to do it. Unlike the white garments in my possession, indicating the sterility of person and purity of spirit, the physical labors I may be called upon to perform involve both strength and skill and can leave one very, very messy, so the clothing for it is dark brown to help conceal the stains of blood and the indignities of recent death. Some scent their garments to mask the stench of improper or less than thorough cleaning, but these smell of no more than fabric and storage dust even though they have obviously been used before.

They are clean, yalms fresher than anything I hold, and only slightly large on my frame. I adjourn to the toilet first, then scrub furiously and quickly in the bathing room so I will have time to properly restrain my hair even if it is damp. Though the monastery is inert stone and dead wood, it is warm and dry, and I will not take ill from the moisture. I do not have time to shave, but the few hairs on my face are still short from my time in Krisidi Keep and light and fine enough that I should be presentable. The odor from my old clothing is strong, and I will need to wash it when given the opportunity, but I am running out of time. The mahogany trousers are loose enough that they will not chafe, so I eschew small clothes that smell as ripe as the rest and slide them over my legs, pulling the drawstring tight and looping it around itself to keep the pants secure about my waist. The tunic is of a finer weave, and slightly tighter to my form, though the short sleeves fall just past my elbow instead of above it. The mask I loop lightly about my neck, not drawing it up to cover my mouth and nose as there should be none of the noxious fumes of death at the supper table. I fold the apron over on itself so I do not trip on the hem, and use the ties to hold back the excess fabric of the tunic. My boots need cleaning as well, and I am reluctant to put them on, hesitating long enough for a soft knock to sound on the door.

“Enter.” I call, and the door swings open for a petite Human woman near my age to enter.
Her clothing is much simpler than Meg’s, the plain robes of a novice, with the stole of a devotee to Din. Her hair is tied back with a cord resembling greenery and from it hangs the medallion of the Forest Temple.

“Good evening, sheik. Sister Meg has sent me to guide you to the grand hall for dinner. I am Joelle.”

“Good evening Sister Joelle, I am…” Her finger presses against my lips and she smiles at me, more than a hint of a smirk coloring the action.

“I do not wish to know your name, for what I do not know I cannot reveal. Come.” Her demeanour is brisk and efficient, if abrupt, and meekly I follow as silent as the shadows my people dwell in, my bare feet soft on the carpet and softer still on stone. She allows me time to return my soiled clothing to the guest room that I have been assigned, and then heads back the way Meg brought me in the first place. The lift is missing from the main room, a pillar supporting the space reaching towards the ceiling where I must assume it rests, and we continue on to the hallway I arrived in, go out across the small stream, and re-enter the monastery. In the antechamber following we encounter another Sister, and I stare.

Shaekha’ri, I know. Hylians I have been taught to revere, Humans to pity. Gorons are our allies, and Kokiri much like the children they resemble, but more than any child could truly hope to be. Gerudo are fierce, loyal, athletic, entertaining, and not to be trusted without outside corroboration. But Zora…Zora are something that are as fantastic to me as setting foot in Derinkuyu, nearly mythological, and absolutely, completely naked. There is a small scarf on her head, a nod to tradition, but that is all. I refrain from having my jaw drop, but I cannot look away no matter how hard I try, and have a moment of sympathy for Zelda when she and Impa first stumbled across our camp. I, too, want to look my fill, but I also remember what such intense scrutiny feels like, and lower my gaze.

“Sister.” The Zora woman, her womanly features on blatant display and I can feel my face heat at the thought, greets Joelle without pausing in her pace.

“Good evening, Sister Beth. May the Great Deku Tree shelter you always.” Joelle bows deeply to the Zora woman, whose laugh sounds like a door hinge needing oil being swung rapidly. It is…unusual. Not unpleasant, but not something that inspires the same in me. I know then that the voice of the Sage of Water belongs to a young Zora girl, for there are certain qualities that all beings of a particular race possess. Shaekha’ri have red eyes. Hylian’s have ears to hear the Goddesses. Zora have gills and a voice that seems to come from a blowhole.

“And good evening to you as well, Sincere Feather.” Sister Beth bows, though not as deeply as Joelle did, towards me, leaving me scrambling to bend deeper still and a little stunned until I recognize the color and embroidery of her head scarf. The Forest Temple sigil is secure in each corner, but the cloth is blue and the lines between the sigils spell Nayru out, over and over again. The interpretation of my title is unusual, but as they share it without visible struggle to remember, I must assume that Feather is the simplest translation not directly indicating what my job entails. That she would translate my name as well says she knows more than the obvious.

“Iyajan bi koya kajima, Beth-ehna.” I return the same phrase in my own tongue, and am rewarded with a smile from Beth and a frown from Joelle, though neither says a word in response. “May the Scales find you balanced.” The blessing flows poorly in the Hyrulean language, but the intention that her spirit be found complete, not lacking or over-burdened, when weighted against Mokara’s feather on the scales of judgement, is hopefully well received.

From the fin…hand?…fin she places on my shoulder, urging me to stand straight once
more, it is. Her skin shimmers faintly with tiny scales that give off a silver glint in the light of the candles, and her smile reveals a row of jagged, razor sharp teeth designed to slice through the flesh and bone of fish as well as the thick fibers of water plants. The sight helps to quell any inappropriate reaction to her voluptuous nudity that I may experience, possibly for the rest of my life.

“Our meal grows cold.” Joelle grumbles, and with another squealing laugh, Beth leads us both to a long hall forming the rectory. The floor is a checked pattern of slate and marble polished to the point that I cannot see a quarry mark on any of the stone. It is a large hall, grander than even Krisidi Keep’s, and makes the fine table at the other end look pathetically small. Designed to seat eight or ten, depending on if the head of the table is used as such. Today, it is not. Today, three chairs line each side, and covered dishes wait. There are two more standing by their chosen seats, and as I watch Sister Meg comes out of another small door bearing a basket of fruit. Joelle and Beth move to the right side of the table, leaving me to take the place between Meg and a Kokiri girl.

I seat myself alongside the Sisters, and the Hylian woman in green chemise and kirtle blesses the meal before removing the covers. A small roast is first, followed by barley and mushrooms in a gravy made from the drippings, with enough fresh greens to please even my appetite. A fragrant tisane is served in place of wine or water, and I taste chamomile, ginger, mint, and orange in the brew. The liquid is welcome, and I eat more than I probably should, but Amy’s prowess with a bow has provided for the Sister’s needs since Saria closed all access to the Temple from the outside world. While it cuts off worshipers and visitors, it also makes invasion impossible and locks Ganondorf out physically. It is an acceptable compromise to all of the women here, and I have to agree with their actions.

Fresh, crisp apples still slightly tart and with flesh pleasantly firm finish the meal, and the small Kokiri girl who is the Sage of Forest leads me from the table before I can offer to help clean up. Not inclined to disobey a Sage in her place of power, I trail along slightly behind her bobbing fairy companion as she leads me outside. After my time spent in the Lost Woods, I am overjoyed to see the stars, taking a moment to locate brother moon and drink in his gentle light. While it is later than I thought, the last remains of dusk still touch the horizon, and I bask in the magic that fills me and restores my spirit.

“Aein-shiik.” Saria calls me back to myself.

“Sorry, it’s just…the time of day.” I murmur, dipping my head in apology.

“I imagine it is much like being in the Heart of the Forest is for me.” She giggles as her fairy dances about her head. “Or speaking to the Deku Tree was.” Sorrow, sharp and deep, crumples her face, but she does not cry. The pain is too much for paltry tears, and I kneel to embrace her gently.

“Was?” I ask, when she is no longer so tense as to resemble stone.

“All life dies, according to Nayru’s laws. It is part of what life is.” Her fairy chimes, a deeper and more resonant bell than the tinkling sounds Navi makes when she is not speaking as he alights on her small shoulder, patting her face in comfort.

“What dies is cleansed, and born anew.” I say softly, and am rewarded with tiny arms returning my embrace as the Forest Sage cuddles close.

“Of all life, you who walk the boundary would know this the best.” She tells me, then sighs and takes my hand to pull me deeper into the shadows beneath the canopy. If there is a trail, I cannot see it, but she seems to know where she is going. After the Woods, I am not letting go of her hand for any reason. When we come to a clearing, I know exactly what the place she has lead me to
Darunia Cor Amoto brought me to the Birth of Mountains where a series of crystals chimed a lively Bolero of Fire, the music driving the Sage to dance. Rauru gave me the key to the Goddess’s Glory. Impa showed me both the Journey’s End and the Memory of the Forgotten. Now, Saria lets me soak in the Heart of the Forest, and plays a simple Minuet. I repeat it on my whistle, echoing the notes pouring from the tiny ocarina, and am careful with my intent. I am already here, I do not need to move. When I do wish to return though, I know how.

Satisfied with my performance, the small Sage leads me back to my assigned chamber where a sleep shirt waits folded on a felt filled mattress with no evidence of my dirty clothing to be found. My bag is untouched, and the small candle next to my bedside is guttering. I change quickly and snuff it, then cover myself with a thin sheet and the thick fur of an ancient bear. Warm, full, content and tired, sleep comes easily.

I am allowed to sleep until I wake, which is a long time indeed if my stomach is any indication. Rising shows a pair of sandals have been placed next to the work clothes, and I take the time for a sketchy wash before dressing and returning to the great hall with the checkered floor. The open door that Amy travelled through last night reveals a small kitchen with a board of bread, cheese, and more apples. A hand pump provides water, and I break my fast with the simple fare before seeking out either the Sage or her attendants.

Meg is waiting for me by the lift in the largest room of the monastery when I return.

“Come, shiiik. We have need of you.” She tells me. It is only when she floats over the lift and disappears that I realize she has no need to walk. Nor will she, ever again. Disconcerted, for I am certain that she lived last I saw her, I stand on the lift and seek a means to operate it, only to have it sink downwards beneath my feet. The motion is smooth, and seems to hold to a well maintained mechanism that gently stops deep within the ground. A large door is thrown open, and I ignore the other paths to follow the solid specter of Sister Meg down a short tunnel and up a flight of stairs.

At the top of the stairs a raised platform is fenced off. Surrounded by portraits of the other Sage’s Temples, the magic sealing Saria from any harm is almost enough for me to ignore the cloying scent of salt and iron and the way my sandaled feet squelch in the dark, clotting blood soaking through the carpet to pool thickly on the stone beneath. At each cardinal point, a Sister slumps, hands folded in prayer, head down, eyes closed. They have been dead for marks, and are stiff to the touch. Cold. Their spirits whisper to me of the necessity of their sacrifice and the protection of the Sage and the Forest. Now they may remain in this place without sleep, not needing food or water or companionship, guarding the land in a way that the Kokiri could never hope to.

“Would you care for our remains, so that the sanctuary remains pristine for the once and future Hero?” Meg entreats me.

“That on his coming, we may rest?” Amy adds.

“Tell your Mistress of our deeds.” Joelle demands.

“The Forest Sage is safe.” Beth declares, and the four spirit Sisters fade from my sight, leaving only corpses, congealing blood, and a Sage encased in the protective magic that cost four lives to complete. I am no black sorcerer feeding on pain and death as Ganondorf is rumored to be, nor am I a white witch, to restore life once it has been lost. My abilities lie in other areas. This is why I was called here, and given these clothes. I draw the mask over my face, and set to work.

A moment’s focus tells me the direction of the Shadow Temple, and I kneel before Joelle’s
body facing it. Then, I pray. Given what I have seen this past year, I have no doubts as to whether or not my people’s Goddess hears. I know She does. The weight of Joelle’s heart shall be dispersed for her sacrifice. Spirit cared for, her request to remain on this plane honored, I turn to her corpse. It is stiff, and I push my magic through mark I make on the crown of her skull and the channels that descend from there, loosening the muscles enough to be malleable. Bending her knees, curling her inward, her head falls to my shoulder as I lift, carrying her as a husband would his new wife. Her wrists have been opened through to the other side, and her spirit follows me as I take her body up the lift and to the small garden next to the kitchen. Laying her on her back, I return to the lower level three more times.

Side by side, arms over stomachs, I begin washing their skin free of the stains of their death and what happens after. Carefully, for decomposition is already occurring, I rinse them free of impurities without scrubbing skin that no longer recovers or retains its elasticity. Their hair, aside from Beth, I braid and bind in elegant knots that will seal seeping fluid from staining their biers. I wash myself after, offering further prayers to Mokara but foregoing the meditations to guide their spirits to the next world. They will find their way to the Silent Realm when it is time. Their clothing I burn in the hearth fire. Taking the time to finish the last of the bread and cheese while I am in the kitchen, I remove a coil of sausage for later and cover it to keep insects away before returning to my task. Amy’s spirit waits for my return.

“Take the lift to the roof.” She instructs, and is gone in less time than it takes to blink. Already, she is carrying the flame of a bound Poe, though she is still distinctly herself in my vision. I obey, and find signs of other bodies left on the various levels of the roof itself for wind and rain and time to dispose of. Exposure is preferred for the Kokiri, the Forest Children. Appropriate, then, that those who have been called to the Temple here desire the same. Meg is closest, and so I once again kneel and take her into my arms. Careful to lift with the muscle of my legs and save my back, I find I have room for two of the Sisters and myself on the lift if I rest them against the pillars, and so Meg and Beth come up on the first trip to the roof of the monastery that is the Forest Temple, and Amy and Joelle on the second.

I place them according to the Goddess they served in life, beginning with Beth, servant of Nayru, in the east where the sun rises and the beginnings of order originate and water pools beneath her prone form. It startles me for a moment, until I feel the structure of the Temple feeding the magic into the rites. Joelle to the south, where Din’s flame burns without fuel. Amy is covered in vines almost before I set her in the west, Farore’s life encompassing death, and Meg lies in cool Shadow to the North as a soft breeze ruffles the coif of her hair, leaving an ink black feather in the strands. Taking the center for myself, aching and sweaty, I call the spirits of the Sisters to manifest and provide the energy they need to do so in order to hear and honor last requests. It is a task I have performed numerous times, but never for more than one at a time, never for an intentional sacrifice, and never for the attendants for a Temple with their own spiritual power.

Energy runs out of me as water from a loosely woven basket, sending me to my knees and too cold to shiver. From there it is a short slump to the flat stone of the roof, and an icy hand on my cheek is all that keeps me conscious. Some of the power I have expended returns through that hand, and then rushes to restore me in the form of four great flames. The lift engages and sinks down to the grand hall, stopping only long enough for the four freestanding conical torches to alight in smokeless fire before descending fully to the vestibule before the sanctuary, and I stagger to follow the flames as they dance about my head and across my vision. The ghostly laughter of the four Sisters is a prelude to their appearance.

With no ties left on their physical forms, the Sisters have turned to geas bound Poes, yet they retain enough of their individual personalities to remain distinct both from each other and other, less cognizant or purposed Poes. I have been successful, then, in my efforts to aid their prayers that
Mokara answer their pleas, Din gift them power, Farore keep their lives, and Nayru grant them their minds. Joelle is harsh angles, red flames, and driving power. Beth is smooth roundness and calm assurance, blue flame steady and serene. Amy’s green fire dances, sending false sparks into the air and gently urgent. The violet flash of Meg’s transitory blaze seems to hold open a gateway that is also a test. Relieved, I laugh, and the sound is returned four fold, haunting and amused.

“Our thanks, Feather.” Amy’s torch dips.

“The Temple is secure, the Sage preserved.” Beth’s voice is the squeal of a dolphin turned to the shriek of a wraith. It is not much of an improvement, but it is better. Or perhaps I am biased in my preferences.

“A gift for a gift.” Joelle’s light moves to the sanctuary, with the others in close attendance, and I follow with renewed energy now that I am no longer being drained dry. Perhaps that is the last sensation the Sisters felt, and I shudder. It is not something I would choose, but I cannot deny the efficacy. The flames alone wait for me at the top of the stairs, and this time as I ascend, I cannot smell the thick, drying blood that should still be soaked into the carpet and flagstones beneath. Instead of dark lumps of congealing proteins starting to rot, all I see is a carpet of near exact dimensions to the raised floor, Triangles and Triforces abounding.

The flames swirl beneath the magically encased form of the Sage, and dissipate to leave behind only sparks and a stylized crystalline heart.

“Geul bi hyli, niahn bi pohs.” Meg’s voice whispers in my ear, saving me the trouble of having to translate from Hyrulean to understand. Saying the blood of life is the gift of ghosts leaves out so much that the Shaekha’ri implicitly know. This is the strength of their life force left behind, unable to find purchase without a mortal form. I touch the shimmering heart and feel my stores, still drained to a third of what I can be, fill completely and increase a third again. Experience and practice normally are the only ways to gain stamina and strength, in small increments over a long period of time. This sudden increase is exhilarating and most welcome. I feel as though I could run for days, or warp to each point I know successively and without pause. The thought brings about one of the most intense rushes of intuition I have ever had, even with Zelda’s presence in the back of my mind, and I know what I should do.

Gathering the supplies of the Temple is actually a relatively simple task. The fabrics, both sewn and simple bolts of cloth, are in the storage room closest to the bed chamber I was given. Food stuffs in the kitchen next to the rectory. Herbs and soaps, bandages and gut, scalpels and other tools of healing by the baineary and infirmary slightly beyond the bed chamber. The tools to cause wounding in the salle and dormitory on the second floor. There is a small tannery, with furs and leathers both raw and processed, and if I have the strength I will attend to those as well. There is no one here alive to require any of these things, though I leave the purely ecclesiastical supplies alone in my hunt.

Moving as much of the goods as I can to the grotto next to the warp platform, I ensure that the area is sealed before heading back to the kitchen to eat. A bath, and I use the elevator to return to the roof and observe the steady waxing of brother moon’s progression. There is enough light that I can see only desiccated remains, and by the time my attuning to the shadows is complete even that has dried up and blown away. I retire, sleeping soundly and dreaming of my Master and Mistress playing together when they are perhaps the age I am now. It is a strange dream, for they cavort as children in a place I know they have never been, with those they have never met.

I wake missing my brother horribly, wondering if he is indeed in the small field next to the tailor’s shop in Sahila, flirting with Keiko as my parents watch in amusement. It is stranger yet that I
no longer think of the village of my birth as home. My home is wherever my feet take me, Impa at my back, Link in my heart, and with Zelda on my mind, her people before me. It feels right, and I have work to do. Brushing lingering memories and traces of tears away, I rise, stretch, bathe, and carry the last of the supplies to the grotto, leaving the Temple empty of all mortal needs. There are bottles of green potion with the medicines, and I make sure to place them nearest the platform, for what I am to do will drain me dry if I am not careful.

Shuffling as much of the perishable goods as I can fit to the raised stone platform takes some time, and I take a deep breath before letting my shadow stretch and engulf the food and medicines, claiming them as my own much as Impa did to me to carry me to the Temple of Time. Taking out my whistle, I let the Nocturne wail. The disorientation of warping passes in a moment, and then I steady myself and jog to the village square. It is more than a mark to noon, and Conrad at the gate waves as I pass by. Within moments of my arrival in the square, I have a contingent of not only citizens, but Elig and his apprentice from Death Mountain to carry away the bounty I have brought. The two Gorons will make the work much easier, and as I rush back it does not occur to me to ask why they are here so early in the day.

Hauling Busi up to the warp platform requires using the Nocturne once more, for Elig cannot reach high enough and Busi is too heavy for any other people to even attempt lifting. Once he is there, however, transferring the goods from the platform to the lower level is simple. I rest while they clear the stone somewhat, enough that I am confident it will be empty by the time I manage the next trip. The Minuet comes quickly, and I reload the platform with the rest of the goods that are prone to rot and spoilage. As there is one of me, and many of them, I drain one of the green potion bottles dry and warp. Brant is waiting, and I am pleased with the notes he is taking on what I bring to Kakariko. This way, no one may claim more than their fair share or dispute ownership. I will ensure that those assisting the transport are paid for their troubles out of my own pocket, and that what I bring goes to the ones with the most need, not the most greed.

Like Brant’s sister, Johanna, and the orphans they tend to.

Two more trips, and I pause for a rest and some food before warping yet again. I am tired, but the satisfaction of stocking a village filled with refugees for a harsh winter keeps me going. I manage five more trips before I can do no more, with only a platform and a half remaining in the Forest Temple grotto. I can rest and recover, and tomorrow the last of the rugs and charcoal will be in Kakariko. Today, physically, I need a massage, for though others have emptied the platform on this end, I was alone in the Forest. I ache. Magically, the green potion helped enough that a single good night’s sleep will restore me, but it is artificial and leaves me feeling out of sorts. Mentally I am sound, and spiritually whole, so there is no reason for me to seek solace the Shadow Temple’s calming aura. Kakariko will have a bed and space for me, and after jumping down and leaving a small crater in the earth, Busi carries me back to the village proper on his shoulder.

I am thankful for the ride, and pay him handsomely for both his steady service and the transportation in a single, large sack of pumice stone he enjoys snacking on. He says the texture is light and crunchy, the flavor slightly sweet. I take his word for it, having grown rather fond of my teeth. Elig prefers the spiciness of scoria, and with some of the salty diorite I have considers that fair trade. Brant asks for a chest of blankets for the orphanage as payment, which I readily agree to, leaving me enough rupees for an honest day’s labor for the rest. My coffers are rather bare afterward, but there is enough credit and exchange value with the bounty I have brought that I will never need to pay for anything in Kakariko again. That won’t stop me from doing so, but tonight my needs will be taken care of.

Potato stew, fresh biscuits, hard boiled eggs, sharp cheese from a wheel in the stores, and some of the last cherries leave me somnolent and disinclined to move, my muscles protesting their
labors. I stretch to alleviate some of the pain, only to have a warm hand land on my shoulders and rub. My head falls forward even as I moan in relief as the tension is released, and a vaguely familiar chuckle sounds behind me.

“Nah, Aein-shiik, how’d you like to go into business with us?” Vidkun asks, and digs out a particularly vicious knot, making me grunt instead of reply. “Master Chuki was all set to trade big on fresh produce for fabrics and linens, and here you are supplying the entire village with more than we have in all our caravans.” For someone whose livelihood is made on such negotiations, he doesn’t seem too upset, continuing the massage that rocks me in my chair until I brace myself against the table top.

“I’m…oh, lower. Lower. I already have further tasks before me.” I hum as he steadily works the stiffness from my limbs. He does not inquire further, though as he presses a different stiffness into my body much, much later that evening, I cannot help but think of what travelling with him would be like. Hard, yes, but walking over the entirety of a country is difficult as well. Challenging, definitely, though not as challenging as allowing Zelda’s possession for the exchange of information with those nobles still loyal to the Hyrulean Crown. More comfortable, with others to share camp duties, stock of necessities, and the companionship that I sorely miss while travelling, assuredly. And this need, too, that I am only now discovering in myself as he moves within me. I have made promises, though.

Rolling enough to straddle Vidkun I continue the steady pace, climax having come once already making both of us capable of a more leisurely rhythm. His hands continually caress my back and buttocks, shifting to tug at my shoulders and pull me down for a thorough kiss. The feel of him pressing me open, friction deep inside, keeps me rocking my hips against his as I brace my palms on his chest. Soon, his enjoyment becomes evident, seeping out of me onto his thighs, dripping down his balls. His hand runs through my hair as he nips at my face and lips, then trails down to test the point of our joining. I am close enough that when a finger joins his dick, I find my finish. Sleep comes to him quickly after, and I rise to clean us up enough that waking won’t be to skin cemented together by drying bodily fluids. Tucking myself under his arm, head on his shoulder, I lift one of the Forest Temple’s blankets to cover the both of us and join him in sleep.

The feeling of waking next to someone is something I am unaccustomed to, though extremely pleasant, and I burrow further into Vidkun’s side even as his arm about my waist tightens and he chuckles.

“Good morning.” His voice is deep, sleep roughened and pleased.

“Mmm.” I purr into his skin, letting his scent fill my nose, not quite ready to give up my hold on dreams. His hand descends to rub my scalp, stroking along my spine, brushing the mess of my hair back from my face even as he touches his lips to mine. I wrinkle my nose as the kiss progresses, and pull back even as he does, his features drawn up in a similar expression.

“Morning breath.” He explains, and I laugh my consensus to the dawn air. With a quick peck to my forehead, he shuffles up and over me to rise and I admire the long line of his form. Broad shoulders, narrow hips, and the muscled legs of a long-time rider are covered in smooth, dark skin and thick, curly hairs. The beginnings of a full beard make his face rough under my palm as I return his brushing of lips and turn to dress myself. While I appreciate his body both in form and the pleasures he can give me, I must continue with my appointed tasks, Zelda a firm pulse of direction in the back of my mind. The horn of the caravan sounds, and I toss his boots towards him as his rate of dressing goes from leisurely to hurried. That horn means the wagons are leaving momentarily, and he must travel with them, just as I must travel on alone.
“Aein.” He murmurs, one boot secured and the other halfway on. I kneel to tug it firmly in place, and begin lacing it to avoid the blush dark enough on his features to be plainly seen. He lifts my chin, his sage-green eyes meeting my own red squarely though the flush in his cheeks is telling of his mood more than the actions of his hands. “Aein-shiik, a…a favor?” He asks. My own blush is twice as fierce for my fair skin. He is not asking for me to do something for him, but for a sign of my loyalties. I break the eye contact by looking down, wondering at what I could possibly use and further, if I am ready for openly showing my preferences. As I understand, courting amongst both our peoples follow similar lines, and this…while not a declaration of intent for a more permanent joining, it is one step further on that path.

“I…” I begin, flushing deeper red still. He…he is kind. Strong. Courteous and honest….and a terrific bed partner. Only two years older, he is a decent match, both in personality and status. I would be a fool to not see that. And yet…

“It…it’s okay if you don’t want to.” He murmurs, pulling away, retreating from my hesitation and I can’t bear the thought of losing him because I am frightened of what may be and unsure of my own desires. I snap the laces of his boot tight and stand to grab his eating knife from his belt. Before unease stills my hand yet again, I lift it to the braid on the right side of my face and slice through the hairs just above the first binding. Quickly, for the horns sound again indicating the first wagon is on the move, I tie the ends together into a rough bracelet and slip it over his hand, putting the blade into his open palm and shoving him towards the door.

“Go, they will not wait.” I urge, and am pleasantly rewarded with his mouth bowing to meet my own as his tongue attempts to suck out my soul despite the sour flavor of an empty stomach making both of us taste foul. It is fast, for all the intensity, and then he is running as I stand clutching my shirt closed, pants unlaced, hair a disaster, in the doorway of the inn. Well aware of the stares of the nearby villagers, I wait only long enough for him to disappear in the rank and file before returning and taking care of my appearance as best I can. My unease at the gift of a favor disappears as quickly as the bowl of porridge I break my fast with, and I forget all about it by the time the last of the goods from the Forest Temple are stored. Brant himself has gone over all the records of my supplies and their locations. I sign a deed of the majority of the goods to him, with the rest going as a storage fee to Impa herself, and seal it with a touch of my magic to ensure that no one but myself can alter the documents once I leave.

From the orphanage, it is not far to the graveyard, and then the Shadow Temple opens for me with a brief prayer. I do not often use the front entrance, the warping platform suiting my purposes much better, and I am not expecting the warm welcome I receive from the resident attendants. It does make a certain amount of sense, for though many of them have already shed their physical forms, those that remain will no longer have to concern themselves with the villager’s needs and can focus instead on keeping themselves supplied. I leave a promissory note in the hands of Kaki-shiik for his judgement from the stores, and stay long enough for Charin to trim the ragged ends of my hair to something that doesn’t look like a five year old did it, and for the noon meal and meditations.

Thus fortified, the song for Derinkuyu seems to take no energy at all, and I am greeted by my Mistress herself as she flings her arms around my middle. She is getting bigger, and the promise of devastating adult beauty is more prominent in her features.

“Welcome home, Aein-shiik.” She murmurs, and I find that she is completely right. I am home.
The Perspective of Another

Chapter Summary

Turn, then, to noble ambition,
Leaving your childhood behind.

A.K.A. Aein fucks up, so Zelda fucks up, which means Ganondorf attacks but also fucks up, so now everyone has a bit more of each other's measure and not everything is fucked up. That's not necessarily a good thing.

Chapter Notes

Warnings to heed: deliberate disassociation, possession, injury, pain, violence, blood, technically self-harm?, thaumaturgy, theurgy, regret, stalking children, nightmares, widespread illness.

Oh look, Ruto.

After the scorching heat of the desert sands, the chill of the last of autumn leaving sinks deep into my bones and I wish not for the first time to be back within the warmth of the Spirit Temple. The surrounding desert I can do without, the unrelenting heat and light enough to drive every trace of moisture from my body in hours, but the Temple itself was wondrous. The moment I crossed the small bridge leading from the valley to the field however, there has been a steady harsh wind driving flecks of sleet against my progress. The damp, freezing rain steals any heat my body can produce and leaves my joints aching and my head muzzy. I am supposed to continue on to the Water Temple, but at this rate I will be an ice statue before I make it halfway there.

I should have left immediately after resupplying and taking a day of rest in Derinkuyu, but with the Harvest Festival only two days after and then a day to clean up turning to three in order to help Hora set up a nursery for the child she carries it was nearly a quarter’s worth of travel time lost that I need to make up for. Then Nabooru…and the Gerudo women. All of them.

Not truly, but it certainly felt like it. I am not ashamed to say that running away seemed the best option. I am not a prized stud, to be passed around like the bowls of dates and figs, yet… refusing these women is not something that is done. They are as jackals, yapping incessantly when they are not hunting and silent as the breeze when they are, travelling in fierce packs and mounting any male they fancy whenever they want. I do not rightly know how they rated my performance, but now, three days after my ignoble escape and with my cloak serving as a full-body ice pack, my hips are still bruised and sore. My skin is as tanned as when Zelda is in residence, though she left after the second day in the desert once all the information her agents had was exchanged, so my tan is a result of the desert itself. The wind whips my cloak open once more, frozen fingers unable to keep it closed, and a fresh soaking chill covers my core before I can fight the fabric down again.

It is perhaps this fact alone that saves me.
Aversa Keep is twice the size of Krisidi Keep, looming out of the gloom of early evening in the rain. Built into the mountainous barrier that surrounds Hyrule proper, housing nearly a thousand souls in its walls, their outriders and guards spot my white robes whipping in the wind through the sleet and shade. I had hoped to reach their gates early this afternoon, and I am too cold to form words now that it is past the supper hour and I have been trekking through the storm for days. Though I am wearing every stitch of clothing I possess, it is not enough to have kept my fingers from turning blue. At least they no longer ache. I haven’t the courage to look at my toes.

Within moments of the first rider’s arrival I am surrounded by the guards of Aversa. Their captain is a Hylian man old enough to be my father and his voice is crisp and clear through the pounding water descending from the heavens to drench the soil. It takes three of them to get me up on his horse, for my legs don’t seem to want to bend properly and I cannot keep my seat even when the horse stands as still as a statue. His hands on my face burn like the desert sun. I slump against his solid chest and let the pace of his mare lull me into a light doze. It means that I don’t remember much of the trip to the keep or how I got to the healer’s rooms, but that’s okay since I’m inside and Lady Flora has been summoned. I leave my body and tug on the bonds before humming the song my Mistress wrote to inform Zelda that I am ready for her to take over. She comes, then immediately withdraws and reaches for my mind with her own.

.:Aein! What have you done to yourself?!.: She hollers at me, delicate hands grasping for me though we are both no more than thoughts, memory, and spirit. I allow the touch, and she uses it to shove me back into my form, tangling some of the strands holding my spirit secure. The Triforce of Wisdom’s golden light fills my vision as I attempt to straighten them out, and then it is late morning and I am staring at the infirmary ceiling. I am uncomfortably warm, and piled with enough blankets and furs that I cannot see the swell of my feet beneath them. When I shift I run into a number of small sacks filled with dried beans that give off residual warmth packed around my body, and my fingers are bandaged when I work them out from beneath the covers. They are no longer blue, but a sickly white.

“Maman, he is moving again.” A childish treble calls out, and I see a small blonde head with two fluffy tails bound on top rush by my bedside. It is almost enough to distract me from the discoloration of the burn on the back of my palm. Almost.

“Ah, you are truly awake then. Come boy, what is your name?” The resident healer pulls my attention away from the mark by moving into my personal space.

“Tor Aein.” My words are slow, but the correct response to the query for the healer.

“I’d thought as much. Lady Flora has read your missive, and Captain Marc knows a Sheikah when he sees one but doesn’t understand a word of the language. Sheik is your title, yes?” She murmurs softly as she pinches and prods my skin, testing my reflexes and listening to my breath. At my confirmation she continues, moving on to check my toes, and then my hands. “You’re lucky Nataniel spotted you when he did, or you’d be all over chilblains by now. If it weren’t for the Goddess’ touch, you’d have lost your fingers for certain sure.” She tells me, and I stiffen in fear at the thought. My hands are not the only tool I use for my livelihood, but they are an important part of it. Losing them would be crippling to more than my body. The healer has continued speaking, but I missed most of what she has said.

“…and Grace here kept your bean bags nice and warm, so you should be up and about within a day or two. No more haring off into early winter storms though, or I’ll tan your hide and have me a fine Sheikah rug.”
“Y..yes ma’am.” I agree. I hadn’t intended to run into the first one so ill provisioned or turned out. The desert lulled me with heat and light, and it is not a mistake I intend to make again. “How long have I been here?”

“How long have I been here?”

“Just a day lad. The Lady’ll take your message this evening once you’re rested, so for now you stay warm and eat what Grace brings to you. Alright?”

“Alright.” I agree, and slip back to the covers, for in the short time my skin has been exposed I have grown chilled, and they are warm. I wrap them around myself though, instead of lying back down, for I am disconcerted with my inability to complete my duties. I must be better prepared, more cautious, and take better care of my body. Even the amount of magic required for Zelda to heal me was enough to sear the back of my hand with her mark, as though Wisdom is a brand. I snort softly to myself. Running into the teeth of Old Man Winter is the furthest thing from wisdom I have done in ages. Yes, it is important that I familiarize myself with Zelda’s land and people, crucial that I learn the last of the warp songs, and imperative that hanyana remain safely out of Ganondorf’s reach. A nearly eleven year old girl, no matter how intelligent, is no match for a battle-hardened warlord.

I can only pray that her use of the Triforce’s power in the lands that his darkness covers has not called his minions down upon the keep. The healer waits for the blonde child no more than six to return with a carefully balanced tray of steaming soup, fresh bread, and tea that smells strongly of strengthening herbs. Taking the tray from the girl, I rest the lot on the bedding and start with the tea. It has steeped too long and is bitter for it, but I feel better after finishing the pot. The soup is thick with roasted vegetables, and the bread sliced deep enough for a pat of butter to melt through. My fingers tingle and flex around the spoon, like there are thousands of tiny insects biting them, and I drop the utensil more than once in my efforts. Forcing the blood to move through them has restored some of their color, and left darkening bruises behind.

The warmth of the meal and the room itself pacifies my mind, drawing it to wander as my body pulls energy to my core for digestion and my limbs grow chilled once more. I am of no use in this state, and resolve firmly to be better prepared when I am capable of leaving this heated room. I would be sweating normally with the amount of warmth pouring from the fireplace, yet small shivers still wrack my body. Curling inward alleviates most of the tremors, and it is coiled in on myself like a babe in the womb that I find sleep. The healer, whose name I have yet to know, and her daughter Grace return marks later, changing the bean bags for fresh and taking the empty dishes of my meal out before the healer returns alone to check my extremities and push a bottle of red potion into my hands. I wince at the sight of it, and again at the pressure on my aching fingers.

“Ah, had this before have you? Drink up then, I won’t try to convince you of the flavor.” She urges, and while I have seen the results that the thick liquid can produce, it is not something that I would wish to consume if there were any other alternatives…and blue potion tastes worse. Holding my nose to avoid scenting the vile concoction, I lift the bottle to my lips and pull as hard as I can, trying to bypass my tongue as much as possible. I can’t completely avoid having some of it touch, but I can avoid gagging it all up afterward and consider the trial a success. As I process the liquid, no more than an eighth of a mark, the frostbite vanishes from my skin and the persistent chill goes with it. The ache remains in the joints of my fingers, but at least they no longer feel as though they are burning. The healer pinches the tips and declares me healed as best as she can.

“Wash up boy, there’s clothes on the counter and a bell cord if you need help.” She shoes me into the small room, little better than a closet, just off of the heated room, and closes the door firmly behind her. I wonder briefly what has happened to the clothing I was wearing, but know that it would have to be dried in the least before I would be allowed to wear it again. The wrap robe and ties will serve until such a time, though I suspect that all of my official clothing will be given a full
laundring as well. The bath is already drawn, and much like in Derinkuyu there is a stopper in the bottom of the tub to drain the water once I have finished and a spigot for fresh if needed. I warm the water before stepping into the tub and immediately attacking my hair with the soaps left on the brim. There is a surprising amount of grime built up, and it takes three full tubs of water to be rid of it all.

Feeling more like myself and less like something the cat dragged in, I am thankful for the quilting of the robe and small clothes. There are even a pair of thick hide and fur boots instead of slippers or sandals. Though I am healed and producing my own body heat, that does not mean that I am warm. The storm that I was walking through may very well mark the start of true winter weather, though the equinox is not yet a full moon past. With the poor yields of farm and field, an early winter could very well spell death to far too many. Of all the places I have been, Kakariko is now the best provisioned of all Hyrule to survive, though it appears Aversa Keep may be the second if not on equal footing.

There is, was, a dozen times the population in a single district of Castle Town. All that remains are the followers of the Usurper King and the dead he has called from their rest to his service. It is an abomination that I have been forbidden to attempt, and though it raises my gorge I can see the Wisdom in Zelda’s orders. A single shiik, no matter how fresh to the theatre, no matter how talented, can only cut so deeply into the darkness that is more than just the absence of light. I would be capable of perhaps a thousand, on my best day, before being lost to the shrieking howls of the ReDead or the relentless hunt of the Gibdo. With that, Zelda would have no means of communication with her people, and her exile would be complete. I am her eyes and her voice.

.:Good for you to remember that:. She teases me, her mind close at hand now that I am to see the Lady of Aversa Keep, or rather, that she is to see the Lady and exchange information. I will be present, but only to ghost about in spirit. My Princess laughs at my faint humor given the recent train of my thoughts, and I share her amusement in a warm pulse of feeling trailing through our bond. The returning sensation makes me frown in the empty bathing room.

.:Are you ready for this, hanyana? You seem tired:. I ask, willing to claim false fatigue from the healing if she needs more time. Possession is never easy, even for those of my talents. Lady Flora has waited one night already, another will not add to her ire, but Zelda’s energy is not limitless despite being Nayru’s chosen.

.:I believe so. Aein, thank you:. She tells me, her presence so close that I swear I could reach out and touch her, though she is on the other side of the country.

.:For what? Princess, I only do what any other servant would, had they the ability:. I reassure her, though I know that there are many who would refuse out of fear. Perhaps my time spent with resusangeul bi aiyuu has begun to wear off on me. That the courage of a boy would inspire the same in me makes me smile, for he is frequently on my mind now that I have left his care to others. I wonder what it would be like to have a brother his age, and feel a sudden longing for Yoru’s teasing.

.:I have sent some of the excess in Derinkuyu to Krisidi Keep, mostly fabrics but some dried fruit and meat as well:. She avoids my question deftly, and I allow it. Sometimes, the need to express thankfulness is best accepted at face value. I am pleased that she has indeed found a means to help the people there, fulfilling her promise made while wearing my skin. As if the thought calls her, she slides into my form much like I slid into the robe moments ago, and I let out the chords binding me to my body to make space for her presence. There is something in the way she holds herself, something beyond my normal posture that would be telling for anyone who knew me even passably well, without the deepening of my skin tone and the bleaching of my hair as her light alters the pigments from it, that proclaims her spirit is present in my flesh.
She is my sun, my light, my life. I bow my head to her warmth and know of all the shadows she casts, I am the one she claims for her own. It is all my honor to serve her thus.

She walks from the bathing room through the hallways to the street and people stop and stare, unable to ignore her presence. She is...more...than anyone, anything else. I chase after her, slowly growing accustomed to moving without a body again, and catch up just in time to pass through the solid oak doors leading to the inner chambers of the Lady of the Keep. How she found her way I will never truly know, but I suspect childhood visits and a familiarity with the terrain have much to do with it.

“Lady Flora of Aversa Keep, Duchess of Bloomingfield, attend to us.” Zelda commands with my voice and her diction, gliding over the floor with the grace of flowing water. The royal plural would never come from my lips, and is another indicator that I am not the one in control at the moment. The Lady pauses, then chases all the servants from the room and empties out the spy holes before summoning a small court including Captain Marc and the guard who found me. Nataniel, I believe his name was.

“Is this the man you found wandering in the North field?” She asks of him, and he hesitates, nods, then shakes his head, then nods again.

“I…I think so m’Lady. His looks is near that of the lad I saw, but there’s something…not the same about him, more than his coloring.” Nataniel admits, his eyes wide. For a human, he’s remarkably observant, which is most likely why he’s been put on the night watch. The white of my clothing would stand out, yes, but to spot it in the rain and send out a contingent of guards to the spot of that short vision is impressive. That he can tell I…we…are not the same as the person he first saw raises my estimation of his entire race.

“His presence is massive now, Lady Flora.” Marc interrupts his subordinate’s stuttering. “The wee thing we dragged in hadn’t nearly the weight of this lad, and there’s a tone to his voice that I heard naught of through his shivering.”

“He is my vessel, my eyes, my voice.” Zelda says, the rehearsed words flowing from my lips easily. “Sheik carries me in his heart, and so keeps me safe from the evil that plagues our land. Please give him whatever aid you may, knowing that we will remember you to the Goddesses.”

With the simplest version of my possession explained, the missive produced claiming the same but with more detail and the seal of the Hyrulean monarchy bound in magic, and two short anecdotal recollections of time Zelda herself spent in Aversa Keep as a child is all it takes for the Lady and her court to accept Zelda’s authenticity. Even having been among these people for nearly half a cycle, I am still not comfortable enough in the language to understand all the legal terms and courtly manners, and grow restless after the first two hours of listening to the information being exchanged. So little has changed in the telling as to be insignificant.

Having no physical form, I cannot even fidget satisfactorily, and so I narrow the cords tying me to my body further still and go exploring. Only one of the spy-holes that Lady Flora had cleared has been repopulated, and I take the time to send the two infiltrators to sleep before moving onward. I would, at hanyana’s suggestion, take their clothes with me, but I haven’t the ability as I am. Further out the people of the keep go about their business and, curious, I follow first a young woman to her home and her hearth where a new husband and newer infant wait. Their dog sees me though, and chases me from their space with growls and whines. I am distracted on the way back to the small market by a pair of children recently released from their lessoning debating the merits of parsnips versus turnips, their identical features emphasized by clothing of the same construction with the only variance between in the decorative stitching.
My recent yearning for my own twin lures me to chase after their progress towards their unknown destination, and I trail them all the way to a small apartment on top of a chandler’s shop. I am, for once, grateful that I cannot smell anything without a body, for though this family seems to specialize in soaps rather than typical candles the stench of tallow and lye would be overpowering. The girls’ mother waits with a tureen of stewed harvest vegetables containing both turnips and parsnips, as well as carrots, potatoes, onions, and some type of squash. I have to assume that some of the small flecks are reused roast, and find I have a similar smile to their mother’s as they tuck into the meal. Their father is out trading the finished product for discarded animal fats and ash, and the mother leaves a portion of the meal for her partner and supervises the cleaning afterward. The darkening sky leaves little time for further activity, though a single candle is left burning in the window for the father to see as the girls are brushed and braided and tucked together beneath a hand stitched quilt. They sleep, holding each other much as Yoru and I did when we still shared a bed, and very closely to how both Link and Zelda are inclined to snuggle if given the opportunity.

Spirit soothed, I return to the ongoing meeting in the Keep proper, and see that the household has provided a meal of similar ingredients and preparations in my absence. With the empty plate before Zelda, she has taken her share of the repast, which means I will not have to find further nourishment on my own. From the tenor of the conversation, all pertinent information has been traded and Lady Flora is simply catching up on the months since Zelda’s exile. For her part, my Mistress is circumspect in her words beyond what most courtiers manage after years of practise. There is no way for anyone to know her location, though my movements are laid out plainly and clearly. Her intent to have me travel to the Water Temple before the full brunt of winter hits is exposed and assistance requested in properly attiring and provisioning me in exchange for future unspecified aid. That makes me uneasy, for it is vague and unclear what that aid will be for what type of situation. I make my displeasure known to my Mistress, and she shushes me, counting down from five.

On two, the door to the chamber bursts open and a young woman wearing the Keep guard uniform bows deeply to Lady Flora and inclines her head towards me before delivering her message. Zelda leaves, yanking me back to my body and making my chest ache at the unaccustomed action of once again needing to breathe and have my heart beat.

“Stalchildren, on the eastern wall.” She manages, and I am on my feet and running, the other members of Lady Flora’s inner circle hard pressed to keep up. From my wanderings as little more than a ghost, I know that the eastern wall is three stories tall and made of sturdy brick and mortar. The bone talons of the stalchildren will have no trouble clawing their way up, most likely the reason they were sent. Arrows are useless, though I see a number of them dipped in pitch and lit before they are fired on the advancing company of skeletal abominations. A matching company of guards rushes to meet them with their blades and shields, the flaming pitch of those arrows that found their mark lighting the field but not slowing the stalchildren in the least. The blades are more effective, dismembering the small skeletons quickly, but this is not a battle that the living can win. The dark magic over the land keeps the stalchildren from finding rest, reforming their bodies over and over again, and unlike the guard, they do not tire.

Their eyes, burning with desires best left unspoken, are the only clue that is available to these people. I, however, see and know nearly in the same moment. Grasping a bucket of fresh water, it is a simple matter to toss the lot on the closest of the stalchildren. I accidentally soak the guard fighting it as well, but it does not matter for the bones dissolve and disappear, never to reform again. Twice more, and the means of permanently dispatching them becomes clear to enough of the guard that one begins pumping buckets of water for the others to use as ammunition and the archers trade pitch for sponges and damp rags. Against the newly armed Hyrulean guards, the stalchildren don’t stand a chance.
The stalfo, however, is a different story. There is only one, but neither pitch nor water seem to affect it at all. The black magic binding it to this world is thicker, heavier than the light, nearly insubstantial ties of the stalchildren, and I cannot perceive any elemental weakness in the structure. My contemplation, however, has taken too long and I have to duck and roll to avoid the reach of the rusted blade as it aims to remove my head from my shoulders. The only weapon I have is the eating knife that Zelda used, its jewel studded hilt finding its way to my palm even as I dance out of the way of a leaping attack. The stalfo takes a moment to recover, but pursues relentlessly, as if it knows I am responsible for the defeat of its lesser brethren. I have a breath to wish that I had some of Yoru’s proficiency with weapons, my own ability in the martial arts limited by not only lack of experience but utter lack of inclination. It is my job to tend to the land and the dead after a battle, not create them.

The stalfo tries to use its shield to push me off balance, knocking the leather wrapped and metal bound wood into my torso and driving the air from my lungs but only sending me spinning away instead of taking my feet from beneath me. It leaps again, and I see a faint chance that I must take, for I am tiring quickly. Stabbing the eating knife around in an arch I connect at the base of the stalfo’s skull and am rewarded when the rest of it clatters to the ground. The cheer from the watching populace is premature, however, for like the stalchildren unless I break the binding magic holding the imprisoned spirit to its skeletal body it will only reform and continue its assault. Scrabbling forward I kick its head as far from the pile of bones of its body as I can, and sink to my knees before the trembling mass. Quickly, for it is already attempting to regain its mobility, I call on my magic and trace the inky filth that tangles the bones to animation, keeping it still if not dispelling the vile power.

It is so similar to my own magic as a shiik, but used in such a way that it makes my skin crawl to be near, and borne of unnatural death and pain. My revulsion at the slimy texture of the binding makes me gag, and I cycle through the releasing and neutralizing patterns I know to no avail. The bones clatter against one another beneath my hands, fighting my hold on their compulsions, and a shriek of warning alerts me to the return of the skull. Bound as I am, tangled around the serpentine twining of evil made manifest, I cannot avoid the incoming bones nor can I knock it away once more.

“Haaaah!” A man yells, and I have a second to see the flare of a hand-bomb the second before it goes off, temporarily blinding me and making me lose my hold on my restraining magic in favor of shielding. I wait for the strike of a sword that never comes, and blink the flash-dazzle from my eyes to see Captain Marc’s face smiling at me. I bow my head to him in gratitude for saving my life.

“I guess bombs work?” I venture, and he laughs.

“I guess they do. Hard to return to life when most of your pieces are missing.” He muses out loud, and I attempt to stand only to have my knees fail me. Apparently coming so close to a violent death takes the starch right out of me. Fortunately, my shot nerves are covered by an extended hand helping me to my feet and the rest of the guard beginning to withdraw once more behind the walls. Captain Marc leads me back to the inner chambers of the Keep proper even as buckets of water are brought to the battlements, chattering about previous attacks and the injuries sustained in ineffectual tactics. I follow in a trance, and he seems to notice only once we’ve reached the guesting rooms for visiting dignitaries.

“Rest up, lad. The Princess wasn’t clear on how much you followed while she…I mean, while you…while she was you, so know that you will be well supplied for your aid on this night and welcomed at Aversa Keep for as long as the corner stones are still standing.” Before I can reply, the door is closed behind the Captain and I stare at the wooden surface for far too long. Eventually, his
words register, as does the soft light of a shielded candle by the bedside of a canopied monstrosity nearly the size of my room in Sahila. There are enough pillows to last a lifetime, and the down filled mattress is so plush that I sink wrist deep in the pile. I appreciate luxury, but this is too much. I need some support for comfort, and fold the topmost of the three quilts into a small cot on the floor next to the bed itself, use one of the smallest cushions, and curl up beneath a second quilt. Sleep seems to be the cure for my agitated mind until the deepest night where I wake, shaking and sweat soaked, unsure if I have cried out but suspecting I have for the soreness of my throat.

It is not the results of the attack, nor the memory of how vertebra felt against my dagger. I retch, hard, narrowly missing the fine bedding with the results, and take only the time to rinse my mouth and put on my boots before slipping out the door. I did not dispel the stalfo’s binding. The foul taint of that magic has every metaphysical nerve shuddering as I approach the ash and dust that is all that remains of Heinric, or ‘Ric’ as his darling called him when sickeningly honey-sweet pet names were beyond them. The cloudy night is deeply dark, but the clot of repugnance swirling about the remains is darker still as I sink my hands into the fine powder, searching for something I can use. Anything. The magic needed to hold his physical form is broken, he will never rise as a wraith of destruction and warfare again.

The magic holding his spirit to the ash of his body is still present, tying him to this plane. In tangling my own magic around the darkness I had thought…but it no longer matters. His ghost rises from the greasy pile as my fingers encounter an edge of metal and pull the promise ring to the air. It is too small for a man, and the scroll work is delicate and bright just like her smile. He weeps before me, broken, and I sing him to his rest, severing the attachment he still holds to this world. In the moments between detachment and true peace, the Poe he would have been manifests large and looming, then dissipates into the night air in a shimmering of light and calm. I clutch the tarnished and rusting ring in my palm, vowing to give it to Johanna when I can. He loved her so much that I know I will need to cleanse my spirit of the overtones of his before I meet with her or risk promising an eternity that is not mine to give.

I brush the intrusive hand that attempts my shoulder aside, knowing that the silent tears streaming down my face are distressing the guard that my mad flight has gathered and not caring. To foul the land of the Goddesses so is a sin of unforgiveable proportion. To destroy the lives of the people is an affront to everything I hold dear. I now understand the magnitude of Ganondorf’s transgressions as more than an abstract, philosophical dilemma. These people are real, more than myth, more than legend, as valuable and as vulnerable as any in the Shaekha’ri Federation. He must be stopped.

“I leave at first light.” I snap at the guardsman at the entrance to my room, still breathing hard from returning from wherever it was he had been, and close the door behind me before he can respond. The acrid stench of my vomit lingers, though the mess has been cleaned up and the bed returned to rights as though nothing has happened. It is fine, I won’t be able to sleep again tonight anyway. The basin and pitcher have been refilled as well, and I wash my face and hands to rid myself of the ashes of a good man and almost-father alongside the salt traces of tears. Releasing my hair from the destroyed braids I bind the lot up and out of the way in a neat club knot, the vain display useless to me now. Thick, cotton lined woolen undergarments wait, and I pull them on before sinking to my knees and sending a desperate plea to the Trine.

I have my answer by the time the faint blush of dawn touches the horizon, and a full winter-gear pack in the colors of the Aversa Keep guards as well as the clothing I carried with me. The cloak will serve still, though the sides of my robe have been let out to allow for bulkier clothing beneath, the seam bound in neat, careful stitching and the sleeves removed. The coat is lined with a fur I’ve never seen before on anything but a living wolfo, and I begin to sweat within moments of donning it. That will not do, for moisture close to the core saps strength and heat quickly, and so I
leave it open as I seek out the Lady of the Keep and give my thanks for her hospitality while she is
still rising. Her personal guards see to it that I have enough provisions for a week’s journey, though
it should only take me four days at most to reach Lake Hylia’s banks. With cold rage fueling my
limbs I may make it in three.

The mount and escort I am given is unexpected but very welcome, and the moment I have
my seat we move out at a brisk trot. It is not the most comfortable pace, but I am beyond caring for
the pace of a mount is faster than my own two legs and when the guards turn back and take the
palomino with them I am a full day’s journey walking with a good four marks of travel time left in
the day. I do not stop for a meal, though I do eat, not tasting the sausage stuffed roll or honey-thick
tea. It is difficult to wait long enough to allow my body time to process the food before falling into a
light jog that I keep up until my lungs protest. Walking until they recover, then jogging again, and
repeating that pattern has me to the entrance of the valley leading to the lake by the time I should be
making camp.

The tasks are simpler for one instead of six, and I am accustomed enough to them to have a
secure shelter set and meal ready by the time the sky is a rich rose and gold. With no one to share
watch with, my skill in illusion crafting has grown and I set the last ward in time to see the first stars
bloom. Tucking my camp into shadow and anchoring the magic Between, nothing will break past
my protections without waking me, and with plenty of time to warp. Dinner is a stew, made from a
dried packet and reconstituted in twice the volume of water, and though the meat is tough it is deftly
spiced and decently tasty. With the furious pace of my travels I seem to have rid myself of the excess
energy brought on by anger, which in this case I deem much better than the despair that is a close
cousin. This type of rage means I still have hope, which my intuition screams will be the most
crucial not only for myself, but for the entire population of Hyrule.

Hope and peace are not served by anger, and converting the emotional energy into
physical stamina has served its purpose in burning off the desire to take and injure. It is a poison that
I am best rid of, and I may as well do something constructive to counteract the destructive impulses
that the negative spectrum of emotions call into being. Holding tight to the energy surging through
my channels I set it aside and send my mind to sleep to prepare for the coming day. The rest clarifies
my spirit and restores my body, and I wake to the faint chiming of a quarter crystalline heart slowly
turning next to my hand. As in the Forest Temple, the moment I touch the clear structure it
disappears and my stamina and strength increase past their previous limits. The rush is heady, and
refreshing in a way nothing else can be. The Water Temple, Zelda-hanyana, and now an ignorant
Johanna await.

Clearing the camp is quicker than building it, and by the time the birds have quit their sun
salutations I am on my way. Mostly sheltered from the wind in the valley, the cloud cover for once
sparsely intermittent and mostly light grey or white in color, fed, warm and rested, the clear path
makes my journey pleasant. The air is chill, and I fold the cowl of my robe up to keep it from getting
directly to my lungs as I continue my pattern from yesterday. With the intervals of jogging and
walking and time to rest for an early lunch, I make it halfway through the tunnel to Lake Hylia and
the small village there with plenty of time to spare before sunset. I could push past and be two hours
closer to the Water Temple in the morning, or could spend the night in comfort with people around.

It is not a difficult choice to make, and as I hail one of the men smoking fish on an open
grill it appears my presence would be very welcome indeed. Despite efforts obviously made to clean
up and keep clean, the scent of upset bowels and illness is pervasive even over the oily brine of the
fish and choking thickness of the smoke. I see a total of five homes, three storage buildings, and one
bare frame of a hall with a solid wall and hearth built in. There should be more people up and about,
even if the stronger villagers are out farming, fishing, hunting or gathering. Children should be
playing or in lessons, even helping their parents with their tasks. From the toys strewn about yards
and stacked against houses, there are children here. Not many, but enough that their presence should be more evident.

The man is moving slowly, though his movements are certain and deliberate, they are pained and reluctant because of it. He doesn’t seem to notice my approach, and I call out a second greeting that makes him start before doubling over clutching his middle. He does not bother to straighten himself before waddling to one of the outhouses and disappearing inside. One of the homes is between the small shed and myself and as I pass I can hear soft sniffling and alter my course. Knocking on the open door before venturing to stick my head past the threshold I am accosted by unpleasant smells and the sight of a bed full of sweaty, strained faces. I wince, and am grateful for the cowl hiding the expression from these sick people.

“Who is it?” The largest calls out, a young man near my age from the firm quality of the muscles in his chest bared to the world by an open shirt. His lips are chapped, eyes sunken, and if the flinch from the light shining through the door is any indication he has a headache as well. I close the door behind me to relieve one source of pain and the tension in his face dissipates enough for me to see that his skin is tight over his muscles.

“Sheik, of the Sheikah, Princess Zelda’s agent.” I introduce myself without giving my name. If there are those loyal to Ganondorf about it is safer, though by no means safe, and with the attack on Aversa Keep I am taking no chances. “When did the sickness start?”

“Two days ago. Brenden thinks it was some bad flour, since we all fell ill within hours of eating it.” He manages, his voice rasping. The three other people shivering next to him are showing the same symptoms, and I hear a vile gurgling seconds before the smallest and I must assume the youngest child rolls away from the group to land hard on the floor. Before the young man or myself can move I see a liquid stain spreading to cover the seat of the boy’s trousers. Embarrassed, he turns his face from me, but weak as they all are I can still see his cries produce no tears. They are dangerously dehydrated. That, I can help with.

“Where is your water?” I ask softly, preparing myself for a lot of hauling buckets. The boy whimpers, resting against the frame of the bed but unable to stand. Filthy as he is, it would be imprudent to let him rejoin the others without bathing first. That means even more water, and boiling the linens if they can be salvaged, burning if not.

“There’s a spring fifty paces north, upstream. We keep it covered and sealed.” His words are mumbled around a tacky, thick tongue, and I waste no time in taking up the ash yoke by the door with its accompanying buckets and heading north. The spring itself is small but fast flowing from the walls of the valley to one of the small tributaries leading to the lake, and is deep enough that I can catch the buckets full without disturbing the sand-lined bottom. The water is heavy, but with muscle gained after hauling all the portable goods from the Forest Temple my burden is easily manageable. I take up some of the charcoal from the bin behind the house and prod the ashes in the hearth until I get a respectable flame. The cauldron has burned dry and as the flames secure their hold on the coal I scrape what ashes remain from the bottom and fill it halfway with water to boil.

Further questions lead the young man to direct me to their herbs, and I slice a thumb’s length of ginger from the root and peel it before placing it in the pot with the still tepid water. Assuring the people on the bed and the boy now wearing only his tunic that I will return I take the water buckets to the next house, and the next, repeating the process and introductions. The man who was working on the fish has collapsed just inside the door of the fourth house when I return with a second set of buckets, and I need to put down my load to squeeze in the door and drag him far enough in that I can carry the water inside. There is only the man, a woman I take as his partner, and an old man who is the worst off of all the villagers. It takes a good deal of heaving to move the
smoker man’s dead weight, though he is still breathing he is unable to help, and I need to go back and get a spark from another fire to light their hearth since the ashes are as cold as the ground and my personal energies must be portioned carefully.

The last house has the most people, and I find not only a cauldron but a kettle as well. The first I fill halfway like the rest, but the kettle I tip the last of the water in and leave to boil with more of the ginger that seems to be a staple seasoning here. One more trip to the spring and I slide the cover back over the mouth and do my best to rush back with nearly my body weight again slung over my shoulders. The first house should have had enough time for my purposes, and I return there first to find that the cauldron has indeed heated enough to boil. To be safe, I let it stay roiling for a full quarter mark before taking it from the flame and pouring the results into a large wooden bowl to cool. Replacing the water with fresh, I take up a pap boat from the top shelf and make sure that each of the people, half-breeds from the look of it, gets a full portion of the liquid.

Three hours and twenty-two people later, I pause in my tasks to eat and drink myself. Twilight has taken the sky, but each home has a full cauldron simmering away and the huge hearth in the makeshift hall keeps me warm with the roaring blaze cooking carrots, cinnamon, and apples into a thin paste. The sugars from the fruit, spirits of the carrots, and soothing properties of the cinnamon will help with the diarrhea that was indeed caused by spoiled flour. The village suffers for unscrupulous traders, for nearly all of their winter flour stock is contaminated with no means of purification. It will have to be buried and salted, downstream from the village itself. Their trade with the Zora people will keep them fed through the winter, but it will be hard, and they will be hungry come spring.

There is enough coal to keep them warm, especially if they consolidate their living spaces, and that could be enough. There is no possibility that I will come across another uninhabited Temple for supplies, and the people of Kakariko need what I have brought them just as much as the people of Sweetsprings. Though Zelda has not come upon me this evening despite my calls, I can feel her approval of my actions in the back of my mind and allow myself to be soothed. I will do what I can, and then move on. Right now, I can stir the cooking puree to keep it from burning and go about setting up my camp once more. I am nearly entirely certain that the mold in the flour is to blame for the illness, the illness for the dehydration, but I cannot risk exposing myself if that is not the case.

The large fire and shielding wall make the small tent and bedroll more than comfortable, and I slide a wooden lid over the cauldron before taking it off the direct flame and curling into my bedding. Tomorrow will be time enough to check on the sleeping village, haul more water, and clean. Tonight, with the rest of the village sleeping, I set my camp wards and join them.

No stalchildren or stalfos, nightmares, or memorable terrors interrupt my dreams, which for the first time in ages are vivid and lucid enough that they seem real. Instead, I wait silently by the warp platform in the Temple of Time, Zelda at the fore of my consciousness. It does not take long before a taller, stronger, battle-honed version of the small boy I left Between materializes in front of me. I hear nothing, feel nothing, and know this is a dream because of it. Link turns, his head tilting as he pays attention to whatever it is I am saying. His expression is something I cannot read, but his posture is telling. He looks worn, tired, but triumphant. Beautiful. He steps from the platform towards me, his fairy hovering over his right shoulder. He is taller than I am. The only movement I make is to trace the Triforce before me, and it allows me to pull on all of my magic at once, draining me utterly, and I wake up.

Dawn’s first light makes me grumble and roll, trying to return to dreams and find some satisfaction in their conclusion. It is far too early to be up. Anything before noon is too early, really, but to wake up with the first of the birds is disgustingly early. I shift again, cover my eyes with my arm, and give up with a soft moan. I am awake. I may as well get up. The slurry of fruit, vegetable,
and spice is ready to be strained, and there are more than enough large bowls for me to deliver the uninspiring slop to each of the homes before heading north again for more water. Only the young man and a woman easily twice my age in the full home are awake, but it is enough that I can leave both of them to tend to their families as each person rises in their own time. With free-reign over their supplies, I start a hearty stew simmering and go for more water.

A barrel is pressed into service and split to form two deep troughs for washing. The first I fill with hot water and soap, the second warm water for rinsing. There is enough purifying sand that I can relax and trust the soap and filth cascading from Human, Hylian and half-breed bodies will not foul the earth or water. Once the oiled canvas of the town hall is set, the villagers can come, clean themselves, and stay warm while they dry off and have a meal. There is little to be done about privacy, though a blanket is provided as a make-shift screen and hung from the ceiling in an attempt at it. The old man and a young girl are the only ones that need to be carried and bathed by another, which is good.

Bedding is cleaned and airing, laundry being done in the same washtubs and hung to dry in the frail sunlight of early winter, and a second batch of stew started by the time I take my leave, the gift of a golden scale in hand. My spirits too, are restored, my determination renewed. Caring, compassion, comfort brought by wisdom and fostering courage will give these people the power needed to see them through. It worked for me, and, heartened, my steps are light and easy as the workplace of the water-bound scientist comes into sight.

I understand the need to be close to the source for the main ingredient of his medicines and concoctions, and that such experimentation takes time and careful measurements, but the building itself is still remarkably huge. Knocking on the lintel and announcing my presence leads a tiny raisin of a man to open the door and express his surprise at a visitor so late in the year. Beckoning me inside, I find that the lowest level of the tower is his workshop, the products of his labors lining the shelves to the right and potions in various stages of concoction on a well vented table to the left. Taking up a full third of the space is a deep pool of the very water he experiments with, its depth marked by etchings in the brick and reflected light making the tiled walls dance.

“What can I help you with, laddie?” The ancient tinkerer murmurs, slicing a handful of some type of water-weed into thin slivers and feeding the results to what appears to be a baby octorok.

“I come seeking the Depth of Reflection.” I tell him, and he chuckles softly before pulling another mass of weed from the bucket next to his work table and starting in on chopping that, too.

“You’ll be knowing yourself well then, right? I can supply you for a price, but I’m too old to be dragging young men like you any distance now.” He grumbles, pointing the blunt end of his cleaver at me before leaving it to rest next to the chopped greenery. Wiping his hands on his apron, he crosses over to me with remarkable speed and proceeds to pinch my thigh and poke my stomach. “You’re a mite thinner than the last one to attempt the Water Temple’s trials, but you’ll do. What’re you carrying for rupees, laddie?”

“67 green, 14 blue, 3 red and one purple.” I count out, opening my wallet and adding the total in my head. Germana, or “Granny” as she prefers back in Kakariko charges dearly for her wares, and with good cause. Some of the herbs and mushrooms she uses cannot be cultivated and grow only in very specific conditions, some of which make even finding them next to impossible. That they decay rapidly only makes her preparations that much more tedious. 247 rupees will not be enough for much, and from the old man’s reaction to my query I will need assistance in learning the song. Though it may only be the fact that he believes I will need help, his complete conviction and age make me inclined to trust my reading of his words and body language.
“Three blue potions, two red, and two green seem fair?” He asks, holding up seven bottles filled with the noxious liquid which, against all odds, seems brighter than the sludge that Granny dishes out. She would charge me 460 rupees for that, nearly twice what the old man is asking, and so I shake my head.

“Too much, your work is more valuable than that.” I tell him. “Two blue, one green.”

“Two blue, one red, two green...” He counters. “…and company for an old man tonight.”

“Done.” I agree. Bargain set, I quickly find myself set to fishing and then chopping the catch to feed the resultant chum to a caged shark kept in the bottom of his pool. The magic woven into the golden scale allows me to sink deep enough to get a good look at the rows of razor sharp teeth, and my ability to cling to the shadows lets me to the surface as quickly as I could want. It is very quick indeed. I am then put to scooping algae and cutting water-weeds until sundown, sharing some of the sausage I carry for our evening meal. A salve smoothed over waterlogged skin torn from unaccustomed activity has red potion mixed in, and settles the minor injury quickly enough that I can sing for Lyell’s entertainment. Once the stars begin to dot the sky, he putters about extinguishing the fish-oil lanterns, leaving only the luminescent algae to glow on the bottom floor, and leads me up a narrow stair to a low cot he keeps for patients and guests. I dream almost as soon as my head hits the pillow, or assume I do, for I have no recollection of moving.

Standing on the only branch of a massive, ancient dawn redwood covered in twining vines I can see in the deep water surrounding the tiny island below the warp platform twin pillars leading to the Temple. The golden scale Brenden, headman of Sweetsprings, gave me is secure against my throat and I brush my fingers over it lightly. Summoning my courage I gain a small running start and leap, inhaling deeply and quickly in the second before hitting the water in a serviceable if less than elegant dive. Two guardian fish carved in the stone watch as I propel myself through the open door and into the Temple proper. Despite the depth of the water outside, the inside is relatively dry, moist air and a small pool in the base of the building the only liquid to be seen. Zora guards nod to me as I use the small lifts before the doors in the central tower to find my way. The top floor shines blue, orange decorates the middle and the bottom hall lights up with a bright yellow as I trail my fingers still stained from the algae I was handling earlier.

Stylized versions of the water-weed adorn the walls, doors, floors and tiles alongside waves and a large, serpentine creature that I have to assume is a representation of the water dragon, Lord Faron, or perhaps the royal family’s patron deity, Jabu-jabu. I stay on the path available to me that the guards subtly encourage, their shoulders and faces allowing either faint tension or eager anticipation. It does not take me long to arrive at a door where two water-serpent spirits slither restlessly, distinguishable by not only their startling obsidian color compared to the sandstone grey of the others I have passed, but by the jars filled with potion, bombs, arrows, throwing needles, and restorative hearts. Golden scales gleam in the low light, and I open the ornate door.

Inside is impossibility. I stand on a small island, facing another of approximately the same size with a gnarled and dead tree in the center, and a shrine an equal distance again beyond that. My eyes tell me that the shimmering polish of the water mirror is just that, a mirror. The water is not deep. The fog obscures the boundaries of this room much as fog hides Hyrule from all the lands and peoples outside of it, and I am impressed by the Sage of Water’s home. With only a minor touch of trepidation, I step onto the mirror lake and begin to work my way across to the Sage’s shrine. My reflection is nearly perfect in the water, and I take the time to neaten my appearance before greeting the Lady of this place. The island at the mid-way point is sand, the tree soap-root, and kneeling I use a small tip to lather and wash my face, slicking my hair tight beneath their wraps and noticing as I do that I can no longer see my reflection in the depths of the pool.
Conquer yourself. A soft tenor murmurs and I spin about, trying to find the source of the words. Next to the tree, identical to me down to the least detail in a way that Yoru could never be, stands a construct of magic and personality shimmering and churning as it assumes my form. It is beautiful, the skill needed to create such a being evident in the smooth motion of the water which shapes its body and holds it to motion. I reach out at the same time it does, wanting to examine the spells used in its creation even as it turns the motion into a strike that scores three shallow lines across the back of my palm where Zelda’s mark has yet to fade completely. It stings, and I pull back in shock, watching as drops of blood well up to fall into the water. Its eyes are red when next I glance at my reflection brought to life, and then the battle is on.

I am not a skilled warrior, my blades are to harvest and provide, my needles to relax and purify. My likeness echoes this, dodging and darting about rather than striking at me, leaving openings that I dare not exploit. Rather, it dances about me, flashing first one direction then the next, striking out with makeshift claws only if I lower my guard or lose my focus. Like the Lost Woods, time has no meaning here, and to a liquid golem there is no fatigue. I estimate a fifth of a mark before my energy falters, and my reproduction manages to circle behind me and slash at my unprotected back, cutting deep over the mark of my geas, drawing blood to stain the divine sigil of Nayru. The warmth activates the symbol and makes the back of my right hand burn anew. Wisdom. Zelda. I reach back to test the wound and smear my blood over Farore’s portion rather than let it fall and further strengthen the power of this replication. My left hand aches as it closes over my dagger. The water-shade laughs, and draws its own blade from its form and rushes in.

Letting go of the hilt I leave the blade sheathed and feel the impact of the golem’s in the base of my ribs. It burns, but so does the golem as I use my blood to bind it to me, forcing it to share my body and all its sensations in a way that Zelda will never know, the physicality of it less than possession but also so much more extreme. It does not manipulate my form as Zelda’s spirit can by my invitation. It does not know my body as a lover. It is my body, and no more than that. What magic makes it move dissipates as I absorb the knowledge it has of me, unflattering and starkly blunt though it is, all my failings and petty upsets, immature and arrogant suppositions exposed. The gut wound burns with the dissolution of the echo’s substantive magics pouring into my veins instead of rejoining the mirror on the floor. I would choke at the agony had I even the slightest ounce of breath or strength left. The test of the Temple pushes me from my form gently, and the pain no longer matters as it moves beneath my skin. Relieved of the immediacy of both physical and spiritual hurts, I seize the cords binding not only my self to my form, but those leading to the people I love, and shove back. The seven vortices and three hundred sixty energy points in my body flare with the strain of two spirits attempting the same vessel, but as the golem is the one truly present the action interrupts its action more than mine. It is a negative version of me, and I must conquer it.

That does not mean defeat. To conquer is to take control, to master, or to overcome. Though I find its opinion of me and the perspective it has of my actions unpalatable, that does not make them untrue. I am petty. Weak. Immature. Foolish. Flawed. Acknowledging my failures is as viscerally unpleasant as the gut wound that continues to bleed freely into the clear water where it disappears. Swallowing the bitter draught of impotent angers, malicious sadism, and the urges to hurt, to take, to kill that rise within is enough to make me choke. My back aches with the raw incision opening further as I embrace my darkness and draw it to me. It pours from my body in the shape of tears, bearing the injuries I sustained with it as I kneel next to it on the tiled floor of the chamber now that the illusion is gone.

The blue potion from Lyell seems to repair most of the damage, and as the purified form of the unwanted parts of my being is loosed from the magic holding it solid returns to the Temple I whisper a prayer for whatever spirit it may contain. It burbles a laugh at me once as the last of it
pools in my palms, soothing the ache on the backs of my hands. I choke down the second blue potion and wish that there was something I could do about the stains of the fight in my clothing. The air is cool, so at least the blood won’t bake into the fabric, but there is little else I can straighten of my appearance before the Water Sage. The shrine door opens of its own volition, and a Zora girl waits, gazing into a more familiarly sized water mirror.

“Time passes, people move. Like a river’s flow, it never ends.” The Zora Princess murmurs as figures from my childhood coalesce above the clear liquid. “A childish mind will turn to noble ambition. Young love will become deep affection.” She conjures sights of my past, people I have encountered and left behind, and, in the last second, Zelda and Link when they are perhaps as old as I am now, holding a small item in both their hands. As the Sage turns to face me, the image ripples and disperses.

“Sage of Water.” I greet, bowing my head. She laughs, and the sound reminds me of Beth, though its variance in tone is not as rapid.

“Wisdom’s Virtue. You’re not what I expected. I’d thought you’d be taller.” She natters, jumping up to circle around me and prodding at the healed skin on my back, the mark of my duty visible. “The clear water’s surface reflects growth.” She tells me, and sings five simple notes that encompass all this Temple is and will be. Her voice blends with my whistle remarkably well, and I feel the magic sink into my bones. Light propagates from the edges of my vision to swiftly fill it, and when I open my eyes against the dazzle I am lying on the small dock nearest the Water Temple entrance. Playing the song does indeed move me to the island close-by, and from there I watch the sun rise and let its light dry my clothing and warm my skin.

The bridges back to the land and the scientist’s abode clatter under my feet and the two empty potion bottles dangle from my belt. My tunic is shredded, apron gone, and a pervasive melancholy slows my steps. Acknowledging my flaws means accepting complete responsibility for my actions and the resultant consequences. There is much I must hold myself accountable for…and nearly as much that I must recognize I personally have no obligation towards. Lack of obligation does not mean a lack of compassion, though, and kindness has always been my path. Lyell seems pleased that I return his potion bottles, and gives me five blue rupees for each before settling himself into his work once more. I leave the coil of dry sausage I carry on his table next to a handful of dried plums while he chortles over a large spiral shell, and will myself to the place where many of my true responsibilities await even as I breathe through the tiny whistle.

The town is nearly empty by the time I make my way back to the inhabited area, no sign of Zelda or her tutors now that Impa has taken up near permanent residence in Kakariko to guard both the well and the Temple. The house spirits congregate around me, chattering happily, and as I turn towards the house of healing I see why. They must have abandoned the circuit and returned within a day of reporting to have made it before winter. Leaner than I remember, tired, but more than welcome, Chia, Enzo, Yoru, Keiko, two men I don’t recognize, and ten large canine balls of jubilant fluff stand surrounded by the people of the Hidden City. I break into a run with a whoop of joy and don’t slow down until Yoru is on his back and winded from the impact, Keiko laughing at his expense, Enzo chuckling, and Chia grinning as she ruffles my hair. Zelda’s smaller body attaches itself to my back, shoving me into my brother who loses what altitude he’s gained under the additional weight.

“Welcome home.” My Princess greets, kissing my forehead and patting my cheek with a hand larger than I remember, her body changing shape beneath her tunic and trousers. I just grin at her, too happy to risk speech, and revel in being where I belong.
The Darkest Night

Chapter Summary

Promises are only as strong as the person who gives them... - Stephen Richards

Chapter Notes

This chapter is...relatively tame with the warnings. Past/canonical character death, emotional trauma, ghosts, cultural differences, magic, precognitive dreams, historic/past/generational trauma, relationship growth, balancing relationships.

I know this is a massive read, and for those of you who have made it this far, thank you for sticking with it. Only six more chapters for the halfway point....and reviewing them for continuity has prodded me into writing down the dreams that spin to threads of the second time these years are lived. Different P.O.V., also first person, but much less complex wording and structure to their thoughts. Yes. That means there IS a sequel/prequel/midquel to all these shenanigans.

Sorry. m(._.)m

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My opponent circles back, wary now that I’ve landed a blow to the chin that should have done more damage than it did, but I’ll take what I can get. Unfortunately, what I get is swift feet closing with me in my moment of self-congratulations and a swifter fist attempting to return the strike. I spin, feeling the displacement of air against my hair as his hand moves past its intended target and opens to snake around to my face. Before I can alter my stance appropriately, the arm that hand is attached to meets my collar bones and his leg twines behind my knee, slamming me into the sand of the practice circle and knocking the wind clean out of my lungs.

“Two points!” Hahron calls as I roll to avoid a disabling blow to the temple and kick out at my adversary’s solar plexus. To my surprise, it connects, sending him sprawling backward.

“One point!” Echoes in the still winter air even as he turns the fall into a roll, regaining his feet easily as I struggle to find mine and air at the same time. Pressing his advantage, my current foe dashes in with a flurry of fists and feints and I fight for space by dodging and dashing about the circle, careful not to step outside and forfeit the match. It is difficult, when he has nearly three ilms height and therefore reach over me. That is what determines the outcome, two exchanges later. That, and the fact he has years more experience than I do.

I lay panting in the sand and staring up at the sky turning rose with the first signs of sunset. The horizon hints at mauve, with the potential of seeing Farore’s Scarf prominent once the heavens darken to true night. This close to the solstice, sister sun’s light holds her throne for less than half the day. Even my preference to stay abed is satisfied, and since Cheesecake is now feeding the kittens on her own there is no reason for me to wake in the middle of the night. My evenings are always late, dusk remains the time of greatest power and Rahla still trying for a child, or I am in
lessoning with Zelda for the other three weeks each moon turn. The daylight hours are spent training in the art of war, attempting to teach me the skill of a lifetime in a season. The dawn is spent Between. Even my duties in Kakariko have been temporarily suspended, the spectral shiik of the Shadow Temple tending to the dead there instead.

There have been a lot of dead. Fights, cold, sickness, invasion, and an attempt to foul and loot the well in Kakariko have all taken their tolls. The man whose remains lay as warning in the depths of the cisterns could have been responsible for many more. It is not my fault, nor, technically, is it my responsibility to guide their souls to the Silent Realm, but I still find frustration a frequent bed partner. Not that I have time for bed partners. I am, aside from Rahla’s visits, completely celibate. Enzo has given up pursuit of anything beyond casual friendship which I am oddly relieved by. Yaru absent from his partner’s bedding which leads the act to be less passionate and, overall, less painful. There is no way for Vidkun to even begin to search for me, and my honor binds me here as securely as chains. Not that it would matter, as I am usually so exhausted I cannot even reacquaint myself with my own hand before I am asleep.

Yoru stretches next to where I slump regaining his breath much more rapidly than I manage, and shoves a red potion into my hands. I grimace at the sight of it, growing heartily sick of the already repulsive fluid that both he and Hahron have been plying me with to maintain my stamina. At least he didn’t pour it down my throat. This time. Heaving myself upward I choke down the musty bitter brew and chew a small candy of honey and mint to refresh my palate before clamoring to my feet unassisted. I am improving, Hahron assures me as we return to the town square, and steadily at that. He is honest, and I can feel the truth of his words. Six hours of sparing with two weapons masters left me unable to lift a finger for the first week, barely able to sit up after the second. Now, with only two red potions instead of eight, I am able to shuffle to my own home under my own power, and last longer than two or three exchanges. It is a stunning improvement, but I have so very far left to go.

The reason for my desperate study is waiting for me with a thick stew and fresh bread baked with raisins inside at the table of my small kitchen. Though she prefers to study archery and fencing with Kairi, or even magic with Nahdo and history with Kenai, Zelda has learned some basic kitchen craft and has a deft hand at embroidery that lets her trade with the people of Derinkuyu. The rupees she brings in allows her to seek out Hora for baked goods. With Impa gone back to the land the Princess is exiled from, hanyana can be found more often than not in the old shiik’s library. I was correct in assuming she would learn Shaekha’ri much faster than I would pick up Hyrulean, and as a result she is reading dry technical manuals that I struggled through at the same age with relative ease. It helps, too, that she cannot perform much of the magic outlined in those books and I was expected to master the spells and their alternatives. There are analogs for those whose magic is based in light instead of shadow, and some of their transliterations are available, but I haven’t the time to assist in her experimentation.

“Welcome home, Aein-ah!” She chirps, already using her own small loaf to sop up the last of the gravy.

“Thank you, hanyana.” I return. “How was your day?” Taking my place across from the diminutive Princess, it is nearly too much effort to pull my stool forward, and definitely too much effort to keep my elbows off the table. Without a hand to support my head, I would be forced to rest it against the smooth sanded wood. I am hungry, though, and that gives energy to the hand that holds my spoon. The stew is simple, and with a murmured thanks for the food I bend to start cleaning my own bowl with nearly unseemly haste.

“I got to watch Keiko-eh finish her latest batch of ink, then helped make quills while she bound three brushes. Yoru-eh brought us both lunch, and then I came back here and finished my
embroidery project. Hora-eh brought the loaves about an hour ago, and I paid her a rupee each, then started reading *The Annals of Auru* again where I got stuck last time. I was going to wait for you to come back, but I got really hungry and didn’t think you’d mind if I started before you.” Zelda chatters, leaving a ribbon to mark her place in the thick parchment book and clearing both of our dishes. I rest, my muscles sore even after the red potion, and listen to her thoughts on one of the few, if drastically incomplete, records we have from the time when Hylia herself walked the earth.

Given that she is of the Goddess’ own blood, and bears the sign of Nayru’s favor, I am inclined to take her musings much more seriously than I would any other eleven year old girl’s. My inclination, however, does not make up for an exhausting day on the heels of an exhausting fortnight, and I find myself trying to smother my yawns despite being fascinated by her insights. She laughs as a failed attempt leads to a jaw cracking inhalation that brings tears of fatigue to my eyes, and shoes me to bed. I know she will remain in the kitchen by the hearth fire for hours yet, keeping warm with a shielded lantern for light as she continues her self-imposed book work. I, though, will sleep as soon as I lie down, and am careful to fold my clothing neatly as I change for bed.

The runt of Cheesecake’s small litter is the only kitten that remains at all present in my home or on my bed for any length of time, the other two following their mother to return to their proper mistress, and I find myself growing remarkably fond of the grey-scale tabby. Niakara bares her fangs in a huge yawn of her own as I shift the covers to crawl beneath, and stretches needle sharp tiny claws into the small coverlet I put at the foot of the bed to prevent her shredding the quilt itself. Once I’ve settled, she crawls up to my welcome warmth and begins a series of purrs and kneading that calms my heart and sends me to my rest gently. I wake briefly when Zelda joins me, curling up against my back and dropping off hours later, and just as easily join my Mistress in slumber. Together we travel Between, checking on Link who dreams while Navi snores, before Nayru’s chosen wings off to prescience and I to proper dreams.

I find myself pounding my fists bloody on thick stone walls rife with embedded crystals, the small cavern completely sealed off from any entrance or exit and containing naught but the warp pad with the symbol for Derinkuyu etched deeply in the center. My breathing is hard and heavy, and it is not the horrendous weeping that shakes my frame alone causing it. The air supply is rapidly running out, leaving me with barely enough to focus my will and warp myself away. I land in my bed with the sun touching the horizon and a kitten curled at my throat and making her displeasure at my motion known by latching a claw into my skin as I attempt to sit up. For some reason the tiny drop of blood welling against my collarbone smears thickly instead of sealing with a touch of saliva, and I resign myself to a quick wash before dressing.

Zelda-hanyana huffs softly and steadily behind me, and Niakara resettles against her as I take up a clean tunic and yesterday’s trousers. Stumbling with fatigue rather than poor vision, I leave the clothing in the bathing room and start the tub to filling before heading to the kitchen and stoking the flames of the hearth. Using the renewed fire I fill a small pot and set it to boil, throwing in a handful of dehydrated peas, cucco bones, and an herb packet before returning to the bath and cleaning myself in preparation for the day. Warmed by the water, my muscles move through their morning stretches easily, and I leave my hair unbound to dry while I finish preparing breakfast.

Skimming the froth from the pot, I remove the bones and herb packet, and add half an onion, a whole carrot, and after the vegetables have softened, a portion of dried noodles. They are thicker and rougher than the noodles I am used to working with, but taste nearly the same, and only require a bit more cook time. Shredding the last of my current jar of pickled ginger, I portion two bowls and cover one to stay warm, using the ginger sparingly but adding a pinch of salt, some shredded cucco meat, and a stamella mushroom to Zelda’s and a fresh egg to mine. I eat quickly, dress properly for the weather, and pick Niakara up to tuck her into the front inner pocket of my jacket. Dropping her back at Hanya’s for her own breakfast, I continue onward past the area of the
ancient city being used and into the parts that nature is doing her best to reclaim.

The Temple of Farore is equidistant from the Temples of Din and Nayru, but the furthest from my home, and so by the time I enter the sanctuary behind the altar morning has arrived in icy splendor. There are enough burnable things within the Temple itself that if I felt comfortable destroying the furniture I would never have to haul charcoal or wood to light the small furnace I’ve brought to mitigate the winter chill, but that is too close to desecration of what is Hers for me to be at ease with even the thought. There is plenty of charcoal in the stores and in the residence, and I carry a full bucket with me to last the next few days. The small sanctuary I have lined with furs and rugs and a mattress of sweet grass well distant from the furnace, and so it is cozy enough I feel capable of discarding my jacket, though not my boots, before sinking into the meditations that will take me Between.

Leaving my body behind, the well travelled path to where Link waits is much simpler to take than if I had brought all of me, and Navi waits patiently for my arrival. Link sleeps, deeply and without dreams, as I empty the chamber pot and prepare a meal, then go about doing his laundry. He wakes as I am pinning the last sock to dry, and tends to his toilet as I take pains to keep my back turned. The privacy of Farore’s Chosen is something I intend to keep intact. No longer starving for food, attention, or affection, his childish frame is still leanly muscled with the tasks I and his other teachers have had him perform. Blond hair slightly darker than Zelda’s and closer to a true gold for it is in need of a trim, and I make a mental note to bring a set of shears with me soon. I can tell tales and trim hair at the same time. He gives thanks for the meal before satisfying a hearty appetite, then cleans his plate and cup without prompting. Today’s lesson is continuing from the last, and I call up an illusion of a cork archery target at thirty yalms distant.

The routine makes his solidification of the target into being barely a strain on his magic, which is good, for by the time he is finished with the lesson he will be exhausted. I have yet more potion on hand in case he blisters, but the callous he’s built over the last week and a half seem to hold up well. The child-sized bow is a heavy draw for its small size, and as Link begins to place arrow after arrow within the first two rings of the target I wonder if I should move it further back, change his goal quadrant, or begin setting up rigging for movement. When he begins to tire, I allow the form of the target to dissipate, and the substance follows once my young Master loses his hold on the sense of it. Checking his fingers despite his protests that they’re fine, I rub a tincture of mint, camphor, eucalyptus, and cloves into the skin to ease some of the ache and settle back onto the bench he made for guests while I was travelling the face of Hyrule and learning the songs of the Sages.

“Story?” He asks, face solemn but body language eager and excited at the prospect.

“Story.” I agree, and quickly have a lapful of slightly sweaty boy and a fairy settling on my head to look at the pages as I turn them. We are halfway through the Tale of Goselle and her daughter Geru, as their tribe wanders lost in the Lanayru Desert. Having Skyloft rejoin the surface world, a contingent of people now explore the surface world safe from Demise’s hunters. This band is led by an adventurous young woman, her partner, and her mother attends to the daily chores of a group of roving nomads. They have pledged to explore the desert, but have been days without water, nearly two weeks without food. Half their number have been lost, and Goselle fades before Geru, prompting her daughter to pledge her life and the lives of all her future sons to Din in exchange for sustenance for her people.

Her prayers are answered, and water comes to the desert in place of the timeshift stones, but not to the people. It takes Geru’s sacrifice of herself and pledge to guide her people for all eternity for the Tribe of Geru, the Geru’do, to learn the ways of life in the desert. The precedent set for sacrifice chills me, but I do not let any of my own dispositions seep into my tone during the telling of the histories. My people’s interbreeding with the Watchers had its own consequences, such
as the pallor of some of the clans like my own, or our muddled bloodlines and relative impurity of purpose in the eyes of the Goddesses. The Geru’d do of old build settlements, map star charts of oasis and wells, dedicate a Temple to the Goddess of the Sand, and construct a cairn where any daughter of the Geru’d can go to find her way. All the infants born to them are female, and they seek far and wide for males only long enough to accomplish their goals. Having first-hand experience of their enthusiasm, I am glad to have escaped with all of my parts intact.

“But why didn’t the other people help Geru?” Link asks, picking at the hem of his shirt.

“I’m sure they tried, but Geru was responsible for all of them, like Princess Zelda is responsible for the safety of all Hyrule. When you have people who depend on you to take care of them, you try harder to do your best.” I tell him, and wince when he fidgets, swinging his legs and banging his heel into my shin in the process.

“But why would she stay to guide them once they had water and houses and stuff?”

“The Book of Din says that “The measure of a man, or woman I suppose, is what they do with power.” so I think Geru wanted to make sure all her people would be okay, and used their talents for the good of all.” I tell him, placing a ribbon between the pages to mark where I left off. Tomorrow we start Gorko’s Discovery. “You wanted to help Princess Zelda, and made a lot of friends that need your help now too, right?” I ask in return, hoping to get him to understand the ethics of generosity and kindness as simply as I can.

“Yeah, but I’m too little to do anything. I need to get big so I can use the Master Sword and fight Ganondorf.” His solemn expression tells me that he knows the fight will be something one of them does not walk away from. He’s nine. Probably close to his tenth birthday, but such things are not counted by the timeless children of Kokiri Forest, and the Great Deku Tree could only say he was given charge of Link in the late summer. He was crawling then, and able to digest soft and liquid foods. Hylian babies are anywhere from six to eight moons old at that point, which would make him a winter child. The marks of the Hunter Moon are evident in his personality, and I would place his birthday then, so he is probably ten cycles old now, but only recently. Shaking myself to focus on the too sober child before me, no matter his true age, I smile and lift him off my lap to stand.

“True, but you need to eat to get big, so I’ll make your lunch and you can practice your rolls.”

“Do I have to?” He pouts, and I hope he never realizes how effective that expression is. It takes all of my willpower to insist on the task before I can slice cheese, sausage, and open one of the jars of pickled vegetables before toasting yesterday’s bread and covering it with a thick layer of butter. It is plain fare, but Link falls on it as though it is a feast fit for the King’s table. Well, Queen’s table. Despite the lack of a coronation, Zelda will be the only monarch I recognize on the throne of Hyrule, even in my thoughts. I take my leave while the young Hero eats, content that his tutor for the afternoon will arrive shortly and wanting to be well gone.

Doylan and I may be civil to each other, but first impressions are critical in interpersonal relationships and we did not start in a good way. He may be an accomplished mage, learned in Hylian magics and well able to contain any accidents that may occur in an initiate’s training, but the passage I quoted at Link is one I find quite true. The measure of a man is what he does with power. Doylan has a great deal of power, socially, magically, physically, economically, and in the force of his personality. He chooses to serve himself and his whims, taking the best and brightest and leaving only what he does not care for or consider worthy. I find him repugnant for it. He, in turn, detests me as well, particularly my disinclination to bow and scrape and debase myself for his amusement. Best if we do not encounter each other.
There is a bean and lentil soup flavored with bay leaves and chili flakes waiting for me when I return, though Zelda herself is nowhere to be found. Niakara dozes by the hearth fire, and the tiny house sprite that has grown stronger at nearly the same pace I have putters about the flames, keeping them steady and herding wayward sparks from the young cat’s soft fur. I put out a saucer of milk for it as reward, and know that it is the energy of the gift that the Minish will consume, leaving the liquid for Niakara. The empty bottle I set by the hand pumped basin and have my own meal, then clean it and my dishes at the same time. That bottle goes to the doorstep with a blue rupee inside, so when Enzai does his morning rounds he will fill it with fresh milk. Most of it goes to Zelda, who I am certain feeds Niakara a generous portion, and the rest to the house sprite.

I stoke and bank the fire before heading to the clothes press to prepare for my afternoon exercises. Yesterday was sparing, the day before weight lifting, so today will be running with all sorts of interesting variations. Like seemingly random attacks, or one hundred consecutive jump kicks for each leg, or jogging around the entirety of the city backwards. I am very, very glad that the last of my time in Hyrule was spent running intervals, for aside from the task of running on high alert and making sure I am as silent as the wind while doing so, I can find a rhythm and enjoy the exertion. With that in mind, I leave my jacket that is more of a cloak aside and layer. Beginning with a linen undershirt, I pull over it a cotton work shirt and tunic. Linen hose over wool stockings is covered by woolen pants, and I belt the wolfos fur lined waistcoat over top of it all. My knee high boots have a thick sole and lace from ankle to brim holding them tight to my calves, and a woolen hood covers my ears. Rabbit skin gloves finish my preparations, and I use the journey to Hahron’s to warm my muscles and stretch my joints.

“First stop’s the North Orchard spring.” The weapons master says as soon as I am close enough to hear without him having to raise his voice. Yoru gives Keiko a quick peck that she returns with interest before he starts off, sword, bow, shield, pike, and quiver on his back. I cannot hope to become proficient in any of those weapons in the deep winter months, and so Hahron is not even trying. Link seems to do well enough with his training, but he has years to learn. Instead, I am taught to use my needles as weapons, how to use dagger, staff, and how to move quickly. The greatest gift is the trick of stepping into Shadow. I cannot manage it for long, or at all consistently, but if I can learn to control it enough to flicker out of existence at the point where a weapon would make contact with me, then the purpose of the training is served. Instead of learning to absorb the blow with a shield, I learn not to be there when it falls.

Today’s run is to feature a number of areas of ice, snow-pack, and traps with freezard’s breath contained within. Triggering them will cause me to be encased in ice, which is not painful, but takes time to get out of and cramps muscles. My time for the course will be noted and critiqued, and so the more of them I can avoid the better. That means quick-stepping and awkward jumps to complicate my footwork. I am grateful for the warning, and let Yoru and Ronio gain enough distance that I can see their route and avoid any traps they happen to spring in crossing. It does not take my brother long to outdistance the older hunter, and I wait for him to fall. It does not take him long, and I resist the urge to laugh at his expense for I am certain that I will find myself in the same circumstances relatively quickly.

Running on the balls of my feet shortens my stride considerably, but allows me to tread where the less wary or agile cannot. I step between the faint discolorations of snow that indicate trap placement and quickly outpace both Yoru and the few warriors who are using the opportunity to keep themselves sharp, continuing steadily in a counterclockwise path. Zelda considers it ill-omened, but for the Shaekha’ri who account for the dead of Hyrule as well as the living, the contrary course is the preferred path. She, meditating in Nayru’s Temple, joins me momentarily to feel the breeze and smell the crisp winter air before returning to her tasks. I take heart from the visit, and though I am careful not to strain myself beyond my limits, I do push for a little more speed, a bit more grace.
The trap beneath the trap is underhanded and dirty, but I now know what it looks like and will not fall for it again. Shaking the last of the ice from my waistcoat and breathing deeply to restore my blood and prevent cramps, I walk through the next hundred yalms of the course. Evergreens scent the air, their needles quivering in the pervasive gusts coming down from the western-most caldera and into the city still within my sight. My passage startles a rabbit, its white coat a near match for the drifts piled against the bramble wind-block, and I pause long enough to watch it disappear into a hidden warren. I smile softly, for the illusion is well made and probably took a number of days to construct, and am careful not to break it even as I pass by at a good distance.

I do not recognize the trap the illusion masks, but given the general theme of this run I can assume there is more ice and cold. I am cold enough, now that I am no longer exerting myself, and leave the hidden trap to do what it will if sprung, or to be dispelled by Nahdo, Oman, or Chia later. I suspect that one of the elemental mages set it at the weapons master’s request, and think it is Chia’s work for it has a level of subtlety I have learned to associate with her. I must also assume that Oman is responsible for the thick bridge of ice spanning the obviously trapped area surrounding the North Orchard’s spring, though Nahdo probably helped with that one just to boost his output. While the depth of the ice is thick enough to bear both Yoru, his weapons, and Hahron at the same time, it is narrow enough on top that I must walk toe to heel along the slick surface to reach the medallion hanging from the winch used to irrigate the surrounding area.

My progress slowed to a crawl, I manage the balance of the distance in an awkward slide that has me slamming into the side of the winch bracket and grabbing at it to keep my feet. The complete lack of traction makes reaching for the medallion a tricky thing that requires three tries before I can secure my grip on the tiny metal plate and pocket it. Yoru has made the bridge and I wave from the spring before continuing over another, shorter bridge that I would never be able to scale due to the angle. Sliding down, however, is a lot of fun. Not so much that I would circle back and cross the bridge again to do it, but enough that I hope someone takes the idea and expands upon it. Perhaps a grooved ridge, to keep from falling off the edge? Textured stairs, to get greater height and correspondingly faster speeds?

My musings mean I hit not one, but two ice traps, and I leave the thoughts for a less involved time. The western edge of Derinkuyu holds more of the same, with the added component of tilting platforms that dump you into more freezezard breath traps. I am halfway around before I get the hang of sliding mostly down and leaping to the next, and Yoru has once again made up the distance between us. I blame my competitive streak and frustration combining for the decision to actually do something about it coming to a head. I can see the goal nearly two hundred yalms distant and the shadows from mostly fallen structures reaching across the snow. The box we must place our medallion in holds a reward, usually food or a few rupees, or, in some cases, potion. I hope it’s not potion. It rests on a small pillar whose shadow extends into the one cast by half of an archway.

Yoru slows to look at me with wide eyes as I stop on the next platform and stand as close to the center as I can to keep it from tilting in any direction, then when he sees I am not injured or too exhausted to continue, moves toward the box with renewed speed.

I step into my shadow, and use that to vault into the surrounding shadows.

Practice in travelling Between has allowed me to grow accustomed to the sensation of disembodiment, and given me the skill to keep from panicking as I move my physical form from solid to pure energy and back. That moment of disassembly into the basic form of all matter is the most dangerous, followed closely by the reformation on the other end. Should I lose focus or be distracted by any wayward thought or emotion, I would simply dissipate. It is a similar spell to what came over me in the caverns upon meeting Zelda, imposed by an outside source of malevolence. Now though, I can direct my perception of myself, so as long as there is shadow, or shadow...
connecting shadow, that space is within my reach. Reformation complete means my magic is gone, the supports that I normally rely on missing entirely, but I am whole and solid and standing perfectly balanced next to the prize box. Grinning, I drop my medallion against the depression lock, and tilt up the lid to find what the reward for today is.

“Cheater!” Yoru shouts at me, and I wave a rude gesture in his direction. Just because he can’t do it doesn’t mean it’s cheating. He can destroy the traps with his arrows. I can’t, not and expect my needles to survive the experience. Grinning to myself, I peer into the box. Seeing what it contains, my smile widens. It’s absolutely perfect, and I’ll have to remember to thank Hahron later for setting it up. As it is, I close the lid securely and pick up the lot, then wait for Yoru to join me. He takes his time, now that the prize has been claimed, to ensure he doesn’t trigger any of the remaining traps. He pestered me somewhat to know what is in the box, but I refuse to answer and only tell him that he’ll find out later, which has him grumbling all the way back into the outskirts of the populated areas where Hahron is waiting with red potion and a smile when he sees me carrying the box.

“Found it did ye?” His gruff voice the result of years of shouting.

“I did. It’s perfect, thank you.” I tell him, bowing deeply, eyes down, to show my sincerity. I am indebted to him for this.

“I thought so, when hanyana spoke of her strange festival.” He grins, displaying the missing teeth he says were kicked out by a horse as a young man, turning him off from the mounted warrior’s path entirely. I agree with his assessment of the festival that my Mistress has spoken of seems odd, but then, we are the Shadow folk. A celebration of the return of the light is more ominous than joyful to us. But Zelda, her entire people and most of the peoples they treat with welcome the light, are of the light, or yearn for it. It casts us down on the ground to be trod upon. The equinoxes are more of a seasonal celebration for us, where things are properly balanced.

Not that we shun opportunities to have a party. The feasting, the games, the gift giving are all things that it seems each Shaekha’ri has embraced with vigor. To ease the monotony of deep winter with light and sound, to fill bellies growing accustomed to privation, these things are welcomed. I know tomorrow I have the day off from training with Hahron and Zelda for the simple task of cooking. There are no other members of the Tor clan here, and so I have been elected to represent our clan’s culinary arts on the solstice day, beginning the moment the sun rises. I hope for an early evening, and am pleased that all of the dishes I have been asked to prepare are either served cold, at room temperature, or require long stewing or braising. I can sort of sleep in. Maybe.

“See you in two days, Aein-ah.” Yoru says, making sure to sling an arm about my shoulders and squeeze, hard, before heading back to the building he and Keiko have restored to make their home. I would not be surprised if, over the next few moons, they make their pairing official. Waving farewell to him, I once again bow deeply to the weapons master and express my gratitude.

“Ach, boyo, I expect to be treated to some proper Tor cuisine. The Mu, Yin, and Han styles seem to be all that are mastered here, so having something hot and fiery for a change will be most welcome.” He grins at me, and I know I will be using his reward and making a gift. The Dar tend to favor sweeter versions of similar dishes, but both our clans share a love of heat that some other clans find bordering on tear inducing or down right painful.

“Hanyana requested a feast, did she not?” I grin back and see his eyes light up in anticipation.

“That she did.” He pats me on the back, laughing as we part ways to return to our
respective homes. I stop at Taoki’s shop to pick up the portion of pork I’ve been allotted for the feast, visit Demi only long enough to receive six cucco eggs. As I will be boiling them tonight, they will last the two days easily. I have garlic, onions and onion sprouts, cabbage, potato, and now thanks to Hahron’s reward, enough peppers and bean paste to make four dishes. I will, however, need rice flour, and detour to Jeni’s mill to request enough for my purposes. Fortunately, she has enough on hand for my recipe with enough extra that if I make a mistake I won’t run out. Sugar, dried fish, dried kelp, and oil keep well in my larder, and Zelda is waiting for me by the time I get back with my purchases.

Her hair is tied back with a headscarf very similar to the one she wore when I first met her, though my apron is so large on her small frame it is bordering on ridiculous. I store the meat in the ice box, clean the eggs, and have Zelda peel and chop potatoes into rough triangles. I carefully lay the eggs in my smallest pot and cover them with cold water, then focus the flame into the smallest funnel to rapidly heat the water. Filling my medium sized pot with clean water, I return to set up the rice flour, water, oil and salt, then count to three hundred once the egg water comes to a rapid boil over the quick fire. Plunging the eggs into the snow, I wait for the last to melt, then empty the pot and replace the snow. Zelda uses a bowl to allow the potatoes to soak, and starts a simple super at my direction. Once the eggs are cool to the touch, I rest them in a basket and help hanyana finish setting up a thick bean stew with the last of the preserved pork belly. It will take about two and a half hours to cook, three to become its best, and so we adjourn to the second story and head to the bookshelves.

My relative fluency in Hyrulean is the only reason I have been selected as Zelda’s tutor, and with her growing mastery of Shaekha’ri habit alone keeps any of us from seeking out others. There will be time enough once I must again travel Hyrule proper as her Voice for other teachers to tend to her lessons. For now, whilst I am still capable of furthering her education, I shall. Through the fierce battles that covered Hyrule before her birth and in her childhood, many histories and relics of previous ages were lost to the Hyrulean people. Given our exile, there is much my people do not know. Fortunately, through ancient remains of my people’s purpose, the guardians of Derinkuyu have access to some information from the time lost. Nothing is complete, but piecing together some of what occurred is definitely possible.

The stories we have from before the sundering of clans and subsequent exodus is what we have been reading and will last most likely into the next moon, but not far beyond that. The few histories Impa had in Kakariko will last mayhap a moon beyond that. I shouldn’t be put back in the field before a full moon beyond that, so I must find four weeks’ worth of material to keep Zelda’s remarkably agile mind active and engaged. Or at least entertained. There is something to be said about giving the mind a rest and allowing it to recover, as one might a muscle group or strained joint. The logic of mathematics may keep her amused for a while, but I can see her quickly growing bored with the regularity of the type of problems she is likely to encounter before she can progress to the truly complex. Philosophy, and ethics for that matter, tie in so closely with the history we’ve been studying that one cannot learn about an aspect without at least touching on the other two.

She has no patience for the typical skills taught to most daughters of the noble houses I’ve read about, dancing and embroidery the only two she can manage for any length of time without growing frightfully bored. Cosmetics, fashion, polite conversation which restricts any real discussion of issues and limits topic to generalizations of obvious fact, needlework, painting, and on one or two rare occasions, music. Perhaps the last. The logic of mathematical precision, the challenge of learning the written language of it, expression in interpretation, physical skill, and the artistry in performance would not only be complex enough to occupy her interest, but assist her in using the magic of Rian Liahr to its fullest potential. The Guardian Harp, harp of the Goddess Hylia is the counterpart to Anak Silar, and has abilities both offensive and defensive that, as Hylia’s descendant, Zelda-hanyana should be able to access.
Like *Ohkarinah bi Koya* the Harp is purported to be able to carry one through Time itself, though if it has the ability to even warp Zelda about I would be most pleased. She has enough magic that any of the instruments made of the timeshift stones should be able to allow her instant travel, but none of them seem to have any effect. It could be the reference to Force Gems that neither of us can make sense of preventing such movement. If she is to flee, it will have to be on foot, and that sends a bolt of stark terror through my heart. She is fast for a Hylian of eleven cycles. The restless dead that comprise Ganondorf’s army are faster. The living are usually mounted. While she is safe, here, for now, I cannot afford to hope that will always be the case. The forgotten part of Hyrule, on the very edges of the boundary, hidden in the mists surrounding and with the last of the geas bound Shaekha’ri guarding her light from Ganondorf’s sight may be enough to keep her concealed until the time the Hero returns. She says seven years. Link will be sixteen, Zelda seventeen, Ganondorf forty-two. I will be twenty-three by then. It seems very far away.

Zelda has taken up with the same tome she has been reading for the past three days, and should be near the part where Ruma Noh calls upon her power as Sage of Shadow to bring Mokara’s Harvest down upon the Shaekha’ri, sundering the clans for all time. We were the guardians of the gates of time, the sentinels of Hylia’s slumber, and the protectors of her progeny. That custody was transferred to the Imprisoned for a time, though imperfectly, and the twelve clans learned much. After the Sundering, eight clans fled Hyrule in shame. Four were taken up by the Golden Goddesses themselves, and cast into Twilight alongside the interlopers of other races, never to bear the touch of light again without pain. My clan, the Tor, took the north-west point, our fair skin needing shelter from the sun and relatively hairless bodies doing well in the water. All eight of the remaining clans patrol the lands outside the mists. We will not fail in our purpose again.

I know when Zelda reaches the point in the chronicles where Ruma was forced to slay her partner and three of her five children by the tears on her cheeks. I haven’t turned a page of my own in too long if the candle marks are any indication. I can’t. I can’t even see the leaf, so there is no point. The visions encased in stone fly through my mind even as Zelda turns the page, the memories of great Shaekha’ri held for future generations to look on and reflect. I have not found any of these stones in Hyrule, though the less complex Gossip Stones abound. She asks no questions, for which I shall be eternally grateful. The Eye Stones contain the memories of those who left them there, down to the smallest detail. One does not sit back and view history in them, you live it. The Eye Stone of Ruma is worn smooth from the clenching of thousands of hands on the rim, runnels drain away from the tears. I would not wish the guilt, the heartbreak, nor the despair contained in her memories on anyone, let alone someone I am as fond of as I am of Zelda-hanyana. I also know, if she asked, I could not deny her the experience. I can deny her nothing.

I close my own book and re-shelve it without marking my page, since I have made no progress in it whatsoever, when Zelda carefully places her ribbon between the preserved parchment and leaves the account on the desk for later perusal. She says nothing, only takes my hand and leads us both down to the kitchen for a late supper of stewed beans and bacon, with some of the sprouts I have growing on the windowsill and cabbage made into a vinegar-dressed salad on the side. The flavor breaks some of my melancholy, and I resolve to get more sun as soon as possible. This depression is understandable, but not something that affects me for any length of time, and my inability to shake it off tells me that I am lacking in certain spirits that the sunlight carries.

Maybe Zelda’s Solstice holy day isn’t such an odd idea after all. Shadows need the light to exist. I muster the energy to clean the dishes as Zelda dries them and puts them away. Niakara is waiting, curled at the foot of the bed, when my Mistress takes up my hand once more and instructs me to change for bed. She dons her own night gown, stockings, and kerchief while I am still folding my tunic, and ushers me into my own night clothes with small tuts and huffs. I am of slightly less than average height, but I still must duck down for her to tie my night shirt closed, and she takes the opportunity to kiss my forehead and tug me into a warm embrace. My cheek is squished against her
budding breasts, but the warmth that radiates from her small form is soothing. She shoves at me until she is comfortable against my back, and we sleep.

Habit wakes me earlier than dawn, and Zelda pulls me back to the warm blankets for another two marks of sleep that I take, and gratefully. When I wake next, she is gone from the bedding but it is still warm and Niakara has taken her place against my side. I can faintly hear splashing from the bathing rooms, and find she has started a pot of porridge to break our nightly fasts, so I take the opportunity to bathe as well in the guesting room furthest from the kitchen. The steam fills the air from the heat of the water I call up, so the chill of the hallway is a shock to my system and I dart back to the bedroom to dress as quickly as I can. My hair damp, I join my Princess for our morning meal, and then let her braid the lot tight to my scalp before I return the favor. Her hair reaches the bottom of her shoulder blades, and I must remember shears to deal with Link’s today, for I will forget tomorrow.

Hair bound, hands cleaned, I teach the Princess of Hyrule how to mix and steam rice flour, salt and water to make the thick, chewy, soft noodles. She takes a turn with the large wooden pestle, and I resume the pounding when her arms and hands tire. She recovers quickly, and manages to roll and stretch her portion to my satisfaction. I take the greater division, and have another six portions to complete when her stamina for the task runs dry. With a smile, I tell her to take some of the sausage to Hora for sausage rolls for lunch, and she takes four green rupees from her own collection before I can suggest otherwise and is out the door. I resume my rolling, stretching, rolling and stretching, until I have ten even, round rolls of noodle about as thick as my smallest finger. I leave them on their oiled board, covering them with a damp cloth to keep them from drying too quickly, and wash up.

Doylan shouldn’t be with Link for another hour, and I take the shears and some of last night’s sour cabbage salad in addition to the regular fare with me when I send my spirit winging through the pathways Between. Link is practicing the strokes of the middle guard with Anak Silar as Navi calls the rhythm. The length of the blade makes the weapon require two hands, so he treats it as a long sword instead of the single handed blade it truly is as he moves through the stances. I can recognize them clearly, the motions clean and sure and already better than I can manage with both Hahron and Yoru to guide and correct my movements. Nabooru’s Aveil and Ruto’s Torisu have taught him well. I leave him to it, pleased by his initiative to train on his own without me there to guide and coax. I take the time to make his noon meal, being sure to include a greater amount of protein to help his muscles heal and grow, before cleaning out his chamber pot and washing up.

“Link, lunch time.” I call, and am not surprised when he simply sheaths his blade and stretches out his muscles before taking his seat. I don’t think I could startle him if I tried. Navi hovers until he gives her a piece of the small loaf and cheese, then flutters off to sit on the bed post and have her own meal. The moment he’s finished, I get him to turn on his stool and remove his cap so I can clip his hair to a more manageable length, then change his tunic for a fresh one. Doylan has yet to arrive by the time I am finished the tasks I had thought of for today, and so start in on the next story in the tome of Folktales of Hyrule. I finish Gorko’s Discovery, and Machi’s Seven Flowers, when Torisu arrives for Link’s next lesson.

Doylan didn’t show up. The Zora Captain seems surprised to see me, but covers it well. Either that, or I cannot read Zora body language as easily. I turn Link’s tutoring over to him and return to myself to find a cold sausage roll waiting at my side and Zelda once more gone to her own lessons. I eat, check on the noodles, re-wet the cloth coverings, and take the soaking potatoes out of the starchy water to rinse them and get the next batch for soaking. Adding more coal to the fire, I proceed to fill the one family sized cauldron I have with lard and watch it melt before adding the next piece. In between adding chunks of fat to the cauldron, I stretch cheesecloth over two planks with plenty of space underneath. Once it is three quarters of the way full of clear, shimmering and aromatic fat, I begin cooking the potato wedges. The first round, they cook. The second, I
submerge them only long enough to crisp the outside, and leave them to drip dry on the cheesecloth.

While the wedges dry, I pour the rendered fat back into the large tin I took it from, straining the liquid with more layers of cheesecloth and sticking the tin outside in the snow to cool as rapidly as possible and prevent it from going rancid. While I am out, I take the pork neck bones inside and rinse them thoroughly, until I can smell no blood, and see no discoloration of the rinse water. I wipe the cauldron clean, and let it heat while I stack the cooled crisp potato pieces. The noodles are firm, so I cut them into bite sized lengths and cover them once more. An entire bulb of garlic cloves goes into the cauldron with a bit of fat and three onions, followed by the pork neck bones and enough water to fill it. I will have to add more ingredients later, but the slow simmering of what is now inside will make a lightly flavorful and fragrant broth.

The kitchen work soothes me, familiar and routine as it is. Zelda returns in time for a supper of mixed rice bowls and a kitchen filled with good smells and half-finished dishes. Everything else I will have to do tomorrow before the feast, and instead of studying tonight my Mistress pulls me out to slide across a frozen artificial pond she has set up with the help of the mages of Derinkuyu and some of the warriors’ muscles to pump water. Impa’s mind touches my own, and I welcome the Sage of Shadow’s presence as I allow the eleven year old to convince me to try the game she has arranged. There are wooden blades can be laced to the bottom of boots, allowing the more agile to glide gracefully along the surface of the ice, and the less physically nimble to acquire a spectacular set of bruises. Juen and Darak ease the injuries away, Darak even participating in their gathering for a while, while the roundly pregnant women watch their partners make fools of themselves for their amusement. It grows dark quickly, the longest night of the year starting as early as possible, and the skates are put away in favor of returning to homes for a warm tea or tisane to aid sleep and dreams anticipating the party tomorrow.

Zelda lags behind, laughing and dancing in the snow like a drunken Anouki from beyond the furthest Goron held lands of the Snowfall mountain range. I am amused by her antics, and pleased to see the child in her surface. She is Queen in all but ceremony and situation, and I expect that this fact will cause her pain as she goes through the first Winter Solstice without her father if what I am told happened at the Summer Solstice is any indication. I will keep a close eye on her, and do my best. Impa too, is on high alert, watching through my eyes from the Temple depths, using the amethyst lattices there to amplify her reach and strength. Her amusement is the only thing keeping me from concern as we near home and Zelda turns from a joyously flailing child to an over-serious monarch in the space of a handful of heart beats.

“Happy Luminosity, Aein-shiik.” She says, blue eyes twinkling in a solemn face.

“And you, Zelda-hanyana.” I return, bowing to her in the way of the courtiers of Hyrule.

“I know the party isn’t until tomorrow, but I couldn’t think of any other time to get you out of the house long enough, so…” She trails off, biting her lips and truly nervous. “…I hope you like it!” Her enthusiasm comes out in a rush of syllables and breath, and she is opening the door and tugging off her boots, ignoring the house slippers in favor of rushing to open the men’s side of the bathing room door. I follow, and stop dead in the doorway.

This could not be the work of a single day. The changing room is no more, though the bathing area is still accessible the tub itself is gone and the drain cleverly tiled over to allow for flooding but appear as though it has always been solid ceramic. I can smell the grout, so that at least is very recent. Having one guest changing and bathing room will not impact my abilities to take clients, but this…this will help soothe both myself and others.

A marimba, complete with four and a half octave bars and three sets of mallets. The
wooden resonators are covered with paper instead of the intestine that I am used to seeing, and the bracing frame for the bars is obviously new. An old instrument, refurbished and transported. I run my hand along smoothly sanded mahogany, test the weight of the birch mallets, the flex of the rattan, and strike a C, listening to the charleo as it reverberates in the warm room, well insulated from the outside weather.

“It’s beautiful.” I whisper.

“Will you play for me?” Zelda asks. I cannot refuse her normally, let alone in the face of this precious gift. Though it has been nearly two years since I last held the mallets of my chosen instrument, I was banging on the three key xylophone toy my parents gave us since I was old enough to curl my fingers around a stick. The grip, the rhythm, the music returns to my hands quickly, and swells to fill my home. In honor of the season I sound the Snowdrift Waltz, jangle my way through the Iron Colossus, and test my dexterity with the lilting On This Blade which describes the start of the journey of the Goddesses’ chosen Hero from the view point of his sword, the only sword known to be conscious of its wielder. The song has lyrics, but I cannot sing them and play at the same time again yet, too much of my attention on the pair of mallets in each hand and the position of the bars. I get a better sound striking just to the left of center, and endeavor to do so, knowing my audience has ears that can detect each off-balance warble and tremor.

She doesn’t seem to mind, though she is getting tired. I am as well, and transition to play the simple theme of the Royal Lullaby, earning myself a soft smile. Letting my next variation become the coda, I play the six notes in four octaves, then three, two, and one. The music ends gently, I replace the mallets in velvet pockets on the side of the brackets and cover the instrument with a soft felt cloth to protect its finish.

“The Lullaby doesn’t really make me sleepy.” Zelda tells me solemnly, then yawns, and I laugh.

“It may not make you sleepy, but I need to go to bed so I can finish cooking tomorrow for your feast, hanyana. There is still much to be done.” I barely make it through my sentence before I too, am yawning. With a nod of acceptance at my reasoning, Zelda goes to change for bed and I check the noodles and the broth to make sure the first is dry enough and the second damp enough to last the night. I check on my Mistress, seeing the deep and slow rise and fall of her chest beneath the blankets, and head to the second story library as quietly as I can to finish the last stitches of my gift to her. Task complete, I carefully wrap the present and tuck it alongside Impa’s gift to reveal tomorrow evening. Returning to the ground level I find Niakara pressed against Zelda who is snoring softly. I manage to slip into my night clothes without waking either of them, and fall asleep within seconds of my head touching the pillow.

Zelda is still snoring when I wake from disquieting dreams, but Niakara has wrapped herself around my head and is paying particular attention to grooming my eyebrow. The sky is beginning to brighten with false dawn, and though I could turn over and go back to sleep easily, I groan my way to my feet and stumble to the one remaining bathing room I have. A quick detour to the water-closet first, and then I make sure to groom myself thoroughly. For the first time in months, I take the time to braid and bind my hair into the traditional style worn by master shiiks, tying it back with indigo ribbon and scenting my skin with citrus lotions. I carefully trim my nails, then tie back my sleeves so they won’t fall in any of the food I need to start and finish preparing, including breakfast.

Small cakes with fruit preserves and fresh milk rouse Zelda, who wakes completely halfway through her second portion. She goes to tend to her own appearance, leaving me to the simmering pot of spicy pork with cabbage and potato soup, skewers of noodle, eggs and onion in a
red spicy sauce, crisp sprout salad, and sweet and crispy potato wedges with toasted sesame seeds. Normally I’d serve the noodles in a bowl, but they are much easier to eat this way and the purpose is for everyone to have a taste of a dish if they are so inclined, not to fill up on any one thing. The only space large enough for a gathering this size is the Market Square which has been covered with tents and canopies, and filled with braziers and fire pits to make it more temperate. With Zelda, Yoru, and Keiko helping transport the dishes, it takes a single trip for me to set up my contribution in the Tor clan’s space.

The fact that the tunic Yoru is wearing has the Ren rune upon it does not escape my notice, nor does Keiko’s glow. The last time I saw a woman looking like that, Alma was headed back to finish the circuit our party started. Perhaps they are waiting to see if the child is viable before announcing their partnership. I will say nothing publicly either way, unless they both tell me it is alright to do so. Some private teasing later, perhaps, but there are already enough people flooding towards the Square to constitute being in public. Once inside, the sheer press of people is enough to make me want to shed my jacket, and when I reach my destination before anything else, I do. A small brazier has been provided to keep the two hot dishes warm, and the cooled dishes are sweating in their covering. I’m sweating in my coverings, and I am not moving about as most of the people around me are.

Rather than a single, large gathering, the Market has been set up as a series of eight small pocket parties. Each of the eight clans has a section, with the four banished clans retaining an honorary marker in their traditional directions, so I am standing next to an older man from the Dar clan. I set the soup to simmer, the skewers to baste in their own sauce, and the salad and sweet potatoes within easy reach before heading over to pay my respects.

“I See you, Dar-eh.” I greet formally, and the old man chuckles.

“So serious on a feast day, young Tor. I am Kaiel, and you are Aein, and now that we are known to each other, do I see tteokbokki on skewers?” He asks, deep burgundy eyes shining with hope.

“You do.” I confirm, and swiftly retrieve a piece from Zelda’s watchful eye to bring over. With a brief but heartfelt thanks, he tears a noodle from the end with sharp, white teeth and chews, sighing happily.

“Beautifully done, boy. Simply beautifully. I can die a happy man, now. Have some sadte.” He shoves a stick of spiced pork into my hand after dipping the end is a smooth peanut sauce. I praise his cooking, and return to my own place with a smile, a wave, and a wish that his niece was young enough to tempt me into their clan. Knowing that none of the Shaekha’ri would risk even upsetting her, I send Zelda off to explore and hand out portions of food to whomever expresses interest. I bring samples to Link throughout the day, unsurprised and disquieted by Doylan’s continued absence, but there is nothing I can do about it now. Impa, still loosely present in my mind, knows, and can act. I trust her to it. Sohna stops by long enough to sample a bit of the sauce, and I recommend Kaiel’s coconut rice to cool the fire in her mouth. Innah, the roundest of the women I was successful with, waddles up on her partner’s arm for a bit of soup ladled into the mug he carries. Alhan follows closely, and Hana much later.

By the time Hora makes her rounds Yoru has brought me samples from all but the Mu and Noh clans and I am quite full, but the tiny blini topped with caviar is a treat that I somehow find room for. The small portion of baked beef is topped with a sauce of tomatoes, garlic, and horseradish that leaves a different kind of zing across my taste buds, and the thick shortbread square she leaves behind is so laden with butter I’m surprised it doesn’t melt in my hand. I can only nibble, but even that small end is simply marvelous. I am glad that my Mistress specified only one day of
feasting, however, or I will not fit into my clothes.

Small groups of performers have taken turns throughout the day in each open space, with just enough room between that instruments and vocalists don’t have to compete with each other. I can listen in from where I stand, and, once Zelda returns, wander close enough to see some of the dancers. None of them are young enough for the truly fancy dancing, but what they lack in sheer power is easily made up for in grace and skill. My Mistress shows the steps of a simple round dance, and in a handful of measures has nearly twenty people moving through the motions, myself included. It is the perfect cure for the touch of over eating I have indulged in, and find myself dancing with Kairi and Demi more frequently than any others, our heights a good match for both Zelda’s Hyrulean round dances and the more tribal styles of the various clans present. My duty to hanyana prevents me from going with either woman to her home this evening, but the attention is noted and most definitely welcome. Later, perhaps.

Tonight though, the only Lady taking me home and making any type of bed is the Chosen of Nayru, exiled Princess of Hyrule, Mistress of my soul. She begs one more round dance before retiring, which turns into two and having a number of sweets and gifts presented as we make our way back home. There are more parcels on the doorstep, and a handful inside, all addressed to the Honored Zelda. Clothing, jewelry, books, scrolls, boots, a quilt, a featherbed, food stuffs, pillows, even a doll of porcelain with a head full of horsehair that can be combed and braided. The excitement of the gifts pushes her past her normal bed time, marks later than mine, and I am not certain which gift or even if it was one in particular that sets her to soft tears.

“I miss daddy.” She admits as I gather her into my arms. I am a poor substitute for a parent, no match for Impa who was her mother in all but blood and by no means a king capable of forging peace, however uneasy, between all the races of Hyrule. But I am here, and I am warm, and she knows that I understand her as no other can. She shares my body and my mind, has given her heart to the same boy I have, and accepted the pledge of my soul. We have both grown old before our time, with responsibilities beyond our ages if not our abilities. There is one thing, however, that I can give her still, and I pull back enough to speak clearly without her hair muffling my mouth.

“I have something for you, Zelda-hanyana.” I tell her, and she sniffles a laugh.

“I think everyone in all of the city has given me a present already today.” Wiping her nose on her sleeve, eyes still watery, she smiles.

“I have one for you as well, but this is not that kind of present.” I smile back, engaging her curiosity. She says nothing, but her fingers relax on my shoulders and she tilts her head to the side and stares at me. “It’s a promise.”

“Aein-ah, you…” She starts, and I press my fingertip to her lips.

“I promise you, Zelda, Princess of Hyrule, Nayru’s Chosen, Bearer of Wisdom, that I will never leave you. Danger, distance or death cannot keep me from your side. As long as you live, I will be with you.” I pledge. As a shiik, it is a promise that I can keep, though Zelda may be horrified if she could understand the strength of that bond. Tying my spirit to hers, I will be unable to move on until she herself is welcomed in the Silent Realm. “Now, for your present.” I grin at her, kiss her quickly on the forehead, and rush upstairs to retrieve the bundle of gifts and back down fast enough that she hasn’t moved by the time I return. “Here.”

She reaches for the load tentatively, and I know she can feel the Shadow magic coursing through Impa’s gift. The amethyst crystal is perfectly regular, without incursions and a deep, deep violet. Bound on each end and once around the sides with silver bands of worked runes, the charm is the product of months of work and will enable Zelda to listen in to any Gossip Stone ever made, as
long as it still functions. A braided cord of silk lets me slip the charm over her head to let it hang around her throat, the clasp designed to release should enough pressure be placed on the mechanism to prevent strangling. It sits between and slightly beneath her budding breasts, and she gasps as the magic settles for her, the whispers of stones from ages past simmering down to less than a murmur in moments. My gift seems paltry after the wealth that she has received tonight, but I still offer it to her once her eyes clear and come back to the present.

“It’s beautiful.” She tells me, wrapping her arms around my neck once more. “Thank you, Aein-ah.” The side quiver’s buckle has a good distance to be let out, and with care should last her well into adulthood. The treated leather is bleached near white, stamped with what is being called the Sheikah Eye, braced with brass triangles in patterns of three, and detailed in the full blue of Nayru’s Temples. I lined it with a stiff coutil that can be removed and cleaned as needed, to protect the wooden shafts and feathered fletching. I haven’t the skill to make arrows myself, or even to know what type she will need, and so the quiver is empty. Giving a weapon as a gift, too, makes me uncomfortable in a way I cannot define. It is not done among my clan, but others make a regular practice of it, and the Hyrulean customs I have seen appear to have no qualms over the idea. The quiver, though, is within my skill set and comfort level.

“You’re welcome, Princess.” I tell her, and mean it, with all my heart.

Chapter End Notes

The measure of a man is what he does with power. - Plato
Chapter Summary

Crumbling pillars and collapsing walls
A revenant roams seeking blood.

Chapter Notes

Back with the warnings for this chapter, sending the rating from mature to explicit yet again. Here we go, in no particular order - original character deaths, privation, homosexual sex, explicit sexual content, coercive sex, rimming, rough anal sex, injury, pain, poisoning, magic, mild racism, time travel, panic, sacrifice, sensory loss, and just to make it fun, a cliffhanger.

I am an odd duck...you could say I'm quackers.

Hunkering down into the makeshift shelter I’ve made of my cloak and the inner hollow of the half-rotten bales of last year’s hay I resist the urge to look at the continually overcast sky for a break in the weather. The vernal equinox next week will give me a brief respite from travelling the last of Hyrule and making myself known to the Loyalists still present, but until then this field is to be my circuit. There is a large ranch somewhere in the middle of it I am to find particularly, which will help with my need for contact with other people. Days spent alone, for the small towns and villages along the way that are no bigger than the collection of huts called Sweetsprings by Lake Hylia are mostly abandoned during working marks, and I dare not travel at night. Headman Brenden at Sweetsprings was pleased to see me on my way by four days ago, but had nothing to spare in the way of shelter or food, and little time to spare in the daily tasks of the village. I have been well provisioned by the Shaekha’ri in Derinkuyu for the duration, though the cool, clear water that they are known for was most welcome and appreciated.

If what I have to eat is all preserved bars of the same stuff for each meal every day, I am no longer inclined to complain. It keeps through all weather, in damp and in heat, and is tough as old boot leather. But it is food that keeps me healthy and provides balanced nutrition, which I am fortunate enough to have and to realize my good luck. The settlements of Clearwater and Sweetsprings both showed signs of lethargy that comes for a lack of carbohydrates, though the seaweed keeps them from scurvy very well, and the dried fish is a good, clean protein. The only village large enough to be called that which I have come across since then is not so fortunate, but the early blooming greens and broken legged boar one of their hunters brought in as I was taking my leave has also given them a physical hope to go along with my more spiritual and political one. Spring is blooming, which means there will be food and warmth, and Zelda lives, which means there is hope for peace. It is more than they dared to dream.

I’ve been trailing a wagon for the last day and a half, hoping to catch up and travel at least part of the way with others. I would like the company of other people, for though the Poes in the field protect me from travelling shrouds of ghouls and the roving cliques of Stalchildren, they are
short on conversation and shorter still on physical contact. This far from any Temples, I cannot even reach Zelda with my thoughts or my magic. She can call me, summoning my attention with the song she has written, but doing so would defeat the purpose of my being here. The abandoned settlements are devoid of even so much as a house sprite, and send shivers down my spine whenever I come across them. I usually find two or three a day, for this field is fertile and was well tenanted. If the residents of the abandoned ranches and farmsteads had simply moved to a hamlet, village, town or colony for the winter, the natural spirits, Picori, and familial sprites would only be sleeping, not gone. Not vanished without a trace.

It is as though Ganondorf is sucking the very life from the land.

Removing yet another bar of preserved ground meat mixed with fruit and grains into a texture-free paste and baked hard enough to resemble stone, I break it into four pieces and shove one into my mouth. For all the processing, it actually doesn’t taste horrible. Not good, but I can eat it without gagging, provided I have enough liquid. If I take a mouthful of water from my water skein and hold it together with the food in my mouth it softens enough to chew in a few minutes as the sugars dissolve and the fat becomes malleable. The food does nothing to immediately keep me warm, but the acres of dead grass and high winds make starting a fire a bad idea. I’m tired enough that I cannot guarantee I would extinguish the flame before I fell asleep, and no one can outrun a grass fire. Even if I stepped through the Shadow, I am not certain I could outdistance the flames.

There is a faint warmth coming from the fermentation of the straw beneath me, and with my cloak to shield me from the wind and any overnight precipitation, I am decently comfortable. Like the residents of the village, now that I am fed and warm my mind turns to thoughts of my Princess and they bring me comfort. She is safe, growing and learning and preparing for the day when the Usurper King is overthrown and she is restored to her rightful place. She is warm, covered in furs and resting on a feather bed, with a proper oven for heat and Niakara to keep her company. She is well fed, for a growing girl needs regular, quality nutrition to grow into a strong, healthy woman. She is also cared for, though she is no longer the only child of Derinkuyu.

At various points during the Wolf Moon Hora, Alhan, Innah and Hana brought tiny bundles of joy into their lives, adding members to their small families that were desperately wanted. The fierce joy on Ifan’s face as he met his son for the first time while Hora looked on will forever be etched in my memory. Dora Mu was the first of the five, followed by Innah and Danpe’s Magi and Jeul Dar, Hana and Enpo’s Insa Noh, and Alhan and Aenen’s Elham Yin. Rahla too will deliver sometime in the Squash Moon, a month or so before Keiko and Yoru are expecting, so there is much to be done and many tiny people to tend to. If nothing else, Zelda has learned how to properly hold and handle an infant. Given my role in their production, so have I. My inexperience was telling, and the babies’ parents quickly retrieved the newest additions to their families, but I appreciate the opportunity regardless of my ineptitude.

When they are clean, dry, and only moderately noisy, babies are amazing. Soft, cute, and so very tiny, I think they smell wonderful, though moments after a red face and some grunting that isn’t the case. Jeul was the only one to throw up on me, though Insa tried. If not for the small cloth Enpo had inserted between the smallest of the newborns and my shoulder, he would have succeeded. All ten parents have the full support of the village and wanted their children so very badly that I feel privileged to be able of giving them that gift. Being able to hand the infants back to them when I have had my fill was also a treat.

Chuckling softly to myself, it takes me a moment to recognize the Poe doing the same not three feet from my shelter and I freeze, eyes open to the darkening twilight and hoping that the edges of my cloak cannot be seen from the top of the hay bale. When nothing immediately sounds or attacks, I let myself breathe shallowly and quietly, ears and eyes straining for any hint of an intruder.
No clatter of bones, or shriek of a wraith, and I cannot see even the lantern of the Poe that gave me the warning, but the hairs on the back of my arms and neck are standing tall and proud, and my gut roils. I have felt this fear before, in the caverns on the way to Derinkuyu about a year ago. I remember it still. This is the approach of untimely death.

Digging deeper into the hay bale, I start calling up every protective barrier and mage shield I can think of to deflect any indication of my presence, even as my intuition starts screaming at me to hide, to flee. The sky turns a brilliant violet as Shadow magic is activated and despite myself I pause in my efforts and glance out into the field, not recognizing the signature but certain that it is from a living being. Nearly forty yalms from where I crouch in the flimsy straw shelter a phantasm coalesces into a tall warrior on horseback. His stallion is deepest black, with an unholy light shining from his eyes and his barding, from shaffron to crupper, is of the darkest blackened steel. Only the caparison breaks the foreboding color scheme, a red cloth with tribal markings around the edges that match the markings on the leather of the warrior’s armor. It too, is darkest black, red, and deep brown the color of rusted metal but for the bone white horned mask covering his face and calling to mind a skull, though of what I cannot tell.

He holds a trident easily in his right hand, the inset jewel in the pommel glowing a malevolent citrine and a fourth blade taking the place of the butt at the end of the shaft. I can no longer see the mounted warrior’s eyes, but I know he is searching. I am the only living thing for marks in any direction, and must assume that he is hunting for me. His head moves to scan the countryside, taking in the first blades of new grass and dark mud beginning to freeze over while his mount paws at the ground and snorts restlessly. The revenant spurs his horse to pace, and as they turn to travel southward nearer the stone walls encasing Hyrule I sigh in relief.

It is enough of a sound that the horse rears, whinnying, and the phantom of a living magician spins about and lets his mount lead him directly towards the bale I hide in. Hooves clopping dully on the hard earth that will not be tilled this year, for I now know where the residents of this part of the field have gone and it is not of this plane, he raises the trident so the teeth can puncture the loose walls of my shelter. I find the faint traces of Shadow available to me and gather my remaining magic to step out of reality in the brief moment when the metal tines will occupy the same place my body currently does. I will have one chance. So focussed on my timing I do not twitch when the phantom roars, sending out a crackling energy that makes my extremities tingle, waiting for my chance to survive. A tendril of power strikes me, following the line from that tingle, and I shudder but do nothing else. I cannot afford the distraction. Fifteen yalms. Ten.

The Poe that warned me bursts into being five yalms out, laughing maniacally and whirling its lantern in a brilliant arc of light that has the phantom crying challenge and giving chase. The two ghosts, one natural and the other entirely unnatural, give in to the pursuit with only one inevitable outcome. Within moments the Poe is shrieking on the end of the menacing phantom’s trident, impaled on the three tined blades. I watch, overcome with horror, as the phantom consumes the spirit, taking its power and form for himself and leaving nothing to indicate that the Poe ever existed. There is nothing I can do, nothing left for me to send to the Silent Realm as reward for saving my life. The Poe’s sacrifice will not be in vain, I swear it, but that means I need to leave and leave now.

I focus my will and breathe my intent into the small whistle, keeping a tight grip on my cloak so as not to leave it behind. The sound regains the attention of the fearsome apparition, but even the tight pivot and full on charge is not enough for I am already gone. Braced on the platform above the Water Temple, I spend the night shivering and unable to move even a hair’s breadth to the side, convinced that any moment now the phantom will appear on the shoreline to hunt me down. Paralyzed and ill from irrational and outwardly imposed fear, it takes the Zora guards summoning Torisu to attend to the stranger trembling on the stone pad and the warmth of the high noon sun to
get my limbs working again. I shudder, more of a full body spasm, and gasp in great gulps of air when he touches me, the physical contact shattering the metaphysical binding the phantasm placed on me.

The captain of the Zora guard on the sacred site takes my report, noting my words down and checking my vital signs, looking displeased. I know I am in shock for I am still shaking, still cold to the touch, and showing signs of exhaustion when he orders the guards that alerted him to my presence to escort me to the scientist’s tower. Staggering, knees weak, it takes until mid-afternoon for them to get me there, and Lyell wastes no time in pinching my nose and pouring a blue potion down my throat. The boost in physical healing is enough to steady my nerves, and the dose of magical power is enough to disrupt them again as my channels respond as though I am still in danger, the power flowing through and out almost faster than I can process it.

“By the Trine, laddie.” The scientist murmurs as my body practically vibrates under his hands, the Zora guards taking a quick dip in the pool to preserve their skin and scales. “What in the world is leeching you?” Taking up one of the experimental concoctions from his work bench, the old man’s surprisingly strong grip holds me steady until the Zora guards can take over. The moment they do, he draws a needle of the faintly glowing yellow mix and gives me the full dose in the thigh before I can flinch away. I have a brief vision of the phantom’s jeweled trident glowing in the night, and then it disappears along with the rest of my other-sight.

At least I’ve stopped shaking.

I am also conscious, which is better than the last time I encountered that dark being, and I have gathered exceedingly valuable information through the sighting. A spirit born of malevolence and violent inclination is roving the countryside and depleting it of all life. It does explain where Ganondorf is getting the power to control the weather of Hyrule to the extent he is, if it is actually the Thief himself doing so. No one has been able to confirm that, and there are a number of sorcerers that would gladly serve to be supplied with that much power. They are of the same ilk as our sundered brethren, and one instance of eternal separation is not enough to deter others from repeating the same mistakes, especially if they have no means of remembering the histories that my people are told as children. Doylan is a good example of that, though his defection was discovered before any true damage to the safety of Link, Zelda, or the people of Kakariko could be done.

I have been lain down on the table during my musings, and stare at the ceiling of the laboratory while the colors slowly fade from my vision. The eccentric house sprite that matches the master of this place dissolves into the air before my eyes, and I blink as the boundaries of reality blur, then come sharply into focus, only to distort again in a strange cloudiness that smudges my perception. Both of the Zora guards and Lyell himself seem to find nothing amiss, but the haziness of my sight compounds with a hard distinction of what I know to be solid physical objects. All spiritual and magical beings and…things…are gone. I am nearly blind. The reflection of light from the water’s surface in the deep pool casts incomplete rainbows on the toneless stone walls, grey on grey covering grey and held together with more grey.

“Hmm. Hmm. What’s this?” The old man mutters, plucking a thin metallic sliver from my person, poking at my limbs and unlacing my trousers to yank them down far enough to expose my thigh and view the puncture mark of his needle with cold, bony fingers tugging my skin. Vaguely uncomfortable with the liberties he is taking with my person, I am more concerned with my lost sight and allow the impromptu examination. “Leech link’s broken at least.” He shuffles back to the workspace, returning moments later with a full set of point-needles he wields with an expert hand. I can feel them sliding home, striking my vortexes and channels, but beyond that awareness there is nothing. No reaction, no alteration, no change.
“Lyell-eh?” I ask, and he spares a second to glance at me before returning to his examination.

“Never thought to try this on a Sheikah before.” He admits. “There’s something odd about the way you’re reacting to it.”

“Reacting to what? What did you give me?”

“A Force based booster, concentrated in a crucible for four days to enhance its light bearing magic and blended with purified water and a few stabilizers. It seems to be shutting down your ability to process magic instead of bolstering your defences though. The link itself has dissipated, but your magic’s not responding at all well. How do you feel?” The scientist questions even as he tests my reflexes, giving up on the needles entirely and using his hands to manually manipulate my body. I habitually close my eyes to better gauge my status, though with the majority of my sight gone there is not much sensory input to discern.

“Weary, mostly. Weak. Lethargic to the point of pain. Remarkably well, considering the last time I encountered this…creature, I died.” I admit, and Lyell pauses in his ministrations to absorb that choice piece of information. “I seem to also be losing my vision.” I tell him as calmly as I can, pleased that my voice only wavers once in eleven syllables.

“Oh?” The sound is drawn out, neutrally intoned, and prompts further divulgence. I oblige his curiosity, using the description of my condition to stave off the panic that drives deeper breaths into my lungs.

“My Sight faded first, which I have held in an enhanced stage of development for just under a year, followed quickly by my ability to see the supernatural. The ultraviolet spectrum is beyond me at the moment, and I can no longer differentiate between firings of the bricks in your walls. Everything appears nearly grey, or shades of grey. It’s not…painful.” I manage. “Just very disconcerting.” I am the master of understatement.

“Was this happening before or after the booster shot?”

“The exhaustion before, the issues with my sight after.” A pat on the shin tells me it is okay to sit up and return my clothing to its proper state, but I have to pause and then immediately curl inwards. “Nausea and vertigo just now.” I manage, and then prove it rather spectacularly, much to the disgust of the two Zora guards whose day I have officially ruined alongside the soles of their armored boots. “…sorry.” I wheeze, choking down further bile and succeeding in triggering my gag reflex. Perhaps my reaction is a bit stronger than I thought.

“That’s it, get it out.” Lyell encourages, providing a bucket and a soothing hand on my lower back until the last of the bright yellow has made its way out. Water to rinse, and another glass to drink, and I feel much better. The rainbows reflecting on the walls are expanding, and the walls are once again light slate, ash, and granite with flecks of cinereous, quartz, and jet. I close my eyes in relief, and wake hours later to the settling twilight in the second story sleeping quarters at the lakeside laboratory. Lyell is slumped in a chair by the bedside, and I can see the remains of his dinner on the table below. There is no sign of the Zora guards that escorted me here, and no indication that my sight is at all damaged. I am still weary enough that my bones ache, but exhaustion is easily remedied and the sore neck the scientist will have is not.

“Lyell-eh?” I call, hoping I will not need to stand and shake the elderly man. I am in luck, and after a quick examination and another bottle of blue potion, the man old enough to be my grandfather’s father fairly collapses into bed next to me, snoring seconds later. The cool of the early spring evening makes me grateful for the shared warmth, and I return to dreams easily. The vision I
find myself in is nauseatingly familiar, and though I know I will not see the conclusion I attempt it anyway and let the sequence run through my mind.

“Ah, there you are!” Vidkun calls, his voice warm with affection as I turn and raise my face into his hands to be kissed thoroughly. I respond in kind, feel his hand trace down my chest to toy with the fastenings of my shirt. Before he can go for skin, I wake in panic. Again. Resigned to wait for the effects of the dream to fade, I send my spirit from my body to check on Link, needing to do something productive and lacking any other options. Zelda will be sleeping, and I cannot break through the barrier of the hidden city while nothing more than a whisper of Shadow magic and will without her consent. It is a safeguard Impa insisted upon that I agree with. Should I be captured, Zelda must remain safe. I am too physically worn to do anything but rest and recover, and it is too late to make the most of my meditations.

The Hylian boy is sleeping, as is Navi, with the small pocket of what I now know to be the Sacred Realm overlaid across the surface of Hyrule but not actually a part of it in utter disarray. Doylan’s defection cause little upset to the boy himself, for the peculiar twist the strange suspension of both spirit and person that the Master Sword has enforced means he does not remember the sorcerer’s name, face, or even the particulars of his lessoning. Only the instinctual magic, recalled at the level of muscle memory as much as Torisu and Aveil’s weapons work has him moving before he is aware of the action. I straighten his clothing into piles of clean, worn but okay, stained, and should be rags before I feel capable of sleeping again. With one more glance around, I resolve to bring some fresh food when I am capable, and return to my body to sleep dreamlessly for the remainder of the night.

Dawn sees me jogging through to Sweetsprings, and then back into the field by the time I must make camp. Paranoia and proximity to the Water Temple boost my strength enough to give a report to Zelda, and as such I don’t cover as much distance the second day. The third has me far enough into the dead grass from last year and new growth this year that I cannot see any landmarks and must rely on my internal sense of direction and the faint traces of sacred power echoing from the Temples themselves, for the sky is clouded over to obscure both sun and stars. Reluctant to head to the deep south-east, on the fourth day I cut nearly directly across towards the Forest Temple and come across the tracks of the same wagon I was following nearly a week ago. Droppings between the traces are cold enough that they do not smell overly much, which means that there are people anywhere from two to six marks ahead.

I have no desire to crack one of the horse apples open to judge any more accurately than that, but the thought of being able to travel with someone makes me push myself harder than I probably should. The training this winter and travel in the early spring has left me in excellent shape, but even so I will need to eat and rest to recover from the strain I put my muscles through. It is worth it though, for by the time I need to start casting about to find a suitable campsite the small caravan I’ve been following has a bonfire going and their horses have been set to graze. I wave to their scout, and make sure I am seen long before I can speak and be heard. A large figure, vaguely familiar, moves from the side of a wagon to meet me, and by the time I am close enough to identify his face, he has recognized me.

“Ho, Aein!” Mukesh greets, and I wave in return, too winded from the last hundred yalm’s of running after jogging for nearly four hours to reply intelligibly. If he is here, then the three wagons are a portion of Chuki’s Traders that were sent south to winter. I daren’t hope that Vidkun is among them, and as we approach their camp I cannot see him among the familiar and strange faces gathered by the cook pot. Pressing my disappointment down churns my stomach, but not nearly as badly as the potion Lyell made of Light Force did. Like any medicine, the difference between poison and prescription is in the dosage. The amount I am disheartened at the man who holds my favor’s absence is quickly remedied by the welcome I receive from the rest. That they are meeting
up with the party that went east at Lon Lon Ranch brings me joy, for that is my destination as well. I sing for my supper, give Selah two blue rupees for a place in the wagons, and spend the next three days enjoying both company and the steady pace of the oxen and horses.

They are slower than I am on foot, slower than even the human members of the caravan, but the relative luxury they allow is worth every minute of travel. Even if it means I arrive a day late to aid the passing of one of Talon’s small holders’ grandfathers. Valen’s body lays in state in an outbuilding that smells as though it was used for storage of either hay or tools during the winter on a rough table made of the door for the building itself, and has not yet begun to lose the stiffness that comes as the spirit abandons all connection to the form. Valen’s ghost, still remarkably coherent, hovers about what I must assume are his descendants who are in mourning. His ties to them are much stronger than those to his cadaver, and must be released before he can move on. I thank Ryon for the ride, wave goodbye to Mukesh, and slide from the back of the caravan to do the job I have been born into through aptitude and will.

“I am sorry for your loss.” I say to the older man who looks enough like Valen to be his son, and I assume as much. “I am a sheik, a priest of the dead, of Kakariko village.” My introduction relieves some of the tension on the drawn faces which quickly returns as the family huddles inwards to confer. The woman I take for the man’s partner bursts into silent tears even as he opens his arms to me, showing himself unarmed and displaying worn and patched clothing.

“We cannot afford your fees, Sheik, nor can we offer anything in trade for your services.” He tells me, the lines around his swollen eyes tight and tense with unhappiness, his aura fairly pulsing with the ache of loss and sorrow. “You’d best move quickly, to catch your companions.” The dismissal is clear, as is his family’s misery. There is not a great deal of room in the building, and a cold wind whistles through the open doorway, ruffling the edges of the fabric making up the old man’s shroud. The close quarters when I begin singing the mortuary prayers of my people make it easy for the man to interrupt them with a hand about my wrist.

“We have nothing, Sheik.” His whisper is harsh, broken, and turns to a shuddering gasp as I twist my hand in his to take his larger palm between my own. His skin is rough, dry, and tough as raw hide.

“Give me your pain, your stories, your memories of him, and I will build him a path both easy and smooth to the Silent Realm where his spirit will find peace.” I promise him, then turn my face to meet each and every one of the mourner’s eyes with my own fiery red irises. “All of your stories, for someone so loved must have enough tales to fill a library.”

“Grandpa liked stories.” A young woman near my age says softly, her voice loud in the silence following my demand. “He used to tell me some of them when I brought my knitting to his hearthside. My favourite was the one about the Green Maiden who helped the Hero find the Royal Jewels…” She shares the story, others adding to it and then recalling their own memories. As each one is revealed, I gather their stagnant emotional attachments that will eventually foul their bonds to Valen and use the knowledge to detach his spirit from clinging to them and in time doing them harm. It takes long past sunset for the words to slow, and well into the evening before they stop, exhausted but purged of the bindings that hold Valen’s ghost to this world. His body is malleable, and there is water to wash it, lavender to bring peace, and rosemary to burn and help him find his way.

I sing him to his rest then, and take the offer of a place by the fire to sleep afterward, the euphoria that is the mark of a successful crossing carrying me to my own less permanent rest. Trading two of the travel-food bars for a bowl of porridge in the morning, I see the gates of Lon Lon Ranch after less than a mark of a steady jog, and have reached them within two. There is little about
the place that could be considered defensive, though the main buildings have taken a raised portion of the field for their own. The stockade is pounded earth encased by stone pulled from the surrounding fields, and the gates themselves open onto a stable and a series of barns with ample evidence of their occupancy. Lowing cows, clucking cucos, and the nickers of a variety of horses provide a welcoming backdrop to the smile of a girl perhaps Zelda’s age.

“Hullo there. I’m Malon, and this is Lon Lon Ranch. My dad Talon runs it with help from Mr. Ingo. Normally you can rent a room for 50 rupees a night, but the people from Chuki’s Traders have us all booked up. There’s still some space in the loft of the front stables, if you don’t mind. Say 10 rupees?” Her childish treble is crisp and efficient despite her age, and the thick mane of cascading red hair is enough to make me wonder if there is more than a little Geru’do in her heritage. From the way she wields the pitchfork, I would not be surprised if her mother was a lancer from that formidable group.

“That seems more than fair, Miss Malon, should I need to stay the night. Tell me if you can, has the fifth caravan arrived yet?” I inquire, my curiosity as insistent as my desire to end the enforced celibacy of the last season. Surely, if he still carries my favor, Vidkun would not be adverse in taking some time for conversation and pleasure.

“Are you staying with them? The Master has paid for their stay entirely, all the caravans.” I can fairly see the rupees in the girl’s eyes and with so many things to spend them on all gathering in one place I can understand her avarice. There are a number of things I would like to purchase as well, if they are both available and within my means.

“Does he do that often?” I ask, for such extravagance is unheard of in Kakariko, and unknown in reclusive Derinkuyu. A gathering of merchants of that size is rare, even in the Federation.

“For as long as I can remember, and the books say longer, he’s had a gathering at the start of the season here and paid outright.” She tells me, hand on her hip. “Though if you’re with the fifth you’re early. They aren’t scheduled to arrive until late today or early tomorrow.”

“Ah, no, I was just wondering about a friend.” I reply, feeling my shoulders slump in disappointment and not caring enough to put in the effort to hide it. “I am here to speak with the Master of the Ranch.”

“Dad’s probably in the pasteurization rooms now, making sure this morning’s milking gets bottled. I can take you there if you promise not to touch anything.” Large blue eyes meet my own with a fierce look of determination behind them, and I nod.

“I promise.” I swear to her, holding my hand up and palm flat.

“Kay!” She grins, and then is off like a shot around the back left corner of the whitewashed buildings and towards the fenced area surrounding the entire main ranch. I follow, and am surprised at the number of caravans, horses, oxen, and people milling about in the enclosed field. Over a hundred, I am certain, though I cannot get more than a rough estimate without losing track of my petite guide. She rests her pitchfork against the outer wall of the building and knocks loudly before opening the door and shouting. I catch only the end of her tirade, and am paying very little attention to it while doing my best to honor my most recent promise.

The structure itself is fascinating, and I have seen some of the best mechanical engineering Hyrule’s peoples have to offer in their Temples. Three cauldrons fully large enough for me to bathe in are fitted snugly together so that a gear system can rotate a paddle through each of them at a steady pace. Power for the stirring mechanism is provided by two geldings walking in their traces on a
strange wooden rotating platform, much like the mill in Kakariko is powered by the wind. At the head of horses is a rotund man who looks like he just woke from a nap whom Malon is chattering at. He yawns hugely, pats her head, and checks the candlemarks beside him before turning to make his way over to me.

“Name’s Talon, Master of Lon Lon Ranch. Malon said you needed to speak with me?” His voice is clear and smooth, and his posture only shows the mark of a long time spent overweight, no deception or aggression to be seen. His four footed charges may have a lot to do with that, but I react to it all the same.

“Indeed, Master Talon, I have need of extended discourse. Is there somewhere we may adjourn to, where curious ears cannot overhear us?” I ask, for now that I have fulfilled Zelda’s orders to find the place, Impa’s take precedence. He nods and shoos Malon back to her chores, despite her protests that she’s old enough to hear and the Mistress of the Ranch. While the second is true, I would not burden one so young with unpleasantness she need not be made aware of. Her father though, needs to know. He beckons me to follow him back inside, and once we are situated to watch the pace of the two old draft horses and keep it steady I understand. The clacking of the wooden beams of the treading-mill and shuffling of the horses themselves cover any sound quieter than a shout, and the corner is dimly lit. Still, I do not remove my scarf to further hinder any unknown watchers, though I cannot feel any living souls aside from those I can see and the spirits of the land and the dead who are no threat to Royal secrets.

“This is about as private as it gets here, especially in the early spring.” Talon admits, sitting down on a padded chair. Confirming his normal patterns and body language, I pay particular attention to what my restored other-sight is telling me, and begin my interrogation. I have learned more than just the skills of a fledgling warrior this winter.

“Zelda is alive.” I say, and watch as he falls from that chair only to scramble back to his feet, turning the brown eyes common to most Humans on me, for once bright and alert.

“Truly? The Princess is alive? How can you be sure?” The questions flood outward even as his hands grasp for mine. I allow the contact, encouraging him to look at me even as I tap the skin next to my eyes. I am grateful for the noise his machine makes, and the brevity of his gasp as he manages to make the connection between my red irises and the guardian of the Princess, thought to be the last.

“Sheikah.” He breathes, then visibly collects himself before returning to his chair.

“I am a sheik, sent by the Great Lady Impa, to test your loyalty to the rightful ruler of Hyrule and to deal then with you accordingly.” I say once he has made himself comfortable once more, and am pleased when he carries nearly no additional tension through his face or body at the implied threat. It is not subtle, and only one who is a masterful liar or indeed dedicated to Zelda’s reign could afford to brush it off as this man has. How steadfast his following is will be determined with my ensuing queries, but his loyalty to the royal family is nearly certain. The large man visibly swallows, gathering his courage.

“Your test, then.” His voice is as steady as his aura. Either he is a liar of superb skill, or honest as his appearance. I am inclined to believe the latter, and have yet to encounter someone who can fool me, which makes me less inclined to be aggressive in my examination of his intent.

“Lie to me.” I ask, pitching my voice softly and deep from my chest. His pupils dilate and return, giving a visible indication of his shock at the unexpected request. His mouth quirks up at the corner.
“My name is Elise, I’m a bonnie lass of twenty and love the way my kirtle flares when I dance.” He says, and I read far, far more from his aura than he probably realizes. The dark matte and murky coral of a dishonest response flares briefly at the edges of his awareness, but the threads of black become slightly more pervasive, indicating a resurgence of old grief, and the gentle rose of familiar love twines about it. I’ve confirmed what his lies look like, but unintentionally brought up an old hurt.

“She must have been very special to you.” Consoling a man twice my age is difficult, especially with a hurt as old as this one. Prodding the emotional injury will tell me a great deal about his past and present however, and in letting it bleed I may not only come to know if he will stand by the other Loyalists, but be able to heal the injury, smooth the scars. Talon gaps at me for a moment before dropping his eyes to look into the past.

“She was Malon’s mother. I hid both her and Johan during the Civil War. Others too, but Elise was the only woman I’ve ever loved. She died when Malon was two, so there’s not much she remembers.” Talon divulges, and I can see the ache on his spirit smoothing over as I take the emotional energy travelling down the paths of pain and loss and shift them to the fainter trails of peace and joy. I am too late to break the attachments he harbors cleanly and so the scar will always remain, but it no longer pains him so. Had I more time, it need not pain him at all. But time is something none of us have an abundance of, and as he tells me of the love the three of them shared, then the two of them, and finally the promise he made to the mother of the red haired girl whose father was never physically certain I learn of his unwavering loyalties to both family and crown.

The clink of the tiny metal candle weight in the base of the holder signals him to go and ladle the now thoroughly heated milk into boiled bottles from each kettle in rapid succession and I reach for contact with Zelda to tell her what I have learned. The link we share is tenuous and frail, fragile enough to shatter without both of us concentrating and extending to the very edge of our abilities. The strain, I tell myself, is the reason I give her my confidences as quickly as possible and release my end of the stuttering contact immediately after. If I am as completely honest as I demand from those I am to interview as I have the owner of this ranch, then I must allow for the selfish desire secreted away in the bottom of my heart to account for at least a portion of the brevity of my report.

Ever since moving back into Hyrule proper and taking up the mantle of Zelda’s messenger and personal instrument of communication with her people, I have felt my sense of self growing increasingly occluded. I am disappearing under the figure known to the Hyrulean populace as Sheik of the Sheikah. It is how I introduce myself, who the stories spreading hope throughout the land identify, how I galvanize the mounted troops and cavalry in the Keeps and Holdings, reassure the small holders and peasants. It is Sheik that gives Talon a talisman that will give him free passage and sanctuary in Kakariko should he need it, but it is Aein that smiles at the red head with her ear pressed against the door when I leave her father to continue production of the mainstay of this place, and Aein who fishes out a blue and five green rupees for the room above the stable for the night.

My purse growing steadily emptier, I refuse Malon’s offer of both a bath for five rupees and a bottle of Lon Lon milk for ten, having enough coin for either but not both and being at least a day from acquiring more. I can sing for my supper with the caravans and avoid using the tough meal bars that I must also restock once I have the opportunity. Though the funds I have from Zelda, from the crown, are available for my use I still feel uncomfortable using them to purchase anything unexpected or without direct approval. I know that should I make a purchase beyond my anticipated budget that I can reimburse my Lady for immediately she would not object. I also know that she is making a home of her own, away from my house in Derinkuyu, though not far distant.

A week steady of clients at the change of seasons seeking to let go of their attachments to things that no longer served their goals and furthering educations only reaffirmed the desire for her...
own place after Enzo spent three nights and two days giving me my birthing day present. I couldn’t walk by the third day, and he was depleted as well. Zelda spent the next moon blushing and uncomfortable, and three days before I left became a woman fully. Her Seeking started while I was at Krisidi Keep, and finished just before I started out from the Water Temple the first time. I am curious, but the Women’s mysteries are something that I will not intrude upon with uncouth and inappropriate questions.

I could return to Kakariko now that Talon’s loyalties are ascertained, or restock in Derinkuyu, or even begin the next leg of my journey by returning to the Spirit Temple. I choose not to. Instead, I leave my packs in the small room above, and take the time to visit Link. I do not interrupt Torisu’s equestrian lessoning, nor do I linger, only staying long enough to deposit the last of my travel bars on his plate and clean the small space he calls his own. The green tunic and short pants that the Kokiri favor are too small for his growing frame, though their continued presence tells me that no one has had the heart to take the articles and the memories they hold. Sighing, wondering briefly over the littles I sired in Derinkuyu, I have my own relics that require restitution that I really should deal with. It will not be pleasant, but I am confident that I will be able to do it. Just, not today.

Tucking the edges of the blanket neatly under the corners for my young Master to disrupt again this evening, I return from Between to my body and the sounds of shouting. There is no window on the upper level, and so I creep down the stairs of a great rise and run to peer through the window on the ground floor. A contingent of caravan guards stand, weapons at the ready, as a man who can only be Chuki steps forward to deal with an unseen force. Carefully, I ease the door inward and slip into the rapidly gathering crowd. With so many Humans, Hylians, half-breeds and the occasional Gerudo and even rarer Goron, I am easily hidden as I work my way close enough to the gates to see and hear what is happening.

Three full parties hold a rigid formation, mounted on Geru’dó thoroughbred mares, the faint metallic sheen and lean bodies showing their true purpose. These are not mounts of war, but scouts, rangers, designed for speed and endurance over load bearing capabilities. The women seated comfortably in twenty-four matched saddles seem to be ranked according to the color of the clothing they wear. Though I noticed a nearly uniform style among the women in the Geru’dó lands, I didn’t realize the significance of their garb. The three of the four in the front rank wear the white that I am accustomed to seeing, the next two ranks are red, followed by two of purple, and another in the back of green. They all have the twin scimitars of the warrior women, but the second rank of red have bows, and the first rank of purple have wands, and those in green carry needles, daggers, and pouches as well.

The one woman in rich saffron and gold is their spokesperson, and she demands fodder, stabling, and water for their horses, and beds for her women, in the name of the Great and Powerful King Ganondorf.

I am surprised when Chuki bows deeply and asks her to follow him, apologizing for the crude structures and lack of room in the buildings. I keep my gaze on the ground and do my best to be unobtrusive as he leads them through the small street formed of stables and processing, quarters and cucco coops to where the caravans have set up their encampment. I am more surprised by the tents set up there as though they have been waiting. The matched canvas is set in formation, six to a side, with a lean-to stable next to each containing two feed boxes. As the women approach, members of the caravans fill the feed boxes with grain from their own stores and hay from the Ranch’s common bales. Resisting the urge to flee, I follow at a decent distance, too far to hear what is being said, but close enough that I can see the rupee wallets the gold clad Gerud’ó hands Chuki once her women are settled in. The caravan hands clear out of the Geru’do encampment in the middle of the enclosed track and I am forced to do the same or risk exposing myself.
I search for a familiar face to fall in beside, and come up with Vidkun leading his own mount to the side of a set of caravans that must have come in while the Geru’do were being settled. Nerves churning my stomach, I meander to his side and pick up a curry comb to start brushing. His pale green eyes widen at the sight of me, but he says nothing and shows no outward signs of his shock, allowing me to continue helping him groom his horse before the gelding is set to graze with the rest of the ever increasing herd. Casually, he takes my hand in a grip that is anything but gentle and begins a gradual pace towards the main gates of the ranch. I follow, rather than lose my hand to his tugging, and by the time we’ve reached the main thoroughfare he’s relaxed his hold enough for me to regain some feeling in my fingers.

“What’s going on, Vid…” I begin, hissing low, only to be crowded against the sturdy door of the stables and kissed. With far more teeth and biting than I am at all comfortable with, he uses a hand on my jaw to pry my mouth open and fill it with his tongue. His other hand rakes down my chest, groping me roughly through the layers of clothing I wear and squeezing painfully tight. I cry out in protest at the treatment, though the sound is muffled in his mouth, and I fumble for the handle on the door to release the latch and get him to hopefully release me. It works, sort of, and as the pressure at my back goes so does his footing, tangling us both and making me fall hard, cracking my head against the wooden planked floor. My hands go to the injury even as he kicks the door closed behind us, and then his hands join mine in examining the wound.

The hiss of breath alerts me to his proximity, and dazed, I feel the warmth of a rapidly forming bruise, but no other more dangerous injury.

“I’m so sorry, Aein.” He chokes out, kneeling at my side, hands fisted on the floor, not touching me in any way. I’m confused, and hurt, and don’t really care about his reasoning right now.

“Din’s tits, Vidkun, what is wrong with you?” I grumble, wincing in nausea as I sit up too fast and the world swims.

“You can’t be here. If Chuki or the Geru’d do find you they’ll turn you over to Nuriel or Twinrova for questioning. You have to leave. Now.” He reaches for me, and I recoil before I realize I’ve moved. “Please Aein, she’ll kill you for any information on Sheik.” He pleads.

“Why is Chuki helping mandrag Ganondorf?” I can stand, somewhat, with the room moving beneath my feet worse than any frozen platform Chia could construct. “Why do you stay with his company?”

“I can’t leave. I can’t, Aein, love, please.” He whispers, as close to tears as I’ve seen him. “I have family to support and only know one trade. There’s only one company in Hyrule now. The rest…the rest are gone. You shouldn’t be here. Why are you here?” He babbles.

“I wanted to see you.” I admit, and the kiss I receive is much better, though no less forceful. He shifts on top of me after lifting his mouth from mine and grinds his hips down, making me moan softly and squirm beneath him.

“I want you. Here. Now. Can I have you?” He asks, then shakes his head. “No, there’s not time. What am I saying? Goddesses, Aein. You have to go.” His words and his body are telling me very different things, and I believe both. Sucking the truth from his lips and the breath from his lungs, I taste his terror and lust. The combination is strange and I flick my tongue out to taste it again. “Farore.” He groans before visibly steeling himself and pushing up to stand. I take the offered hand that pulls me back to my feet. “Leave, quickly, there’s a town straight north you should get to by dark if you go now.”

“Vidkun, I…” I start and he shakes his head.
“Unless you can vanish like it is said Sheik can, on the songs of the wind, you need to go. There’s a fifty thousand rupee reward for information leading his current location, and seventy-thousand for his corpse. One hundred thousand alive. Everyone knows you know him, and knows you gave me your favor. They’ll assume I’m pumping you for information.”

“I want you to be pumping me.” I whisper harshly, aroused and confused and enjoying the spice of a hint of fear, the rush it gives me.

“Goddesses, to be in you right now.” He kisses me again. “When did you last meet with your Master, in person?” His hands go to the lacings of my trousers.

“Nearly two moons ago.” I admit. It’s easier to go in spirit.

“Damn. Do you know where he is right now, or will be in a week?”

“I was hoping for a different type of pumping.” I grouse, pressing myself on him and the evidence of the fact against his thigh. “But no. I don’t. Ah!” The exclamation slips out before I can stop it as his hand dips beneath the waistband of my loosened trousers and a spit slicked finger presses inside.

“Aein…” Vidkun groans, his breath ghosting over my face as a second finger joins the first. It hurts, and I cry out in pain even as the digits withdraw. Without the increased presence of his hand holding the waistband of my trousers up they fall to my knees even as I’m spun about to stumble and brace myself against the wall. I try to turn, and his hands stop me. On my hips, they hold me steady but the angle is odd and I don’t understand until something warm and wet and not fingers probes at the tight pucker barring entrance to my body. It circles, and then spears me open and I lose track of anything but the feeling of what he is doing, including the volume of the sounds coming from my open mouth.

His hands move, grasping and spreading me apart to get better access and I can feel the distinct sensation of a kiss on my tailbone as I cling to the walls to remain on my feet. With a hand left to steady me, I am aware that he is standing up once more, his other hand guiding himself. The blunt head of his penis presses against me, then slides partially in, rough and harsh and aching and I spread my legs as far apart as my trousers gathered around my knees will let me to ease the motion. It is not easy, he spits once, again, and gains a few more ilms, driving me against the wall where I quiver, hands grasping at the only solid surface they can. If we had oil…

“Ah…tight….” He moans, the sound rumbling from his chest to my back through our clothing. I whimper, hoarse, as he starts to move, and his hands shift again. One strokes me, the other grabs at my hand and interlaces our fingers. The friction pressing me open and holding my hips up as he moves us both leaves me gasping and teary eyed and doing everything I can to meet his thrusts. It’s not long until I wail and lose muscle control, which in turn spurs him on to adding enough moisture inside me that the withdrawal is only an abrasive pull and not a tearing pain. We stand, panting, until he swallows and kisses the back of my neck before tucking me back into my small clothes and tugging my trousers to sit again at my waist. His seed still seeping slowly from me, he pecks me quickly on the lips, smile pained and eyes still fearful.

“I have a few things upstairs.” I tell him, not wanting to attempt the significant rise of the staircase raw and freshly fucked. He retrieves my packs, helps me strap them in place, and hugs me tight.

“Be safe. I’ll distract them for a while.” He says, and slips out the door before I can protest. Not that I could stop him. It’s all I can do not to limp in the four steps to the door. I can’t risk being seen leaving, and though I will not get the chance to see the merchant’s wares, I also will
not jeopardize all Zelda has done through me. The Nocturne is hesitant, but I arrive in the graveyard moments later and pull out Heinric’s ring. Johanna’s ring, really, even though he never had the chance to give it to her. I can do that in his stead, and lay one more piece of his ensorcelled soul to rest.

It has been nearly a full cycle of the seasons since last I found myself passing by the memorial cenotaph to the composer brothers, and am surprised to see what can only be the Poes of the brothers themselves hovering restlessly around their grave. The graveyard is for the living, to honor and remember the lives of those who made the histories that created the world in which we all participate. The Shadow Temple itself is the place for the dead, where they are welcomed and can continue to engage those around them until such a time they feel ready to move on to the Silent Realm before seeking rebirth. As such, in extreme proximity to the Temple, there is no reason for ghosts or Poes to linger in the graveyard.

Jumping down from the platform produces a sudden spike in abraded discomfort and I must breathe a moment before I can greet the two coherently shaped men. The rotund one dips his lantern as I approach, and I bow in return, taking in his appearance as well as mannerisms, trying to figure out what binds him to this place.

“Good afternoon, sir.” I call, and he chuckles, the sound a half step above my own tenor.

“Good afternoon, shiik. What calls you from the Temple on this fine day?” He asks, his pronunciation of my title as telling as the solidification of his baton.

“I could ask the same of you two. I am Tor Aein, of Sahila, come on business in Kakariko with Johanna, mistress of the orphanage.”

“Ah, Johanna, a real darling.” The thin one gushes, twirling in place.

“A lovely lady indeed.” Agrees his portly brother. “I am Sharp, and this if Flat, of the Mu clan. We were assigned to study the Royal Family’s hereditary mystic abilities.”

“The previous Queen’s gifts, did her daughter receive them?” Flat inquires, and I tilt my head, curious at the question.

“I did not know Zelda-hanyana’s mother, she does not speak of her. Zelda herself, though, has tenuous control of powerful precognition, and a frighteningly adaptive mind.” I admit, and the brothers laugh.

“Remarkable luck then.” Sharp twirls.

“Two generations in succession.” Flat spins.

“You are her teacher?” Sharp points his baton in my direction, compelling me to answer, and answer honestly.

“She is my Mistress, I am but an instrument of her will.”

“She hears your voice though?” Flat circles me.

“She does, and takes my words under advisement.” I agree.

“A song then, a gift, to brighten the dark times and cloak the world in night.” Sharp bobs, his baton rising to conduct music that sounds in the stillness without instrument or voice. If nothing else, these two brothers are powerful magicians, to call sound from the air itself.
“The rising sun will eventually set, a newborn’s life will fade. From sun to moon, moon to sun, dance between light and shade.” Flat sings as Sharp guides the accompaniment, three notes appearing in duet over and over. It is those three that I breathe into the small whistle, and watch as in the space of three beats of my heart, the afternoon becomes deep evening. In the moments between glancing at the sky and returning my gaze for the brothers, they have disappeared and the old caretaker of the graveyard is making his way about the perimeter.

“Come back to us, have ye?” He mutters, gap-toothed grin pleased. “The Sun’s Song’s not one them two teach juss anyone. Ganondorf hisself tried to make em tell him, and look how that ended. No, you keep them musical magics close t’yer heart, good boyo.” Dampe says, enforcing his words with smacks of his shovel on the recently overturned earth and telling me why the brothers keep close. They guarded their songs with their lives, and guard them still, even in death. Until the last memory of their music fades, the last notation is destroyed, they will remain to keep their work safe. I have pledged the same, but with Zelda’s life. I will protect her until the last of her children’s children can no longer recall my name. The rest of Dampe’s words baffle me, however.

“Come back?” I had thought I had not moved. There is no way I could have gone anywhere so quickly without using the warp songs or stepping into the Shadow.

“Aye, their songs is like the movement magic of the Temples that shifts a body through time and space, though in this case, there’s no space and is just time. Ye been movin’ through nowhere, but ye be moving all the same.” The old man laughs, sounding far too like the Poes he keeps from causing trouble with the people in the graveyard. I still don’t understand, but I also am weary, and it is dark beyond twilight.

“Ah, thank you.” I manage, and he guides me to the village itself, now populous enough to be called a town, though all the construction and housing that has been built since I last walked these roads is in the walls of the town itself. Much of the debris has been cleared from the roads, and there is no one outside Impa’s house when I knock on the door. There is no one outside at all, though from light and sound spilling from open and shuttered windows, the place is still inhabited and still bustling.

Impa opens the door and simply pulls me inside without a word, sitting me down at a table set for two with a warm meal waiting. I manage to hide my wince from her, still sore and far too pleased with the results of Vidkun’s desires. I sigh, and try not to fidget. Though plain, the simple food is what I need right now, as is the bed she shoves me toward when I try to tell her what has occurred in the last few days.

“It can keep, Aein-ah. You should rest, the ring will be here tomorrow, as will its owner. You won’t be expected to join in tonight, but I must direct those of the Shadow Temple. We’ll talk later.” Impa instructs, her role as Sage of Shadow and General of the Loyalist Resistance buried but not forgotten in her efficient movements and softened orders. I obey, and watch as she takes up a large sword that probably weighs as much as I do, straps on her boots securely, and closes the door to her home. The protective magics seal the place as securely as stone walls, and the soft breathing of the cow on the floor beneath me lulls me to my rest as peacefully as I could wish. It’s still dark out when I wake to explosions echoing and the ground shaking beneath the entire house.
The Shattered Trust

Chapter Summary

The Heat fades slowly, the Light extinguished, hope of solace fades with the dawn.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter - theurgy, minor gore, despair, cultural differences, emotional awareness, world building (hopefully not too boring).

Rolling to my feet I don’t bother taking the time to find my boots before jumping the short distance to the ground level and bolting out the door. The deep of night is rent with bright flashes far enough distant that I am not entirely dazzled, but close enough that the concussive blasts of air are harsh against my skin. Castletown is awash in flames, but Kakariko seems whole, and my heart leaps up to my throat when I remember the kind old priest in the Temple of Time. The Sage of Light, of all the Sages, did not require me to pass the trials of his Temple before allowing me to learn its Song. Before I can hesitate and think of all the reasons it would be a bad idea, I’ve played the Prelude of Light and can feel the foundations shuddering even as an explosion does blind me and rock the building hard enough to knock me off my feet. I fall well at least, rolling as Yoru taught me and Hahron reinforced with both repetition and a stick when needed. In this chamber, the thick stone walls muffle the noise somewhat, but I still can’t hear the words I see tumbling from Rauru’s lips as he prays, or casts his spell. For those whose gifts lie in theurgy, there is no difference.

He notices my entrance into his space, dismisses me as inconsequential, and returns the entirety of his focus to the task at hand. I am relieved when the tremors of the ground moderate and the shaking of the Temple walls subsides. Had I not just experienced this very sensation, I would not be able to tell what type of magic the Sage is calling forth. The odd sense of displacement and rush of breathlessness is still novel, but becoming familiar the more I am exposed to it. His strength is far beyond mine, and instead of just moving himself to the next nexus point of brother moon, the entire Temple and all within its walls are encased in his spell. I can see the other Sage’s power coming to sustain him, bolster him when he would falter, support him when he would falter in a glittering spectrum of rainbow light and energy. He is tied to them as only a Sage can be. I am not, and the disorientation is nauseating enough that I’m glad my stomach seems to have been left behind. Or maybe it’s the rest of me that’s not present. Either way, staying down and clinging to the smooth stone tiles until it’s over seems to be the best plan.

I’m not sure when I realize everything is still and calm once more, not certain how long it takes me to test the ground I lay on, the air I breathe, and the kinesthetic sense I have of all my parts in relation to each other. I wiggle my toes, flex my fingers, and lick dry lips before determining that it will probably be okay to move. A low moan from a few yalms away spurs me upward and, when that doesn’t result in collapse despite my exhaustion and vertigo, I manage the dozen and some steps to Rauru’s side. The Sage of Light lies prone before the altar holding the three slowly rotating suseko that are the keys to the Sacred Realm.
That would mean that the gateway to the Sacred Realm is present in the very room I stand in, that I have been in, that I know perhaps as well as Sharu’s workplace. Familiar, but not to an exacting standard. By the Goddesses, great spirits, ancestors, and descendants yet unborn. Thousands of my people were sent to a fate worse than death for seeking this place, tens of thousands exiled to the surrounding land. I have walked across this floor casually, ignorant and arrogant for it. Sweet Nayru…

I suppose it makes a certain amount of sense. This is the nexus point of all the magic contained in the land of Hylia’s descent, the place anchoring the Chamber of the Sages who are the guardians of that magic. It is the resting place of Anak Silar, the dais of Rian Liahr, and near the home of the royal family whose scion bears Wisdom. Such sacred grounds, hosting holy relics…I can only pray the weakness of my shaking knees and stuttering heart is accounted for and forgiven.

Rauru groans again, and I ignore the trembling of my soul in order to return my attention to the older man, checking his pulse, breathing, and channels as quickly as I can. He is exhausted, drained, starting to show signs of starvation, and dehydrated. His pulse, like mine, is thready and faster than it should be. His breath is raspy, harsh and shallow. He is too heavy for me to move effectively, the dense muscle of a warrior sitting solid beneath the roundness of age. I must leave him where he lies and stumble through the public portions of the Temple and outside, seeking a direction, only to retreat and close the door as quickly as possible without making a noise with my heart in my throat. Dozens of ReDead lie in wait, restlessly shuffling in the streets, protected by the thick cloud cover mixed with ash. The air smells as though it is burning. Anything outside will be soiled, unusable, even if I could make my way past so many of the dishonored dead.

Returning to the prone figure of the Sage of Light, I crouch next to him and wish my needles weren’t sitting uselessly in Impa’s house in Kakariko, that my magic was enough to accomplish what I can see needs to be done. Without my tools I cannot prod him to consciousness effectively, my fingers far too blunt to be at all precise, but I am running out of options that will result in both of us staying alive and Zelda and Link staying safe. Taking his head in both my hands and resting it on my lap, I stimulate the top four vortexes and steady the bottom three, giving him the strength to return to consciousness and the direction and will to do so. It is inelegant, as clumsy as my first stitches in scrap hide, but it works and I am pleased to see his dark brown eyes are clear and alert when they open.

“Tor Aein, son of Ren Amai and Tor Mela, shiik of Sahila Village, Eldin province, of the Shaekha’ri Federation. Zelda’s Voice, Impa’s Choice, Sincerity of the Sisters, and now Bearer of Light.” Rauru names me, and I startle and lose my concentration in guiding him back to consciousness. He flinches as the headache I was preventing takes hold, but sits up under his own power anyway. “I do hope I was not out long.” He murmurs, shooting me a look that is impossible to misinterpret.

“No, your Radience. You were out for less than a quarter mark.” I think. Unless I passed out as well, then I have no idea how long either of us were gone. The sheer volume of magic at work conceals the natural light that might cover the Temple of Time more thoroughly than any cloud cover could hope, swirling and glittering as though thousands of fairies dance and leaving me without a means to discern any more accurately than the rhythms of breath and heart.

“Good. Technically we’ve been without food or water for three days, so if you would be so kind as to help an old man, both may be had in my quarters across the vestibule.” Rauru manages, but cannot make his feet alone. I am in much better shape than he is, and with his considerable effort, may act as a crutch until I can lean him against the wall next to his doorway. The stone structure steadies him even as he draws on the strength of the warding he has built over the years to replenish himself. That pull by their caster weakens them enough that I can enter without reprisal,
and within moments I have oriented myself to his space. By the time he has managed to seat himself on the bench next to the doorway I have some sort of heavy sweetened small loaf loaded with dried fruit and a goblet of water in his hands. He sips, careful not to make himself ill, and insists I do the same.

Once the water touches my lips it’s difficult to not gulp down my fill, but if I have learned anything in the land of the Goddesses, it is that I should listen to the masters of their craft for they know far better than I do. So I sip, and nibble, and sip again, refilling both my mug and his goblet from a pump in the small kitchen. His space is slightly smaller than my home in Derinkuyu, and many times smaller than my work space in Sahila. I see no signs of his work as either priest or Sage here and must assume that he conducts his business in the Temple itself. There is also very little in the way of storage, which strikes me as unusual. He does not have much regarding material possessions, but there is a veritable treasure of riches in the form of books and scrolls in the small personal library. Hundreds of books, stacked scrolls in racks as tall as I am, and a clean oil burning lantern encased in glass to keep the delicate palimpsest and parchment from damage.

“Thank you, young shiik, for your assistance this day.” Rauru inclines his head in a short bow as I take his empty cup to be cleaned.

“It is my honor, Sage of Light.” I bow fully, properly and much deeper as is appropriate, before cleaning both vessels and finding the cupboard they belong in. He rests, breathing deeply and slowly, recovering from the effort of bending time for such a large area and incredible length of time. Despite the small meal, the restorative absorption of the wards, and the help that I can give him, it is all he can manage to make it to his bed before falling into such a deep slumber I fear for his health. He is feverish within moments, hot to the touch and sweating and eliminating any benefit from the small amount of water he managed to drink beforehand. Despite my best efforts, he will not wake to take in more fluid, and I prop him up to keep him from choking and spoon water into his mouth. Most of it runs out, but not all, and in my search for pillows or cushions to hold him up I found linens enough to make cool compresses for his balding pate, chest, and rounded stomach. His vestments are soaked with sweat, sodden to the touch, so I do not hesitate to apply the compresses directly.

I did not close his chamber door, and can see into the echoingly empty space of the Temple. The glimmer of the Kokiri Emerald, Zora Sapphire, and Goron Ruby send ribbons of pure toned light to reflect off the stone walls. Rauru’s magic gleams, pure and bright everywhere I look. Slowly, the heat his body is producing falls as his channels adjust to the expenditure of more power than I have ever witnessed. Slowly, I adjust to the stillness of an empty Temple in an empty city. It grows darker into what I must assume is night, and I find myself dozing when he stirs. My hands are steady as I help him sit, watch him find his balance, take the compresses from his skin. He is warm, but no longer dangerously feverish.

Helping himself to the water now the ambient temperature I placed next to his bedside he groans and rests his head in his hands. Taking that as my cue, I stand and help him to the privy, turning my back to give him as much privacy as can be afforded. If he has the fluid to need the trip, he is not as badly off as I thought. The fact that I don’t feel any similar need despite having drunk much more than he did also tells me much, and I make sure to sip at another mug full as I watch him fall asleep again, his fever still burning low, but unlikely to return to dangerously hot. I am not certain when I fall asleep myself, only that I am sore and hungry and it is as bright as it ever gets with the constant cloud cover out the small window. Rauru’s bed is empty, the covering in disarray, and it is easy to track him out the door and to the small kitchen where he sits, panting at the simple exertion of remaining upright.

“I don’t suppose you have any blue potion on you?” He rasps, his tone resigned. In my
thin nightshift, barefoot and with my hair loosely braided only enough to keep it out of my face, it is fairly obvious that I have next to nothing on my person. His grimace at the shaking of my head is expected. “There is a medicine shop in the market square west of the Temple, facing the well and immediately to the south upon coming to the main thoroughfare.” He tells me in seven breaths and three long pauses, the effort enough to have him visibly sweating again. I fill his cup, help him back to the privy and then to bed, and wish for more resources. The Goddesses don’t appear with a doctor, medicine, clothing and food in a swirl of sparkling light, but seeing as they never have before it isn’t all that surprising. Their interference only occurs when there is no other recourse, and so I have the ability and resources available to me to acquire all these things. At least, the medicine shop should have some, and the Market the rest, as long as I supply the effort.

It just means I must make my way past the streets filled with ReDeads. Watching their patterns from the safety of the Temple roof, it quickly becomes apparent that they only move after heat sources and motion from anything aside from their own kind. Small animals, a swaying branch, the remains of a devastating fire all draw them in. What they do to a small collared dog is particularly gruesome, but leaves little mess on the cobbled road itself and draws dozens from the nearby streets to clean up even that. Instinctive behavior, nothing resembling thought, and hopefully avoidable. Provided there is nothing with more active intelligence, I should be able to bypass most of them on my way to the clearly visible Market. As soon as I can stop staring at the spire of a foreboding circular castle tower, floating over a pit of molten hot rock, I’ll be on my way.

Goddesses. I do believe that I would have noticed such a massive, unnatural structure in the middle of the capital city before this. I have never been outside of the Temple, but I have looked down on the clearly visible location from Kakariko and the trails of Death Mountain numerous times. Malevolent dark magic gushes forth from the crown of the tower’s spire in an arc of nauseating vileness, and I dare not get any closer if just the sight of it alone is enough to make me recoil as though I’ve been struck. The structure lies in the opposite direction from where I wish to go, and with a shudder of revulsion I turn my back on the Dark King’s stronghold. The Sage of Light needs medicine from the shop just around the corner, and the only other mobile beings are not exactly inclined to fetch it for him, were they capable of understanding the concept to begin with.

Slipping into the Shadow is as easy as breathing. Through a small tube. Underwater. With your hands tied behind your back. Fortunately, I’ve had a lot of practice, and the motion is smooth and sure and jumps me down the cobbled street in a series of bounds broken only where the shade of the sides of the buildings and the eaves troughs don’t quite meet. The ReDead notice me between movements when I have to take a step or three to get to the next patch, but they are slow and lack the ability to anticipate, making it simple for me to disappear before they can react. Their howls chill my bones, but leave my muscles free to move. The only thing that truly gives me pause is the stench. Breathing shallowly through my mouth does little to mute the putrid odors of rotting flesh, stagnant sewage, charred masonry, and burned homes. I breathe as little as possible to try and mitigate some of the foul scent, and the still air helps make certain I do not actually have to taste any of it, but my eyes see, and cannot be closed against the sight.

The fires that must have burned here during the original coup left far more than the recent fires, which in places have reduced even brick to ash. The ground is warm with them, the air thick, though they no longer give off any light outside of that beyond even my eyes. The residual heat is making me sweat, and the ashes of a thousand dead cling to my skin. The Temple stands a proud edifice amid fallen stone and shattered glass, the market lies solitary and empty with the echoes of life so thick as to be nearly visible to almost anyone. To me, to anyone who has the eyes to see, the square is filled with colors and motion. A girl chases a cucco, a matron walks her dog, vendors hawk their wares and a couple dance by one of the many fountains peppering the paths. I recognize Johanna.
She was beautiful. She is beautiful, but so very different from the young woman barely more than a girl gliding before me. The man with her must be Heinrich. The ghostly memory of their time spent here is filled with joy and love and life. The hand that clamps down on my shoulder possesses none of these qualities, and the ReDead shrieks in pain and triumph as it closes in for the kill. Having seen how a Stalfo is bound to service and having the memory close to the surface of my thoughts, I have shattered those same bonds faster than I could draw a knife. The ReDead moans in relief as I disintegrate the foul curse holding it animated, the magic taking physical form and leaving a residue of tortured spirit both thick and murky on my hand, as though I had dipped my fingers in drying blood. It may actually be drying blood, for the hand I pry loose leaving red rakes on my skin that will bruise spectacularly later has not completely desiccated. Freshly dead, then. I gag, curse my inattention to my present situation, and step into the Shadow once more.

The potion shop is a small front for business with a narrow hall leading to a lab Granny Germana would approve of. Where looters ransacked the front, few bothered to come so far into strange territory, and there are signs that production was stopped in a hurry. Storage racks filled with glass bottles have fallen and shattered, the containers cracked with the heat, their stoppers destroyed, and the contents boiled over. I must watch where I step carefully, for the shards could easily pierce into the tougher skin of my feet. There is no uncompromised potion of any type, though a dark paste in the bottom of a handful of the whole bottles should be blue potion. Highly concentrated, possibly poisonous, potentially contaminated and definitely dangerous, it is my best hope. Of the seven viable bottles, I can manage five and my whistle, bypassing the rest of the market. Anything else, food, liquid, clothing, will have to wait for when I have more time and am feeling well, or at least better. There is water in the Temple, and I fill one of the bottles to the point where the liquid would sit for sale before stopping the neck with my thumb and swirl the lot to mix and hopefully reconstitute the potion.

Shivering in the warmth of Rauru’s private chambers, I know I must hurry, and that restoring the potion to its proper viscosity takes time and patience. The color appears to be correct, though there is still a great deal of residue on the bottom when I lift my thumb from the opening to test the results. Small particles stay suspended throughout my sampling, too tiny to taste, but I get the full brunt of the proper flavor and gag even as I feel the potion start acting. Wishing I could inhale my tongue, the restorative effects surge through my system quickly, though they are not as strong as the same potion in Derinkuyu, Kakariko, or by the lake. I must assume the effects of the dilution from repeated mixing and a solid base are the cause, but when no illness results, feed the rest of the bottle to the Sage. He shudders, gags, and would have spit the potion out were it not for the hand I use to hold his mouth closed. After the first swallow, he manages the rest without incident, and I set to restoring a second portion immediately.

The older man is revived enough that he can meander to the large basin and pump cool water to splash over his head and face, scrubbing away the recent sweat and much of his fatigue. Dark circles beneath his eyes shrink, and the swelling goes down, but he is still far from well. The second potion restores him enough that it is his turn to care for me as my failing energy seeps out of me to fuel the spells he set in motion. I can See them surrounding me, holding the Temple steady, even as the outside world changes drastically and quickly, making my head spin and my Sight blur.

“Aein-shiiik. You must leave this place.” He murmurs to me.

“Who will care for you should I go? The Temple is surrounded, you are ill, and there is no other living soul within a day’s journey, let alone within calling distance, to help.” I retort. He smiles in the face of my foul temper.

“These things are all true. Still. You must go. The Spirit Temple has fallen, and unless you leave me here to pull the Temple of Time from full integration with the rest of the world, it too
will be consumed.” He grimaces, then continues, oblivious to my shocked horror. “Nabooru has hidden the power of the Spirit Temple in her memories, and locked them away for the Hero to retrieve. The Dark One shall not triumph, but I will not have your needless death on my conscience. Go, Aein-shiik. When you are safely clear of this place, I will pull it Between Time. Only the rightful bearer of a Sacred Relic will be able to set foot in this space without being lost.”

“…how?” I ask, my voice small and tremulous in the quiet of the Temple.

“I intend to sing my spells, I am as Hylian as the Queen, and we have always dealt with the Goddesses’ will through sound.” He smiles softly, his baritone rich and soothing. I shake my head.

“That’s not what I meant. How did the Spirit Temple fall? The Lady Nabooru is…” I pause, trying to find words without giving offence. “…driven, passionate about her calling. She is so strong.” Stronger than at least two of the other Sages. If Ganondorf has claimed her portion, there is no way those two could stand against him. Impa herself would be hard pressed.

“Her body has long been under the ministrations of two Generals, and Ganondorf hails from the desert. He knows the Temple as well as any Gerudo, better even, for in seeking the Triforce he would have sought the Spirit of the Goddess of the Sand to aid his ambitions. I do not know the specifics, only that the Spirit Medallion has ascended in the Chamber of Sages, beyond the reach of mortals. Only a fully awakened Sage can call it down.” Rauru informs me as I stare through him, not seeing the aging Sage or the Temple he guards, but rather the boy I have not attended to in months, cut off from all he has known to face a fate that his elders cannot, and his contemporaries created. Alone.

“He will have to awaken the Sage, as well as defeat the Dark King?” I whisper my question to the unkind Goddess of Fate. This is too cruel.

“Most likely all the Sages, and cleanse the Temples too.” Rauru answers me in Her stead, and it is all I can do to bow my head in submission and attempt to hide the tears of frustration and sympathy. They are worse than useless, not even providing a hint of emotional release, and the strain of holding the Temple in three places is showing once more on Rauru’s posture. I dash the minimal moisture from my face, resolving myself to doing all I can to aid the kara bi koya upon his awakening. I am useless to him as I am now, and under the burden of Zelda’s possession I cannot risk myself without endangering her. I must have faith in the Triune and their avatars, in that they will give me Courage to act when the time is right and the Wisdom to follow the best path for the benefit of all. That the Power to see my duty through will be there.

.:Come home, Aein-ah:. Zelda urges me, the welcome in her disembodied mental voice warm and soothing.

.:Return to us:. Impa’s voice, muted through Zelda’s hearing and mental translation, echoes through the soul-bond we share.

“Go, Tor Aein. The Temple of Light shall be the Hero’s first step back to this world. We’ll see each other again.” Rauru encourages, and begins to intone a series of notes that echo and reverberate through the Temple structure, a wordless chant that builds as each tone is added to the last and does not fade with repetition. I can feel it as the distinction between the physical building, the spiritual purpose, and the magical structure is broken apart, the first remaining in the center of a destroyed Castletown while the other two become eternal by virtue of giving that temporal stability up.

I am left standing in the middle of an abandoned chapel as the wind’s howling is joined by
the low moans of hundreds of ReDead steadily approaching the thick wooden doors. If this is where Link is to emerge from Between when he is capable of wielding the Blade of Evil’s Bane, doing so amidst such gut-roiling atavistic terrors as the animated remains of the people of a city is beyond even the cruelest of fortunes. I am weary, but still have three blue potions and the warping whistle. I can make his return safer, a manageable horror, instead of leaving him to beyond impossible odds.

The heat of my body alone is enough to call them.

They come first in ones and twos, shuffling slowly and shrieking their suffering to the unaffected sky grown dark with ash and earth. Then in threes and fours. Then tens. Dozens. I cannot hope to tear apart the magical ties that hold them to an animated non-life, nor begin to break the bonds that purpose them to destruction and death. There are simply too many of them. The motion and heat that call them are mine, but I can avoid the paralysis their cries induce, and their shrieks slough off of me as easily as water from a well-groomed duck. Still, I wait. They gather. Out of reach of the tallest, but not once they realize they can walk on each other, I collect what magic remains to me in my hands and condense it. My core chills, and I know I will be sick for days once I am done, but it must be done or the Hero will not have the chance he needs. I remember this. I have walked down this path in my dreams. Still.

The now incandescent ball of life and heat wobbles at first, but travels well as soon as there is solid ground beneath it, heading towards where the Castle once stood. Where a pool of molten rock awaits. Heat and motion. The release of bound spirits is dizzying as they walk from solid ground into the roiling lava, leaving so little behind the lot wouldn’t fill the empty bottle of blue potion with ash. Twice more then. The Temple clear, I travel through Shadow to the Market Square for the next calling, perching myself on the roof of a shop purportedly selling masks to let them gather. And they do. They follow the full heat and motion of an adult down the cobbled road towards the Tower as surely as the last mass did, and I take the time to rummage through some of the shops and homes in the immediate area for supplies. The fire seems to have been confined to the eastern quarter, for though some shops are scorched, those on the western edge of the Market are simply warped with the residual heat. It leaves locked doors open, and some free hanging doors swollen shut.

I have house slippers, only slightly too big, a few bottles of medicine, a chest full of rupees, and preserved foodstuffs when the first wailing groan sounds. Bundling the lot as best I can in a canvas tent awning, I haul it up to the rooftop and kick over the ladder that gave me access as the ReDead begin amassing in the street below. With the sun low on the horizon, I send the last of them off towards their captor’s stronghold where their remains will be destroyed and the enchantments on the physical part at least broken. The damage done to their souls will be the work of many cycles if they do not move on to the Silent Realm as they should, and I know the Shadow Temple will be flooded with new arrivals and as busy as if an actual battle had taken place.

Cold, tired, weary beyond both and more than a little heart-sick, I know should I go to Kakariko that I will put myself to work aiding those I have just sent there and that I do not have the personal resources to do so. Derinkuyu will be much the same, though the work awaiting me there is a type I am less apt at, and therefore less efficient. The Water Temple’s structure is beyond me, and chill besides. The Forest Temple empty of all but ghosts and a sealed Sage. There is no song for the Ranch, and though I know I would find at least some welcome there I do not know it to be safe. The Spirit Temple is corrupted, but the thought of the desert’s warmth is appealing.

It is my turn to let out a low, breathy moan as I lift the whistle to my parched, dry lips and breathe my intent to sound the Bolero that will take me to warmth and longtime allies with my people. The platform itself is made of the same smooth stone that the other five are, but where they are cool this one is radiantly warm. I should remove myself immediately, but I’m exhausted to the
point where I can’t control my own temperature and the heat of the entrance to the Fire Temple is soothing. I rest long enough to be sure of my footing over the rope and petrified wood bridges that span the gaps between stone pillars, and leave the canvas bundle to the side. Nothing inside will spoil for a little heat, and I haven’t the strength to carry it with me.

There is someone in the Sage’s chambers when I stagger up to the stone doorway, and I know that whoever it is, they outrank me by virtue of their private audience with the Big Boss of the Gorons. The stone is warm, and right now that’s all I really need. I slump against the wall on the wrong side of the stone lattice that partitions Darunia’s space off from the Temple entrance, and before the tone of the conversation reaches my ears I am asleep. Having used my magic and life energy to the extent I have, it is not a natural sleep, and I do not dream.

When I wake, it is to the amused violet eyes of a red haired woman dressed in nothing but greenery. The walls shimmer with Wisdom’s magic, and the white marble tile beneath me has a golden Triforce worked into the stone itself. The sheer size of the woman becomes as apparent as the fact she is a servant of the Three the moment she ceases floating near the ceiling and settles on the edge of a large fountain with an inhuman laugh. Her voice, like the voice of my geas, surrounds me instead of coming from within, and is impossible to mistake for anything else.

:"I am the Great Fairy of Wisdom. I shall grant you a boon. Receive it now! When your trials have made you weary, please come back to see me:." She requests, and with the surge of serenity that fills me and my health and magic both restored and extended, I bow deeply to the Fairy who serves the Goddess.

“My gratitude for the boon, Great Fairy. Would you allow me to present you with a song?” Nothing is free. I have done nothing to deserve the aid she has given me, nor the boon she bestowed. Not everything tallies in rupees, however. A gift for a gift, given freely of each of our talents. As I am, once more barefoot and having only the clothes on my back and my body, there is little else I can offer. At her nod, I breathe deeply and sing to her Cantor’s Calling followed by Oath of the Sky, as the first leads into the second in the their cycle of history-songs and I find myself not ready to stop when the coda of the first arrives. She closes her eyes to listen, and I am treated to the flames on either side of her shallow dais flickering with the beat, the magic of the walls swaying to the melody.

It has been far too long since I sang for no other reason than the joy of it, longer still since I had an audience of any kind, and yet it is so very easy. The rest of the cycle is beyond my range, and so I start into a silly children’s song about a sheep and how much grass it eats, following it with a round that echoes through the Fairy Fountain much the same way Rauru’s voice filled the Temple of Time before he banished me, allowing me to actually sing with myself. When the Great Fairy notices she twists the air to repeat the measure, and I know what I sound like in chorus. Laughing, I try a complex carol that normally needs at least six voices, preferably eight, and with her magic the full chorus rings through the fountain in perfect harmony.

I end up singing myself hoarse, and receive a second healing as thanks before making my way back to the Fire Temple. My canvas makeshift sack is gone from the warp platform, and Darunia’s rooms are silent and abandoned, the massive stone door next to impossible for me to move. I manage to squeeze myself through only losing a little skin in the process, and emerge from the Big Boss’ space into the heart of the Goron City. The night guard circles relentlessly as I make my way upward to the guesting rooms near the top level, closer to the sun and plants and other potential food sources. The Goron diet is hard on Human, Hylian, and Shaekha’ri stomachs, and I must assume the same for the other races as well. Stepping to the side out of the path of the second level’s rolling guard I am surprised when he stops his patrol to stand and greet me by name.
“Tor Aein-sheik, Big Brother Darunia requests an audience in the morning. Your items are in the guest room on the east side by the center of the second fence with the bomb flower directly above.” He rumbles, the sound deep and soothing. Hearing a Goron speak is comforting to me, despite the fact that he is obviously a warrior and nearly twice my height. One of my first teachers was nearly the same coloring, and though I was too young to remember much of anything from that time, I do remember feeling safe and content in his care. Right now, safe and content seems to be quite appealing. Following his instructions, I find the canvas sheet with the meagre amount of loot I managed to gather waiting for me next to the torch just inside the doorway of my assigned room.

Like all Goron architecture that I am accustomed to, there is no door to the space, only a doorway and a banner hung to denote occupancy. It is a little more than a smoothly carved square space with a second, smaller room for sand just out of sight of the door. The torch outside provides more than enough light for me to see that a number of things have been added to the space purely for my benefit. A rug much like the one gracing the floor of Darunia’s chambers is folded over on itself twice, making a sleeping pad that if not high from the ground, does provide a decent cushion from the hard stone of the floor. The rug itself is worn and shaggy for it as the threads loosen themselves from the weave, which adds to the softness rather than detracting from it. A basin filled with clear water is accompanied by a small cloth and the pitcher next to it is chilled and filled with more of the same.

I wash up, drink, and eat some of the leather-tough jerky nearly unidentifiable because of the heat of the fires. I cannot tell what it was, only that once I crack through the outer crust it disintegrates on my tongue. The boon of the Fairy has me too alert and feeling far too active to actually sleep, though it is clearly well into the night, and so I sit on the makeshift bed and send my mind out to keep my body still and not disturb the sleeping city around me. It has been moonturns since I last visited Link as anything more than a spirit, and longer still since I found the way without aid. It is not something I care to risk, given that the entirety of a Temple now resides in the same place. I do not want to move down and out and find myself encased in solid rock.

Instead, I take the time to do something that I should do much more often, and simply still my mind. Let go of active thought first, passive second, find the place of potential that every intelligent being carries within them and simply let myself be. From there, it is not far to find the seeds of compassion, patience, and joy deep inside me, and spend some time reacquainting myself with them. Pruning anger, hatred, and fear comes next, gathering the energy from them and feeding it back into the traits I wish to strengthen.

It is not sleep, per se, nor is it precisely an activity, it requires active pursuit to maintain but cannot be sought, only found. The serenity the Great Fairy granted me adds to the experience, and by the time a different guard summons me to Darunia’s chambers I have found my balance again and go to greet him from a place of great calm and openness. He sits before the entrance to the Fire Temple, low grumbles emerging from his chest every few moments as he mulls over whatever thoughts have preoccupied him while I was being brought to him. So lost in thought, he does not immediately acknowledge my presence, and I have not been given permission to sit, so I stand far enough inside the room that outsiders cannot see, but not so far as to intrude on his personal space.

He has a lot of space. Not the largest Goron I have ever met, he is still more than impressive, the jagged outcroppings on his head resembling a thick beard and the broad width of his shoulders showing he is no stranger to hard work. Having heard his voice in the Chamber of Sages and again occasionally after through Zelda’s mental filters, it still surprises me when he uses it.

“Morning, Sheik. You’ve been busy since last we spoke.” He greets me.

“Yes, your Prominence.” I concur, for much has happened since last we had contact.
Much has happened in the last turn, let alone the last six.

“I have reason to speak with your Mistress, if she is available, regarding the recent changes in the local power structure.” The Big Brother of the Gorons says, and I am smart enough to read between the lines of his phrasing and caution. Spirit and Light have sealed themselves away, their Sages unable to attend their posts. I send a mental call for Zelda, even as I push down my own worry. This is one conversation I will linger over, should it be possible.

:What is it Aein-ah?: Zelda asks in response to my request for her attendance, and I get the impression of exhaustion from sleepless nights, weariness born of worry, and the beginnings of physical illness from the fever that arises with the use of too much magic in too short a time.

:The Sage of Fire wishes to speak with you hanyana, if possible, regarding the Sealing of the Sage of Spirit and the Withdrawal of the Sage of Light.: I try to keep my mental voice as steady and soothing as possible, an instinctive need to protect my Lady from all I can surging to the fore. She is as much a child as Farore’s Chosen, together they do not make up the age of the bearer of the last third of the Triforce.

:Bother. I suppose the Chamber of Sages is not as secure as it once was. Can you carry me now, Aein-ah?: Zelda muses, and I get the distinct impression that I was not the intended recipient of her words. We are even closer in spirit than normal, but I do not wonder at the cause.

:I would not have called you otherwise.: I return, and relax my hold on my physical form until my personality is less than a ghost of memories trailing behind the changes of the living. Removed as I am, it is always fascinating to me to watch as Zelda’s possession takes hold. My lax form fills with direction and purpose not my own, color returns to pale skin and then pushes past what tone I am normally capable of into a dark, even tan the color of caramel. My hair, regularly an ashen brown, bleaches blond in the light of my Mistress’ occupation. I sit straighter, and with a worldly authority I do not have. Though my eyes remain the tone of freshly spilled blood, the being behind their intelligence is foreign and strange.

When Zelda speaks, even the formidable Sage of Fire listens. Between them, they discuss options and actions, planning and countering for the innumerable potential futures that could come to pass. The Great Lady Impa arrives within the hour, spearing my spirit with a glance of purest stoicism that hides a deep and unabiding worry. The invitation there is impossible to refuse, and I know I will be stopping in Kakariko afterward, any personal business I have there secondary to the needs of the Sage. I nod, and with the Sage of Shadow’s insight the conversation turns to outlining the actions to be taken immediately, soon, and later.

I am thankful that I know the Songs, for otherwise I would be running myself ragged just getting to where I will need to be. As it is, I will be short on sleep, but not badly enough off that it will impair my ability to do what is asked of me. Three voices refrain and agree on a series of most probables, highly likelies, and not impossible but next to its. I listen and consider, chasing thought patterns and physical limits to their inevitable conclusions, and by the time all the circles have been run all three Sages are looking wane and pale. Unsure if she can hear me, I gesture my intent to the Lady Impa even as I voice my suggestion to my Mistress.

By the time I’ve regained feeling in my fingertips, Darunia has a basket full of scoria before him, and Impa and I each have a small loaf and grilled vegetables with a tektite joint apiece. Spiced butter compliments the meal, and a light and fragrant tea is nearly as restorative as the food. Sharing a meal, even if the meal itself is not actually shared, draws people closer together. By the time the last pebbles are being brushed from Big Brother’s lap Impa is mopping the last of the butter with the last of the bread and I sip my tea, more than content to let my overly rich meal digest and my
company relax. The settling and shifting of Darunia happens long before the physical signs of tension release appear in the leader of my people, and so I attend to him first.

Mimicking his motions, though not in the same order, I make a veritable show of relaxation Goron style to Impa’s amused perspective. While my current efforts are not directed specifically at her, they will have an effect. Subtle and slow is as effective as blatant and swift, usually more so, as the person is unlikely to tense and outright reject the effort. The rumbling of the leader of the Gorons in Hyrule calms in time, and he sighs.

“Ironic that the decisions affecting the whole realm are easier to make than dealing with an individual’s problems.” He grouses, and I make an encouraging groan in response. It’s not the same sound that comes from a Goron, but it is as close as my throat can achieve. It is enough, though. “My son will be born in the coming days, and I haven’t a name for the child yet.” He explains.

“A child of Big Brother must be named appropriately.” I say, though it is true for all children regardless of who their parents are. Amongst the Shaekha’ri, should a child be dissatisfied with their name, upon reaching adulthood they are allowed to change it to one more suitable. I do not know if the same can be said for the Gorons, but given Impa’s nod at my words, I assume not. A name is a powerful thing, and one that I am beginning to understand can be bestowed as well as claimed. I still think of myself as Tor Aein, but to so many I am Sheik. Both are accurate, and as I continue to grow into my potentials, I hope to acquire more names to match my expanding repertoire of skills.

“My family line is descended from the Hero of the Gorons, and my name, my Father’s name, my Papa’s name, my Grandfathers’ names, all reflect that. Even my brother, had he lived, would have a name in the heroic tradition. Darbus, Darmani, Dangoro, Dariso, Danbusi. Yet none of these names have the verve, the power, that a true hero needs.” Darunia laments, his fist crashing into the solid stone floor and leaving a dent large enough for Niakara to comfortably stretch out in. I wince, but fortunately the large Sage does not notice.

“Is there anyone you look up to?” I ask. “As an example of a particular trait you wish your son to inherit?” My own parents named us after the virtues we exhibited as our first year passed. I did nothing by half measures, and did not attempt the manipulations that infants are wont to do for attention and affection. Yoru chased after anything that caught his attention, and did everything he could to attain his goals, be they songs or food or comfort. Sincerity, ambition. What qualities does Darunia want for his son?

“I want him to be a good leader, kind, strong, stern, but tempered with compassion. Adaptable, and unafraid.” Darunia admits, his violet eyes closing as he thinks of his child’s future.

“Would not Golo Cor Trem be an example of adaptability? Or Kargon a leader for him to aspire to, to emulate?” Both Gorons feature prominently in the ancient history stories, from the time of the descent, that my people pass on from generation to generation.

“Golo was more of an explorer than even the most travelled of us would wish to be. Kargon the elder was indeed a leader to be admired, as was Kargon the younger, both of whom died early, painful deaths. I would not wish their fate on anyone.” Darunia reminds me, and I nod. Neither of the Kargons fared well, in the end. Now that I am thinking of it, very few heroes live to see much of what their heroics wrought.

“Must the name come from a Goron?” Impa asks, and I blink in surprise even as Darunia’s jaw drops.

“It...traditionally, we...I...we’ve always...” He stutters, and I can’t help but grin.
Perhaps…

“The names of sworn brothers have also been used, have they not?” Impa points out.

“Tarakin Cor Gorko was named after Dar Akima, sworn brother to his papa, and a Shaekha’ri of great renown.”

“That’s true.” Darunia grins, and the expression makes him look as young as he truly is. Not that 107 is youthful by most standards, but by Goron lifespans he is just entering full adulthood, very much like myself. “Ha! That’s very true indeed!” He laughs, slapping his thighs in mirth. I am glad I am not in range of those hammers he calls hands, for that type of joviality would break bones.

“Have you a sworn brother?” I ask when he has calmed from a roar to a rumble.

“I do indeed! A hero to us Gorons, though he’s Hylian. Gave him the Spiritual Stone of Fire to seal our bond!” Darunia dances in place as he recounts the tale, adding details which in hindsight gather all of our troubles into one big basket, through no fault whatsoever of the young hero.

“He sounds very brave.” I offer, pondering how that bravery has led my charge to a sleep lasting as many cycles as he has over.

“I’ll name him Link! Link of the Gorons!” Darunia crows, moving remarkably quickly for someone so large and catching me up in a hug, sweeping me completely off my feet and squeezing hard enough to bruise, so he is being quite delicate, honestly. Before I can get my balance or breath back, he’s done the same to Impa, and the expression on her face is enough to set me giggling. As Darunia rushes off to wherever it is his partner is incubating their offspring, calling his joy for all to hear and naming his son before he is truly of this world, Impa coughs and grins wryly.

“I believe our business here is concluded, Aein-shiik.” She says in Shaekha’ri, the soft syllables soothing after moons of nothing but Hyrulean and encounters with the other race’s languages. The Zora’s trills, squeals, and clicks require mechanical aid to reproduce, and tools haven’t the range or tone variation to make them meaningful. The Kokiri’s rustles, whooshes, ticks and natters sound like so much babbling to me. The Goron’s rumbles, groans, and roars are rhythmic enough that I can get a sense of what is a word and what is more, but not enough to distinguish. The Gerudo’s hierarchy is beyond my meagre understanding, and so I do not try, for I know I will only succeed in giving offense. The Humans seem to be able to pick up bits and pieces of all of it, throw it together, and it’s just close enough to everything I know and understand to be complete gibberish. I shake myself from my musings and bow my head to the Shadow Sage.

“That seems to be the case, Impa-yana. You have need of me?” I reply in the same, earning a small smile from my Mistress’ guardian.

“Not a need, but your presence would help a great deal. I believe you also have an errand in Kakariko that should have been attended to long ago.”

“I am only five turns overdue.” I blush, knowing that this task should have been taken care of before I went to winter out in Derinkuyu. I simply did not have the courage. I’m not sure if I do now. I am certain that what few aspects of Heinrich’s affection for Johanna which seeped into the weaving of my spirit have fled, so that much will not hinder me. I do still have the ring, and I have run out of excuses. Pulling on the compassion I spent last night strengthening, I steel myself, send a prayer to the Trine, and allow the physical contact that is necessary for Impa to pull me with her to her place of power. I can tell the moment my feet touch the cool stone of the warp pad at the back of the Graveyard, before the cool white light fades from my vision, that the magic of this place is different, and I have not been gone overly long. Not really, not for such a drastic change to occur.
Casting about to find the source of the discrepancy between my memories and my current experiences, or at least some sort of focal point for my disquiet, I am drawn inexorably towards the well. The well that supplies most of the water for not only the people and the livestock in Kakariko, but irrigates the surrounding terraced fields. There is a churning miasma clouding the life that a village of this size should have, thick and dark and spewing forth not only from the well but the ground surrounding it also. The sign proclaiming that it is dark, narrow, and scary has never seemed more appropriate.

“The spirit is restless. It senses the wanton destruction of war, the people living in fear, and feeds on their terror and pain.” Impa says, laying a gentle hand over my shoulder to forcibly turn my gaze from the mist of evil seeping into the very source of life for all the villagers here. “I sealed it over a dozen years ago, but I cannot destroy it, and it grows stronger with each day Ganondorf holds Power.”

“How powerful is it, to be leaking around such a seal?” I whisper, appalled.

“Strong enough that you needn’t concern yourself over it. It is a matter for Sages and those beyond.” Impa’s brisk tones brook no argument, though I see the meaning behind her words. This too, may be something that Zelda or Link has to take care of before Ganondorf can turn it to his purposes. “Now, as fetching as you are barefoot, in your nightclothes, and with your hair unbound, perhaps it would be wise for you to attend the baths at the inn. I will bring your working clothes there.”

The though terrifies me, and I stumble in my paces. Fortunately, the Sage of Shadow has already turned towards her home where my pack and at least three changes of clothing wait. She does not see me falter, and with the streets deserted at the odd hour and the smells of cooking wafting through the air, I am very much alone.

.:Never completely.: Zelda sends along with a surge of affection, and I relax enough to make my way towards the small inn. Impa is right. If the spirit in the well is strong enough to be obvious even to my eyes despite her best warding under stone and flowing water, it is too much for me to hope to take on and survive. I need a bath. My feet hurt, my clothes smell, and my hair may need to be cut away from my head it is so knotted and snarled. The scent of other people’s meals sends my stomach growling, and I am a sorry sight indeed by the time I open the door to the common room of the inn in Kakariko that also serves as a pub. Hopefully I can find the proprietor and request a bath before too many notice my presence.

“Sheik! Goddess, man, what happened to you?” Conrad asks before I can open the door, just coming off his shift at the gate and still in uniform. I try not to fidget, and for the most part succeed, though my feet ache something fierce.

“I have just returned from Castletown, and am in desperate need of a bath.” I admit, hoping that my words will keep him from detaining me from my task.

“What in the flames of eternal enmity happened there?” He asks, alert and focused as he was relaxed and curious a moment ago. I am out of luck, it appears.

“Mandrag Ganondorf decided to remodel the Castle after a spire of malice, and burn as much of the city as he could in the process.” I grumble, then grunt as his arm goes about my shoulders and he drags me through the doorway.
“Everyone listen up!” He bellows, and a good two dozen heads swivel to stare at us, or more accurately, glare at the source of the noise then take in my bedraggled and slovenly appearance. I can feel my face heat under the scrutiny and wish for shoes as the cool stone floor chills my swollen feet to a different type of ache. “Sheik’s been to Castletown and can tell us what the mess was six days ago.” He says, unintentionally telling me how long I have been gone, dressed in my night clothes and nothing else. No wonder I feel as though my skin is crawling with dirt. It very may well be.

Better than that the ashes of the dead. I shudder under Conrad’s grasp.

“Conrad. Tailorsson.” Though much quieter than the gate guard’s shouting, the effect on the patrons of her bar is instantaneous as Valyarie storms over to us and growls in his face. Silence so thick it is nearly visible descends. “What in Hylia’s name do ye think ye’re doing? Can’t you see the boy’s run right off his feet?!” He can talk AFTER he’s had a bath and a meal and at least one good night’s sleep. Nothing he knows will tell us more than the Great Lady Impa has already told us, and he’s probably to report to her first, y’ken? What’de do, see him and grab him off the street?! Men! Pah!” Valyarie throws her hands up at her husband’s failings, then cocks her head and frowns at me.

“Mistress, he…” I begin, trying to keep him out of further trouble with his spouse by informing her of my instructions to seek a bath, but her frown turns to a glare that mutes me.

“Oh shush boy.” She says, her posture changing to one not at all hostile towards me.

“I’m not…” I begin, and her hand snaps out faster than I can follow to rest on my lips.

“Oh, yer a boy alright. Ye’ve got to have at least twenty summers beneath yer belt afore ye’re a man in my books, and I know ye’re lackin’. Not by much, true, but enough.” She nods, confirming her own words without any input on my part. “Now, take yerself off to the baths. I’ll have a meal brought in, and when ye’re done wit that you go to the loft room and sleep. Yer news’ll keep ’til th’morn.” She instructs, slipping a key into my hand and sliding me out from under her husband’s grasp to shove me towards the back of the inn where the baths are kept warm and ready from the same ovens that heat the building and cook the pub’s food. The door closes firmly behind me, and I know better than to return to the main hall.

The cedar wood that lines the walls and the thick clay tile on the floors hold four deep tubs that can be partitioned off with cloth screens, and I am pleased to note only one other patron present and hidden by the fabric privacy curtain. Soap, towels, brushes and razors fill small baskets by the door, and I take one up and move to fill the bath furthest from the other tub with as warm a water as I can stand. While not as hot as the springs on Snow Peak, the water is still next to scalding, and I strip and scrub until my skin is pink with the effort, replacing the water each time. I can detect no trace of the riled spirit I saw in the water itself, and am relieved. My facial hair is simple to tidy, my hair, not so much. The water from the fourth filling of the bath grows cold by the time I manage to work enough of the snarls and tangling out to run my fingers through it, and my arms are tired. I am tired.

A robe with the inn’s crest covers me and I carry my soiled night clothes in the basket to be washed later and find my room. The key bears the primary of a cucco, and I snort at the feather, amused by the assuredly unintentional pun, and match it to the carved feather decorating the third door on the right at the top of the stairs. It appears Impa has come and gone, for my clothes for when I am to work intimately with the dead await me, as well as a soft nightshirt fully long enough to cover me from shoulder to knee. A meal sits, still softly steaming beneath the covers, of a thick stew and fresh small loaf. I grimace at the mug of potion, but am pleased by the jug filled with watered
wine. The fire has been banked, though the sun has yet to set, and by the time I finish my meal I am ready for bed.

Valyarie is right. My news can wait. There is nothing the villagers can do about Castletown now except rebuild the ReDead population. If Impa had required me to report immediately, she would have stayed while I ate. Johanna’s ring is safe, and that too, can wait for tomorrow. While my confirmation of the Loyalists present in the other areas of Hyrule awaits, Kakariko is filled with them. I am as safe here as my brother and his partner are in Derinkuyu, as safe as my Mistress is amongst the last of the Shaekha’ri that can still call the lands where Hylia descended home. I sleep, content for the first time in nearly a quarter turning, unaware that the safety I trust in is no more than an elaborate illusion.
For three rupees Valyarie’s sister Erys brings me a boiled sausage and millet porridge to break my fast, though it is closer to noon than dawn when I finally rise, and shortly after by the time I set out towards the orphanage on my way to the Temple. This close to the stronghold of Shadow, my magic is singing in my veins and my senses are primed and vibrant. Dressed for the most physically laborious part of my job, I leave the mask to protect me from the toxic emissions that a corpse can release looped loose around my neck. My path skirts the central well, and the rancor that feeds the monster there is enough to sear my skin, but I do not let it linger and scrub at my arms with my hands even though the sensation is entirely spiritual. I detour from the path to the graveyard leading to the Temple long enough to drop in to the empty orphanage and deposit the tarnished ring on Johanna’s bedside table.

Cowardice, perhaps, but I cannot linger and haven’t the time to seek her out. Best to let the children she is raising enjoy their day. The guards in the inn last night are on duty now, and so I have no trouble with being detained as I head up the shallow rises leading to the resting place of the dead. The headstones bearing the inscriptions of the familial names of generations mark both Hylian and Human graves, while the columbarium holds the ashes of the Shaekha’ri who once lived here. The royal mausoleum at the back on the highest level holds the composer brothers as well as the bones of most of the royal family, though I suspect no one will know what happened to Zelda’s father after he was murdered. His ghost is not a Poe, nor did it travel through the Shadow Temple. None of us are foolish enough to believe he is still alive.

Before the mausoleum lies the corpse of the old Gravekeeper. I know, from his ghost hovering near-by and looking distinctly solid, that he has been dead for some time, and careful examination of his body proves it. It has passed through the stages of stiffening and softened once more, making it difficult to move. His ghost is less of an effort to mobilize, very coherent and lacking many of the attachments that may hold him to this plane already. Not surprising, really, for though he is fully Human he has spent his life working in conjunction with the Shadow Temple. His methods may be crude, but they are well meaning and serve their purpose in sending spirits where they belong. Spending his life at the juncture, his awareness is strong on both sides of the divide. Of all, his ghost is one that would not linger or need assistance in passing on, so there is a reason behind his presence.

“What keeps you, Dampe-eh?” I ask, leaving his body where it lays. The chill air will
keep rot from setting for as long as I will be gone, and his stooped spine makes certain that I will need help in carrying it to be cared for properly. Even as hunched as decades of digging had made him, he was still taller than I am. Now that his ghost hovers, it is worse, and I must crane my neck upwards to see into his cinnamon brown eyes.

“Walk wit’ me, shiik.” The spirit of the elderly grave keeper bobs, and both Sharp and Flat return to their interrupted rest. Now that I can comfort and serve the dead man, there is no need for them to linger.

He leads me to the catacombs beneath the headstones and through a pair of guardian sacred flames burning without fuel and glowing violet with the energy of the Shadow. If nothing else, that this place remains untouched despite the gathered hatred and rage of both the Shadow Temple’s tasked duty and the monster beneath the well gives me comfort. Instead of heading further into the newer areas of the catacombs that lead towards the Temple however, he takes me through a winding path that ends at the apex of a circular pit with a narrow ledge that reminds me far too much of the journey to Derinkuyu for me to be at all at ease. Though the space he stops in is spacious and the ceiling high, the claustrophobia from my journey through the caves to Derinkuyu sings through my nerves and makes me wish to see the sky.

The warm orange flames lighting the space tell me that though this area of the city of the dead is ancient and filled with the whispers of my ancestors, there are enough living souls moving through that the standing torches are maintained regularly. The dead do not need light to see, and those with the Shadow in their blood can See, which means Hylian and Human visitors come often.

“I saw Her here.” Dampe sighs, and for a moment I am confused until I see the jet black feather he holds. Not only is it far too large to have come from any known corvid, it is far too solid in the spectral grasp of the old grave keeper to be anything but a token from Hylia’s half-sister and Mistress of the Dead.

“Her blessing’s upon you.” I breathe, the barbs of the feather ruffling with my exhalation as they do not from Dampe’s speech.

“I’m t’ challenge ‘im for my treasure when he returns. The trial of my own choosing, the reward Hers.” The spirit moans, his form wavering and revealing a strange contraption lying just off the central platform. I drop down and pick it up, noting the metal is of a similar sheen to that of my whistle. It is remarkably light for the potential power it holds, and I turn it around in my hands, careful not to cut myself on the sharp edge of the head or compress the trigger on the butt as I do. There is exposed chain of more of the same material coiled about the core and I cannot figure out the tool’s purpose simply holding it.

“It’s a hookshot.” Dampe explains as I examine the textures of the coiled links and get no closer to ascertaining its purpose. “Ye kin use it t’ bring things closer to ye, or anchor it far away and pull ye across the gap. It let me git from one end of the graveyard right quick t’ keep the villagers from causing the Poes too much trouble, or make the Poes take a nap. I don’t needs it anyhow, but She said that the Hero of Time will. Make certain sure he comes here for’t.” He asks me, his final wish, and I cannot refuse. That is what he needs to move on, and so that is what he shall have.

“It will take a while.” I warn.

“Six years, She said.” He nods. “I kin wait. The wife’s safe in th’ Realm, and I’ve got used ta missin’ her. Been a decade there’bout, nother six years won’t kill me.” He laughs, the sound verging on the cackle of a Poe but not as crisp or regretful. He will stay a ghost, then.

“What did, if you don’t mind me asking?” I place the hookshot on the raised platform and
draw deeply on my magic to call up one of the best illusions I can, concealing the tool intended for the Hero from every sense but those of the dead. No living person left in Hyrule will be able to find it, though Dampe will be able to pull it from the illusion easily. The effort leaves me panting, but the tool will stay there until resusangeul bi aiyuu completes the challenge the old man will set to him. The magic throbs, powerful and solid and bright enough to cause pain in my Sight, and I need to turn away once it is done, but it is done. I stumble the six steps to the doorway and wonder where the stairway leads, for that method seems to be much simpler than the convoluted route the ghost took me through. Outside of the graveyard proper, that much I am certain of, though not exactly where. We should be above ground, but the space is solidly enclosed.

“Bury me next to my wife, would ye?” The ghost whispers, but has dissipated to a temporary rest by the time I turn to face him. My question then must remain unanswered, at least for now. Rather than risk getting lost or being unable to leave, I return through the same path Dampe lead me on but turn down the descending path after the first set of Shadow torches instead of heading back to the graveyard itself. The Temple should be close by, and if my internal sense of direction has been accurately honed by a nearly a year of my manhood journey followed immediately by just over a year of wandering Hyrule without map or sun or stars to guide, then I am close.

It is certainly much easier than navigating the Lost Woods.

Less than a quarter mark later I find myself emerging in the uppermost level of the Shadow Temple’s archives. A statue of the Carrion Crow looms large and foreboding in each corner, keeping an unblinking eye on everything in the room. I know better than to assume that each formed piece is inhabited by a spirit, but I also know that it would be foolish not to act as though they were. Here, in this room, are the memories of generations. Stone eyes and crystal spheres filled with the experiences of every Shaekha’ri, Hylian, Human, Goron, Gerudo, and Zora willing to share their perspectives. There are even a few Kokiri, known to have passed from this world, given with the blessing of their Protector. The Deku Tree’s knowings as well, fill the small section dedicated to the hundreds of little gods that keep the Three’s creation safe.

Though as one of the last living shiik within the Shadow Temple I have every right to be in here, as an individual, particularly a Shaekha’ri individual, the space makes me exceedingly uncomfortable. We were created to watch, to guard…not horde and deny. Here is where the one who instigated my people’s shame began. Surrounded by the memories of ages forgotten and left to obscurity leaves me barely holding back my gorge. Too much truth may drive me mad. Even on invitation from the Sage to attend her in her place of power, I cannot leave the physical presence of Hyrule’s bloody history of greed and hatred fast enough. Perhaps one day, when I am a stronger person, I will be able to return and delve into the records and remembrances, but not today. Impa is waiting somewhere within, and I should attend as soon as possible.

My quick pace discourages conversation as I enter the living quarters and active areas of the subterranean stronghold, and I start as a digit of wallmasters scurries overhead. The destruction of their habitat has all but wiped the species out, and from the coloring on the dark blue-grey father carrying the smallest of their offspring I see signs of crossbreeding with the more hardy floormasters. Their resemblance to severed hands is superficial at best, the joints placed wrong and the muscles designed for locomotion not at all related to the musculature required of a single limb attached to a body. The ridges on their exoskeleton are the last vestigial trait they share with their aquatic cousins, the starfish. Fortunately for my purposes, they are much, much more intelligent and capable of being domesticated.

Last year’s clutch scuttles along behind, still half the size of the mature set, and I have to assume from the intent with which they move that it is feeding time. Not knowing where Impa is, but knowing what I do of wallmasters, I follow. This Temple must be a sanctuary for them, shaded
from the sun, cool yet fresh flowing air, hard surfaces to move easily on much like a natural cave, and dead flesh to feed upon. The closer I get, the more the scent of putrefaction tells me that not only is my guess that the digit is on the way to a meal is correct, but that Impa would be the one to feed them is well founded. I can think of a number of reasons that the Sage of Shadow would find the creatures useful, and the best way to train them is always by the same person delivering both instruction, reward, and if needed, punishment.

“Aein-shiik, come give me a hand, would you?” Impa asks, holding what appears to be a mallet and awl as the wallmasters settle over their portion of the dismembered dodongo carcasses. The stench makes my eyes water and I pull up the mask around my neck before lifting the hindquarters of the next rotting heap of meat. Poisonous to most, this is why there have been many making the effort to preserve the species. There is nothing dead the wallmasters cannot consume. Poisons, scales, teeth, acids, hallucinogens, magic enhancements, and any other nasty hunting or defence mechanism any species has, doesn’t matter. They eat it all. The only thing that their stomach cannot process is fresh, living flesh. They’re wonderful cleaners, and really very affectionate.

I have three that seem to want to follow me everywhere by the time the feeding is done, reminding me forcibly of Niakara’s initial efforts to claim me as hers. I only need the help of one, though, and entice her with the methane sack from the last of the dodongo carcasses to help me move Dampe’s corpse. It is not hard to find his wife’s grave, close to the small shack in which he lived and painstakingly tended. Digging is more difficult, though with the late afternoon sun shining bright and the wallmaster seeking shade, once I’ve made it past the topsoil I have help. It is an effort to get her not to eat the body, but again the Sage of this place comes through and has a solution in the form of a positively rancid and gangrenous limb from either a goat or a sheep. I cannot tell, it has decayed that far. My assistant however, seems overjoyed as she rushes back to the safety of the Temple proper, leaving me with a mound of dirt to replace now that Dampe’s body lies next to the bones of his wife.

“A remembrance of his life is being arranged for in two days’ time.” Impa tells me in my mother tongue as I begin the task of putting all the dirt back. “If there is anything you wish to add, tell me now.” She encourages.

“Because I will not be here.” I infer, pausing in my lifting long enough to look at the only other member of my race, the only one left here who speaks my language fluently, and the only one who knows, truly, what it is I am in all of Hyrule proper.

“You will not be here. In fact, you were never here.” She nods, her severe expression emphasizing the order. No wonder none of the guards on duty so much as looked in my direction. No wonder the orphanage was cleared out at naptime. If there is no one looking, no one there…then they can honestly say they didn’t see me. Only the dead know, and they do not speak to those under the banner of the usurper king.

“I must leave directions for the one that is to come.” I inform her. How to guarantee the young hero comes to challenge Dampe’s ghost for a tool that I must trust the Goddesses deem necessary for his trials is a puzzle, for if I was never here, I cannot leave verbal directions with the townsfolk. Any sign must be so subtle as to be overlooked by the patrols of Gerudo lead traitors that scour the landscape for any trace of my Mistress and those who support her.

“You cannot enter the town proper, I have the graveyard hidden, but the patrol will search it soon.” Impa’s eyes dart to the entrance to the graveyard carved into the very face of the mountain, and I can see the shimmering of a powerful visual illusion guarding it. The patrol of Gerudo women and a handful of humans is also clearly visible. I swallow, hard.
I will return when I have a better idea of how to do so, the Poes can explain if needed before then.” I inform the Sage of Shadow, and pull out the whistle. The illusion does not cover sound, the patterning of it isn’t dense enough for that, and the Gerudo have better hearing than the Shaekha’ri in the first place. They may have already heard us.

“Go.” The word is hissed, the shovel taken from the lax fingers of my off hand. I let the notes and all my will take me to the one place I can truly call safe in all of my reach, and pray that there is a reasonable explanation for Impa to give the patrols.

The Temple of Nayru in Derinkuyu is nearly deserted when I arrive, but for a petite blonde young Hylian woman in a sky blue dalmatic with elaborately embroidered clavi over her working clothes. It matches the color of her eyes, and I bow deeply before the Avatar of my chosen Goddess. The Temple itself has been cleaned and decorated since last I visited, fresh flowers and newly made draperies covering both the altar and the small scribe’s table where a heap of scrolls and books lie opened and recently moved, for the topmost is still warm to the touch when I pick it up. Glancing at the contents I smile softly, and am rewarded with Zelda’s soft chuckle.

“Not everything has to be boring old tomes and study, does it?” She laughs. No longer the laugh of a child. She has grown remarkably…but is still so very young. I close the fanciful love story and replace it on the pile.

“No, not everything. Please tell me you aren’t learning anything from this drivel.” I mock plead, and am graced with another honest smile.

“Oh, Aein-shiik. Yonder Knight, your honoured brother most muscle bound, hath pleaded with mine humble self, paragon of beauty and wisdom, to summon you thusly. The Lady Keiko hath most recently borne a healthy infant boy.” She lilts, and it takes a moment to sink in, but then I am scooping her up in my arms and twirling her about in my joy. Keiko’s pregnancy has been hard since the second trimester, that the child is healthy is cause for celebration.

“Mistress of my Heart, Lady second only to the Goddesses themselves, I beseech thee, tell me all that you know.” What’s his name? Where are my brother, his partner, and my nephew? I ask, continuing the charade of mannerism that poorly plotted and historically inaccurate fiction writers favor.

“Ancient Sohna of the stern brow and guiding hand was called yesterday to the home of the happy couple to bequeath upon the child a name suitable for his person.” Zelda confirms, moving to one of the chests near the altar for the dusk face of the Goddess and pulling out an indigo scapular. I follow her about the small Temple’s three rooms as she gathers a lantern, incense, and an alb of soft cotton bleached ivory white.

“Zelda-hanyana, please.” I whine, for her acquisitions have been made in utter silence.

“Put on the robes, Aein-shiik. Though your work is that of Mokara’s, your devotion lies in Wisdom, not boundaries.” My Queen instructs, and I obey. The lantern is lit by the time I’ve removed my soiled tunic and trousers and replaced them with the loose robes of the priesthood. A bath would have been prudent, but I can wash myself and the clothing later. Zelda hands me a cone of the sandalwood incense and I offer it on behalf of my nephew next to the dried violets and wisteria. So Yoru and Keiko have both been here already. Probably earlier today, in fact.

“The birth was hard, but both mother and child are healthy. Yoru-eh is doting on both of them. Danpe-eh has been named surrogate should Yoru-eh fail, and Hana-eh will suckle him should Keiko-eh be unable to, though Innah-eh is the surrogate.” Zelda’s convoluted Hyrulean falls away to Shaekha’ri once the offering is complete, and for a moment my heart pangs that I was not called
upon to raise the boy should anything happen to Yoru. It’s a foolish thought, and I shove it aside to look at the issue objectively rather than emotionally. Danpe and Innah are of similar social status and hold similar jobs to both Yoru and Keiko. They have a child only a few turns older, and are friends rather than simply friendly. It is a good choice. Not that I want anything to happen to my brother and sister-by-choice, but better to plan for it than be taken unprepared.

“It is a wise decision.” I concur, nodding slightly and watching as the building’s memories of people go about their business. Not solid enough to even appear as proper spirits, the wisps of light dance and shimmer in a way that could be mistaken for dust motes in the sun beams, but the sun is too low on the horizon and the Temple too clean.

“Ren Insu-ah has invited his uncle to lunch tomorrow, if you will attend.” Zelda finally, finally satisfying my curiosity, and I approve of the choice of name. Though difficult to tell before a child speaks, that Sohna saw joy in my brother’s child gives me the same feeling myself.

“Provided I am not required elsewhere, I would enjoy that very much.” Even though Insu-ah is still in the loud and messy and not much else stage, I’ve had some practise holding new infants now and know I won’t drop him, even if he decides that I am a surface that needs messing.

“Have you anything to report?” The woman-child before me shifts posture and takes up the mantle of authority too large for her small shoulders with the ease of familiarity. In this, her mental voice is the same. She is Queen.

“I have recently come to know through reliable sources that the Hero will awaken in around six years.” I begin. By the time I have given witness to the circumstances surrounding how I came to know this with such certainty, Impa has arrived and corroborated my tale insofar as she is capable. The sun has also set, and the fire in the brazier gone out. I’m tired, hungry, and more than willing to go to my bed.

The trek from the Temple to my home is a little less than half the distance between Temple and warp platform, and takes a quarter of the time to complete. The roadway has at least had a semblance of care taken for it, and the surrounding courtyard was large enough that any collapsing structures around the property still left a clear path. So late in the day, though, the area of the city still inhabited would appear just as deserted were it not for the lights visible in the windows of homes where residents are retiring for the night. My own home on the edge is still sealed up against the elements as I left it. There is nothing there to eat, all perishable goods having gone to people and places that could use them before they spoiled or rotted through, but there is a warm, purring cat waiting on my bed and the precognition of both mine and my Mistress’ Goddess has left a fire stoked and at least three hours old in the oven. I am warm, and will be clean as soon as I wake, and that makes the comfortable bedding an effective aid to sleep.

The alb from the Temple is wrinkled beyond redemption without some serious laundering when I rise late in the morning, though I had the foresight to remove the scapular and fold it before seeking my blankets. My own clothing is pungent even from across the room, and my small clothes need a cleaning almost as much as I do. That would place them somewhere between desperately and immediately, and I take them with me to the tub to clean after I take care of myself. The lid on the ceramic vessel is a light balsam lined with just enough cedar to scent the air as I start filling it with the chill water available since the fire in my oven went out while I slept and I don’t want to wait a moment longer than I absolutely have to. I’ve heated enough bathwater with my magic that I know exactly how hot I like it and how much energy needs to go into the spell to get it to that point.

The first rinse is in half a tub full of lukewarm water, enough to soap myself down and loosen the majority of the dirt left from digging Dampe’s grave. The second is to wash away the
soap and start on my hair. The third I feel clean again, and so the fourth time I let the water reach just below scalding and pile my hair in a loose knot on the top of my head, filling the tub to the brim and soaking in the temperate liquid. Fully intending to remain until chilled, my plans are spoiled by the loud complaint from my stomach and the soft thrumming purr of Niakara as she discovers where her pillow has gone and curls up on the sloughed off alb I dropped on the floor, burying her face in the folds of fabric marked with my scent.

My gut demanding attention now that I’m warm and clean, I linger in the water long enough to leech every last bit of warmth possible, but do not re-heat the water or wait beyond the point that I can no longer feel its heat seeping into my bones. Letting the water drain and the now damp but clean clothing to dry, I slide into the soft cotton robe nominally left for guests and clients and have a swipe of moisture lifted from my legs even as fine short cat hair is left in return. It is too chill to linger in the halls, and clean, dry clothing waits for me back in the bedchamber. I dress just in time for Zelda to arrive, her mental summons to my door delivered with the same courteousness as a patient knock would be.

Dressed in loose pants and tunic, eschewing anything more for the moment, I open the door for my Goddess’ avatar who is burdened with small flatcakes smeared in a thick fruit compote to break my fast. The food is appreciated, as are the updates on life in Derinkuyu during my absence. While the birth of my nephew is still foremost in my mind, the knowledge that the children I sired are prospering is good to have. News and breakfast delivered, she also brings instructions no longer couched as suggestions or requests. As her servant, I will obey, and agree to the task with a handful of clarifying questions.

At least this way I will be able to see Insu regularly, and I have enough time to prepare a small gift before I am due at the house that has recently come to hold three. With some of the fabric stores left from my ransacking of the Forest Temple, there is a soft, plush woven hemp that is soft and supple which I size, trim, and hem in just under an hour once Zelda takes her leave. I will see her again either this evening or the next, and again every evening until my task is completed. Forty-eight stones, no larger than half my smallest finger, for two necklaces and twelve brackets that will give Zelda not only the freedom to traverse Hyrule proper, but hide from all malevolent forces at will. She will take the day, I the night, and under the watchful eyes of sister sun and brother moon, she will be safe.

Not that Derinkuyu isn’t safe. Of all the lands where Hylia brought Skyloft to the surface, Derinkuyu is the safest place furthest from the Triforce of Power claimed by a madman. Safety, however, is relative. Until Link can take up the Master Sword and drive the Oath of Demise from the land, the rightful Queen’s exile under the Eyes of the Guardians will simply be not as dangerous, but never truly safe. It is a matter of degrees, never an absolute.

My gift for Insu complete, I fold the fabric into a neat bundle and meander towards Keiko and Yoru’s house close to the western-most edge of the occupied city. Though I dwell alone, the nature of my occupation allows me a similarly sized dwelling to the one my brother and his partner have. Limestone covered walls have a number of the supportive beams in mahogany stained wood adding accent lines, and Yoru has planted sprigs of sage in the boxes beneath the two large windows facing the street and the southern sun. The scent of them is welcoming, as is the scent of steaming rice and stewing spicy cabbage soup. Yoru himself is tired, his muscles fatigued as he draws me into a one armed hug in greeting moments after I announce my presence.

“Ah, hannuhn, well come.” He murmurs, dark circles beneath his wine eyes dulled by exhaustion and I curse my short-sightedness. He and Keiko both have no blood relations here, no one to help with the daily work of a household and a new infant to care for. To think just over a year previous I was infuriated at the treatment Johanna was receiving from those around her, and I have
done worse still through my inability to recall my familial obligations. Apparently, despite precocious intelligence and a driving purpose I could not have named until recently, I can be as smart as a box of hair.

“Sit down Yoru-ah, before you fall over.” My chiding comes out harsher than it should, my disappointment with myself colouring my tone. It is a mark of his weariness that Yoru simply obeys on the first cushion of the double seat as I toe off my walking shoes instead of snarking back a retort at my presumptions. I cover him with the small blanket I brought for his son and check on the food, letting the rice sit to steam even as I add more water to the soup and scoop the froth from the top of its gentle boil. There are dishes waiting to be cleaned, a bucket full of hot water for the task set next to the deep basin and a cleaning cloth folded neatly close by, and I set to.

I should have been the one to do it in the first place, taking care of the small things that become large while Insu’s parents take care of him. Impaz would have been Keiko’s midwife, but there are none of the Ren clan left in Derinkuyu, and those Tor that remain are so distant that they may as well be Dar, leaving Yoru alone as well. I have been remiss, and am shamed for it. I should have thought of it before Hylia’s legacy was called to remind me of my duty.

My little brother is sleeping soundly by the time I have the dishes cleaned, and I will not wake him until the food is ready to be eaten, not just served. That means gathering his partner and their child. The bedroom is furthest from the street, and smells of old sweat and tired bodies. Keiko is awake, though Insu sleeps deeply enough that he does not wake when I lift him from his mother’s side.

“There is rice.” I offer, and am pleased when she can stand under her own power. She is still recovering from the birth, will be for some time yet, but is definitely on the way to full health. It would be better still if I changed the bedding and aired the room out, and so as she eats I tie Insu close to my back where he can feel the beat of my heart as I first gather Yoru to eat as well, then go about changing the bedclothes and sweeping the floor of the bedroom. Taking the old linen out, I am contented to see my brother leading Keiko back to bed and curling around her as they both drop off for a much needed nap.

By the time Insu wakes wanting to nurse, neither my brother nor sister-by-choice are as wane and pale, and the kitchen is as clean as the bedding drying on the line behind their home. There is still much to be done, but my nephew needs to eat to grow strong and healthy, and so I return him to his parents before heading to the markets. I have been gone long enough that my own stores are nonexistent, and so I need not just a basket, but a small back-sack to carry all my purchases. When I return my family is sleeping still, though the sun has begun a noticeable descent, and so I simply go about cooking a meal rather than ask for preferences. I know Yoru well enough to be certain, and understand enough to help Keiko regain her strength, but flavor and texture are a matter of preference and not need.

The fresh, young vegetables available call for simple preparation, and if the old cucco is small and tough, a long stewing makes shredding the meat both possible and preferable. Flour, water, oil, and I have a thick stack of small round flatbread to wrap around both. I leave the starch to stay warm in a tureen and allow the peppers and herbs in the minced vegetables and fruit to meld flavor while I go about cleaning the largest room. The sun is truly setting when I wake first Yoru, then Keiko whose stirring rouses Insu into squalling. His cloth needs changing, and while Keiko performs the task I set the meal out as attractively as I can manage. The evening is spent both arranging for the immediate future and I regale the adults with tales of my forays into Hyrule proper, and with discussion of the next few months. By the time my eyes are heavy, both of my hosts are ready for bed. Insu still needs to be fed every few hours, which means interrupted sleep for all, but now that I am back for the season the tasks of every day can be spread over three instead of two.
I return to my own home to bathe, pet Niakara thoroughly, and bundle up clothes and tools for the next few days. My bedding is soft and blankets warm, the Picori that tend to the place in my absence satisfied, and the spirits of the shiik’s residence in alignment once more. I sleep deeply and without any dreams of note. Waking mid-morning feeling recovered and rejuvenated for the extra rest, I take up my pack and Niakara and return to Keiko’s. Breakfast is oatmeal and dried apple, cinnamon and cloves, ginseng and ginger blended into the lot to restore energy levels. I draw a bath for Keiko while she eats and Yoru tends to Insu’s soiled cloth, eating my own portion while my younger brother plays cushion to his infant son, and then cleaning up after the adults. Though my own journey was interrupted, Yoru’s return to Sahila marked the completion of his manhood trials, and the letters waiting on the workbench in his home tells me that it was agreed upon by the elders that I too, should be counted among those capable of making their own choices and accepting the consequences of their actions.

I am a man, truly and fully. Enzo’s dogs make marvellous messengers, and the second letter tells me why he himself will not be running circuit this year. The new year’s gathering brought a ranger to his home village and the letter he sent says they will be bonded the turn before high summer begins. I send Bap off with a scratch and a quarter cucco in the gullet, my congratulations scrawled next to a hasty signature and folded neatly in his pack. Enzo’s partner sounds like an ideal match for his temperament, and I manage four basins of washing before I need to start the midday meal contemplating my own ideal mate.

I am not inclined towards spending my life with more than one or two others, so a communal marriage is not the path I would easily take. I know too, from experience now and not just inclination, that I want my partner to be able to easily cover me, and that sexually I prefer to be penetrated rather than penetrate. Not all the time, but definitely most of it. A sense of humor that does not denigrate or harm is a must, as well as a kind disposition. Someone who can give me the space socially that I need for my calling, but is also comfortable with being possessive of my time when available. I am deeply attracted to Vidkun, but his nonchalance and casual regard for my token aches, and the rough way he treated me on our last meeting is not entirely dismissible as the stress of the situation and that nags at me like a hangnail I worry at whenever it comes back into my conscious mind. It is not a matter that would have me refusing him, but it is not ideal, either.

Ideally, there are many things I could wish for. Realistically, I am content where I am at this point in my life, and even though Insu has eaten three times today, Keiko, Yoru and I have not. My hunger for a partner is displaced by my hunger for food, and though the second is easily taken care of, it still needs to be taken care of. Keiko needs a rest, Insu a nap, and Yoru a bath before we spend the afternoon in the Temple of the Triune, equidistant from each Goddesses’ respective Temples. I welcome Insu officially into the family as Sohna welcomes him to the community and he is given his first earrings. They will be used to pierce his ears to mark his passage from toddler to child, and are a steel of the highest quality, tempered against rust and decay. Juen takes the time to pierce my ears marking my adult status behind and above the hoops I got as a child myself while Darak looks on. The amethyst stones set in the studs holding a startling amount of Shadow Magic for my using, a gift from the Sage to celebrate my own maturation.

It stings, then a rush of warmth spreads through me as the power in the gift sinks into my own energy patterns. With the amount of magic-work assigned me over the next season, the assist is appreciated, and I must remember to thank Impa when next I see her. For now, after the excitement of meeting so many people in a single hour, Insu is overwhelmed and cries his displeasure for the world to hear. Keiko cradles him in her arms as Yoru hovers about both of them, physically shielding the smaller pair. I, in turn, cover them all with some of the power I haven’t been using and touch the Shadow that hovers close always. Muddled by too much external encounters, I use that natural darkness and soothe Insu’s patterns into the steadiness I saw in him this morning, and he does something I have only seen my mentor Sharu do before.
Tiny hands unused to the motion reach out to grasp at the tendrils of magic and tug, toying with the energy as most infants would their parents’ hair. Making it his own. It startles me badly enough that I stop feeding the minor magic too frail to be called a spell and it dissipates beneath his timid touch. He latches tiny fingers into Keiko’s tunic without upset, and his red eyes as deep a wine as Yoru’s blinking slowly as if in reproach for taking away his toy. It may be coincidence, only time will tell, but I will be more cautious with my use of energies too powerful for his tiny body around him in the future. Should he be gifted as I am, I will train him as Sharu trained me in the sworn duty that shiik bear simply by being what they are. It is not something I would wish on him, but if it is so, then I will help him to grow and learn in the ways of those who walk the boundaries.

Now though, I can keep house while his parents strengthen the newly formed bond between them and welcome him into this world, this life. It is his for the having, if he will stay. That bond steadies as brother moon rises and I watch his course as long as I can, strengthening my own bond with this body, this life, this duty and preparing myself for the creation of miniature warping points attuned to two people alone. In taking the night, I have also taken the more subtle and complex magics, requiring less raw power and more gentle manipulation to build. Zelda will take the day, strong and pure and at times harsh with the force of life required for all things to grow and prosper. It is not the first time I have had to change my sleeping schedule, but it is the first time that I am altering it to the time where I feel the most comfortable.

I cannot make the dawning the first night, too weary from a full day of both physical and spiritual labour, and the second is a near thing but still beyond my reach. The third day, though, I find myself not only greeting the dawn with the songbirds but capable of making a meal for my nephew’s parents and informing Zelda of my success before seeking my bed. Tonight I will begin simply learning the shape of the moonstones that will serve as my focus. I sleep easily, wake in time to start supper, and have a cucumber salad dressed with flavoured vinegar, grilled cucco heart and liver, and three grain rice mixed with barley and millet set for service by the time Keiko and Yoru return from today’s errands. I spend a full hour keeping Insu entertained and allow them to be a couple rather than parents after cleaning the dishes, then hand the sleepy baby back and head to the Temple of Balance.

There, I prepare myself in the ritual baths, set sage and sandalwood before Din, wisteria and juniper before Farore, and lilac and pine at Nayru’s feet. The moonstone waits wrapped in silk of darkest black protected by wards inscribed on folded rice paper and secured by salt. Untouched by mortal hands, these crystalline vessels are a gift of the spirits of the land itself to the ultimate daughter of a minor Goddess. They are a gift that she has deigned to share with me, as I share my body with her. The last of twilight I spend deep in prayer, asking that the Three bless my endeavor and help me complete my task. There is the aspect of creation, and so, in the deep of night when dreams touch reality, I begin.

By the time the first light of dawn touches the altar where I sway and draws my spell work to a close, I am drenched in sweat, exhausted, and ready to collapse where I stand, but all twenty-four moonstones shine with a faint inner light. Their glow is matched by the twenty-four sunstones safely ensconced in white silk waiting for Zelda to return on the other side of the flat stone altar made smooth by thousands of hands and offerings. I can hear her in the baths, the last scent of incense from my offering long dissipated, and though she will not be long I must rest before I actually give in to the impulse to lay on the cold tile and sleep. Yoru has a stuffed roll filled with spiced sausage waiting for me next to a pitcher full of chilled water, so I eat and drink it all even as I lay down. I am asleep before my head touches the pillow.

I’ve made it through a moon turn and the initial keying by the time my body has adjusted to the work, and can stand to watch Zelda begin her portion. Thyme, rosemary, and cedar scent the air and the moment she begins I am forced from the space, the magic of light searing my skin and
stinging my eyes. She is further along than I, setting three pairs completed in a warded cache where I must still begin that portion of the work, but she also started two days before I did. We are both leaner for the labour, so I have taken steps to remedy that for both of us. Taoki brings sliced meats, Rahl sends potions, Ifan delivers Hora’s baking, and Yoru hauls tea. The diet is steady, and between the two of us we eat enough for four, so if we are thin it is no longer dangerously so.

Two cots have also been brought to the Temple, an old storage room cleared to make space that is both cool and dark, and I make up Zelda’s before sliding the linen from mine. There is a full basket between my Mistress and myself, and I take the lot to Keiko’s and set it soaking. Most of the laundry is Insu’s cloths, which I wash separately and more thoroughly than the rest, and have the line full and double pinned in time to spare Taoki and Ifan the trip. I’ll return tomorrow and retrieve the articles that will go back to the Temple, while Keiko will take them down once they’ve dried and Yoru will sort and fold. It takes me longer than it would were I simply doing my own and Zelda’s, but individually it makes the task go quickly and I get to feel as though I am helping my family as well as fulfilling my duty.

The walk back seems to take twice as long for all that it is not only the same distance but slightly downhill, and I know I will need to eat and sleep again. The constant strain of the spell work will end. I am taking better at managing it. I must keep trying. There are things I must do after. I tell myself all this, but still don’t quite make it to the cots. Instead, I take up a banana, a muffin made with oats and dried service berries, and a portion from a wheel of cheese half decimated by both Zelda and mine own ravenous pillaging, and find a spot in the sun to rest. Niakara joins me moments later, begging a bit of the cheese and purring contentedly against my side when she gets it. I wake the same way hours later, panting and terrified and utterly unable to remember more than the start of my dreams, with the cat kneading my stomach as though my life depends on it. Her tiny claws are sharp and push through the sweat-soaked fabric of the indigo tunic I wear, pricking my skin and I curl about her and simply breathe.

Disquieted, once my racing heart returns to a more neutral pace, I note the time and carry the supper Zelda has left close at hand with me to the Temple alters. Instead of setting to work slightly early, I take the time to reacquaint myself with Nayru’s calm assurances. Refreshed, I once again bathe, light incense, and bind moonstones into pairs. Twelve pairs of each, balanced between Shadow and Light, Adult and Child, Male and Female, Active and Passive. The cache where the completed sets rest feels nearly alive, pulsing with magic that resembles a heartbeat to my eyes. It’s beautiful, and I have plans to string the active set I am to carry on a cord for my hair much as hanyana intends to make either a necklace or set of brooches with her golden sunstones.

If they work the way they are intended to, I will be able to begin distributing them about Hyrule proper under the guardianship of the Loyalist army. For the most part, the spaces either already exist or will be easy to create along the duchies of the various nobility still operating their traditional lands. The far south east may be an issue, for nothing of Lord Pattin’s fate has been brought to light after my nearly disastrous attempt at crossing his holdings. The duchies of Lady Flora, Lord Artura and Lady Emilia, and Lord Bradley have volunteered space for five of the intended safe-houses. Master Talon has provided a sixth. The lands under Lord Throri and Lady Mira may have two potential areas, but neither has been seen since my first circuit of Hyrule despite passing through their lands on five separate occasions. Crown land accounts for two more, leaving two more places to find and build shelters in if I am to fulfill Zelda’s vision appropriately.

I can make Elydis Keep in time for the first gifts of the field and forest to be harvested. It may mean wintering away from Derinkuyu, away from my family and my people, should the Lord and Lady prove allies still. It is with that sense of impending loss that I attend to my current task, cleansing my person and my space for the magic that serves my Mistress. Another turn of this task, a turn of testing, followed by setting the precious stones into appropriate jewelry, then I am being
outfitted for the journey from the Water Temple through Hyrule Field towards the Kokiri’s Forest.

Kakariko is no longer safe for me to be seen in, the regular patrols from Castle Town making even the residents feel unsafe with their pillaging and looting. Nothing is safe from the women and the men they lead about, but they are now the only predators Kakariko must contend with. Viewed as a retreat from their duties to the Usurper King, the patrols make certain the town is supplied and maintained and the paths to and from well kept. Tektites and the occasional torch slug are kept well away from the road, the stairs repaired quickly and well. Offerings to the Shadow Temple have actually increased with the productivity of tourism, as though those that murder can cleanse the blood staining their hands with rupees.

The activity within the Temple has increased beyond that of Kakariko itself. Rarely is a death from illness, old age, or accident seen. Almost all are the fallen of the battlefield or razing of the land. I cannot risk the lives of all those who live there and are growing to depend on the custom of soldiers by showing my face. Nor can I use the Temple of Time as a starting point, for though the numbers of the re-dead there have been drastically reduced, they are still present and do not need to rest. The Forest Temple is closer to my ultimate destination, but I have not been given the Secret of the Woods to find my way free of the trees. With the Sage in spell-bound sleep, I cannot bring myself to chance it.

And so on the fourth day before the birth of the Grain Moon, I find myself spending the night with Lyell in the lakeside laboratory. After declining to sample his most recent creation, I take the time to repair the shingles on his roof for the winter while he grills lake trout for my lunch and minces the rest for Niakara who insisted upon coming with me. Her weight is a comforting warmth on the back of my shoulders as I start the walk towards Sweetsprings, and quite nice curled against my stomach within the small shelter I have for the night. She does not stay at my side constantly, but ranges further than I can track during the night, sleeping when she needs on my pack during the day. She cannot speak, but the companionship she provides makes the five days to Krisidi Keep seem like two.

Lord Artura is in the fields right next to his people, dressed in the same brown homespun and leather they are, binding hay into bales. So surprised am I by the noble face in peasant garb that I stumble when he greets me by name. My name. Upset at the jostling, Niakara sneezes her displeasure on the back of my neck and jumps to the ground, and then Lord Artura is laughing as he approaches.

“I guess the cat’s out of the bag now.” He grins.

“Yes.” I agree. Niakara seems intent on grooming herself to rights, and from the look on the Lord’s face there is some sort of joke I am supposed to understand, but do not. I will have to ask, later. His smile falters, and he clears his throat before his blue eyes meet mine.

“Are you here on behalf of your Mistress, or is this a pleasure jaunt through Hyrule Field?” Less the working man, more of the Lord, his posture changes unconsciously to shoulder the weight of responsibility for the entire duchy. I drop my eyes in response to his mantling, giving him the upper hand without him truly needing to claim it.

“My Mistress would that I seek Elydis Hold, I am merely passing through your lands and thought it best to pay my respects.” I tell him, keeping my eyes down and posture submissive as it seems to mellow him.

“And your other task?” He asks, looking for more information on the safe shelters I am to build, two on his land, two that bring risk of destruction and death should either the structures or I be discovered.
“To wait for the winter cold, or the spring blooming.” I reassure him. Digging will be harder than wise in the winter and he knows it, but the spring is a herald of change and growth. I leave him to the assumption that my words are intended to inspire, even as I note how far the harvest has come in which fields. I will not be able to manage both, but one is possible before the ground freezes. Should the rulers of Elydis Holding prove elusive, I may return and use Krisidi Keep as a base for the winter as Zelda and Impa regroup to adjust my orders. Until I have scoured the land between here and the Forest for any trace of its hereditary occupants, there is no reason for me to either contact Zelda or change my set course of action. It may very well be early spring by the time I return.

“Well, see now, if I don’t invite you to dinner Emilya will have my hide tanned and turned into boots, but if you need to go I understand.” He accepts my reasoning without further comment, blushing a rosy pink ever so slightly at the mention of his wife and mother of his children. That they could still be so in love after ten children and twenty-odd years of marriage makes me smile. That is the type of love I yearn for, and know will most likely never come my way, not in this lifetime.

“I am certain I can stay for a meal.” I accept the offer.

“Arik too, will be grateful for your presence.” He grins, and it takes me a moment to place the scholar and his covetous perceptions regarding my person. I should have refused. The moment to do so has passed, however, and so I resign myself to being stared at and, if I am seated too closely, pawed over.

“It will be good to hear the tales of my people.” I respond, knowing that whatever manages to make it out of the supposedly learned man’s mouth will be both abbreviated and difficult to follow. Yet, by learning what he knows of my people I can infer that the general populace at least knows no more, and may even begin to spread some tales of my own through my interactions with him.

If only he didn’t leer so.

Lord Artura nods, seeming to understand that I am trying my best to make light of an uncomfortable situation, and sends me off to the Keep itself to refresh myself in time for the meal. Though Lady Emylia is nowhere to be seen, their eldest takes up the duties of host the moment I pass the inspection of the guards. With the approaching equinox, by joining the Keep in the evening meal I have for all practical purposes agreed to spend the night. The short time I would be able to safely travel with Hylian or Human eyesight means that leaving after is deemed foolish. I am tired, but the time spent resuming my traversing of Hyrule proper instead of tireless spellwork has restored my mental faculties to the point where I could not lightly accept the title of fool, at least not without sufficient cause.

I do not intend to give reason, and so thank Willem for his guidance and the guest room I am assigned. There are four beds, so the space is more prestigious than the ten cot room I was placed in last I was here. Stowing my pack in the small chest at the foot of the bed furthest from the door yet closest to the south facing window, I take the official clothing of a shiik with me to the baths. Niakara is curled on the bed when I return, and I take the time to plait my hair with indigo ribbons that she paws at if I dangle them within her reach. Though I am not here officially, I am still Zelda’s representative even when she does not occupy my form, and must behave appropriately.

That means I sit at the head table, though I am close to the edge and not directly next to the true nobility, and listen to conversations on the harvest and coming winter. Better than the year previous, though by no means spectacular, the weather witch assures a long but mild cold season. I test my connection to Zelda for both confirmation and reassurance, for the witch seems to expect
some sort of response to his forecasting and I haven’t sought dreams or visions of the future of the wind and snow. There is no response but for acknowledgement of my presence and a surge of trust. It heartens me, and the witch can see it in my posture.

“Do you See a contradictory prophecy, Sheikah?” He asks, his pride of place here dependent upon my answer.

“I do not.” I reply, hesitating for only a second before continuing. “What I See is rarely prophecy, and even when it is, that foresight is neither promise nor surety. My eyes See what is, not what may be.” Most of the time. When I do have visions of the future, it is neither my eyes nor my blood that dictate them, but rather my devotion to the Goddess of Wisdom whose avatar I serve. Zelda’s visions are far more pervasive, accurate, and far reaching, and she is as Hylian as the first child of the Goddess made mortal. Her foresight at discovering a wind mage of Ganondorf’s called Kabocha and stopping an attack on the few remaining small holders around Fort Heathersage is only the most recent proof. At the trestle tables below the head table, Arik practically hangs on every word I speak, forgetting to eat when instead he can watch me choke down every mouthful as though each movement were divine revelation.

Not that the food is bad, perhaps a bit bland, but warm and filling and plentiful enough to satisfy appetites roused by a hard day’s labour. I may be biased though, having grown used to the spices and flavors of my childhood once more in Derinkuyu. Roasted meat, potatoes, carrot and rutabaga mash laden with butter means I do not eat as heartily as the men and women who are toiling from sun up to sunset to bring in as much as they can before the winter locks them within their homes, but I do eat enough to be overfull as I make my way back to my waiting bed after another two courses and dessert and chatter to last until true night. I am weary to the point that my manners are sloppy as I bid my roommates good night and pleasant dreams and that is all. Niakara is soft beneath my hand and warm against my side, the night gown thick enough that a single blanket is sufficient, and I sleep.

The well is dark, narrow, and absolutely terrifying. The scent of fire and sounds of screaming are inconsequential. Not because of the unknown reason behind them, but rather because I can see exactly what malicious evil is churning the shadows darker than black in the water below. It’s inky film oozes up the stone sides, swirling and throbbing with hatred and power as it works through the last of the seal that the Sage of Shadow set on it. Footsteps behind me distract me for half a second as I shout a warning, and then the spirit is rushing up the ladder faster than anything corporeal could manage and the winch flies into the air with the force of it. Paralyzed with fear, tendrils of rancor breach the surface and that is all the warning I have before the world spins with nauseating speed and everything goes black.

Blinking my eyes open I recognize the ceiling of Impa’s house in Kakariko despite the low light shimmering from a shielded lantern, though I usually sleep on the spare cot rather than on her bed. Why I am here is baffling, both in general and in particular, and I am confused until I try sitting up. My body is heavy, awkward and disproportionate to what I am used to, and my right shoulder, side, chest and face throb with a pain that would leave me gasping if I could breathe. I lack any of the connections I should have to my physical form. Zelda is forefront in possessing my body, and the control I should be able to take is missing for she is deeply unconscious. It is as though my spirit is trapped in a corpse. That final horror is enough to wake me truly with a gasp.

False dawn touches the horizon with the first glimmerings of the new day, and none of the men I am rooming with seem to be disturbed by my dreaming. Niakara is nowhere to be found, not yet returned from her nightly hunting, and I restore my bedding to some semblance of order while I regain my equilibrium. Another bath, and I head to the kitchens to beg breakfast off the cooks, pack my bags, and bid farewell to my hosts before they attend to their own meals. This far into harvest, I
am not the only one making my way from the Keep courtyard by the time dawn arrives with a burst of light and birdsong. If there is one fewer feathered vocalist when the grey and black toned tabby joins me nearly an hour later with her ears up and tail flagged, then I’m almost certain no one will notice, and the population better served by the elimination of a rival for food and shelter in the coming winter.

That is another reason the harvest seems so good. Fewer people means fewer mouths to feed, and the grass and grains in the fields on either side of me look to bear as much as they did last year. Perhaps slightly more, perhaps only fuller fruits, but less in the way of habitation. Though not the same sense of abandonment and emptiness as the south-eastern portion of the map, there are still fewer houses and homesteads, and those that I do see are not full. Perhaps everyone is just out in the fields and orchards. Perhaps not. The fields themselves are well maintained, as are the traces of trail I follow, too faint to be called a road. It meanders haphazardly through the grasses and shrubbery, around sloughs and reservoirs, hedging hedges and thickets and thoroughly making my journey take far longer than it could. Niakara enjoys hunting through the tall grasses for shrews and mice, and I see no reason why I cannot follow her path as easily and as quickly.

The burn of my calves as we move into a hilly section of the field two days later tells me I’ve grown complacent maintaining my physical self, and resign myself to a number of bruising with Hahron and Yoru come winter should I be successful in finding the proper managers of the Elydis duchy. The increased grooming of the surrounding lands and obvious storage structures for food and useful things from the field and forest tell me that I am in the correct vicinity, but not where the buildings and houses for people are. Cresting a hill for a somewhat better vantage of the area, I can see no other signs of habitation, and slump to sit in the grass. It’s nearly noon, and my breakfast of oats is wearing particularly thin. Niakara scampers off after either insects or a rodent, and I follow her example to find my own meal.

More dried meat, dried fruit, and water. It seems particularly unpalatable when there is an abundance of produce ripe for the picking less than a dozen steps from where I rest, but I have not been given permission and do not know the state of the larders of the people in the area. I can survive on unpalatable. With a sigh I stand, brushing myself clean of any dirt or crumbs, and take up my pack and canteen once more. The ground shifts slightly beneath me, and that is all the warning I have before I am falling through the earth. It is a short trip, and I flex my knees to absorb most of the impact, attempting to roll for the rest and succeeding only in running head-first into a solid wooden beam. It wouldn’t be so bad, truly, if the second beam, dislodged from my graceless entrance, hadn’t decided to smack into the back of my head less than a second later. I see stars, blue eyes, and darkness.
The Occultation of Self

Chapter Summary

Bury the lede, bury your youth,
Bury me face down with fractions of truth.

Chapter Notes

Warnings - blood, death, racism, pain, war, battle-field clean up, cultural differences, metaphysics, frustration.

Scars make us whole
and sing our stories to
the stars

The benefit of the subterranean dwellings that those on the Elydis lands call home is that, when given cause, next to no light comes in to stab at my brain sending lances of agony through my skull and down my spine where the tension removes the last of my control over my rebelling stomach and makes me vomit up whatever liquids my nurse has managed to get into me in the first place. Given that during most of the year the grass covered hills holding houses are used only for sleeping and copulation lets me lose track of all sense of the passage of time. Once I can bear both a shielded lantern and sitting up under my own power, the gentle callused hands and soft voice that have been my only constants become attached to a face and a name and inform me that I have been drifting in and out of consciousness for the better part of two days.

What murmurings I did manage when not emptying my stomach, bleeding profusely, or sleeping like the dead were mostly unintelligible and entirely incoherent. The words from my nurse who has stayed by my side the entire time are a relief and a caution, and he helps hold me steady as a tea, thick with herbs and honey, is brought to my lips. I am horrendously thirsty, but know better than to gulp at the cup even if my shaking hands would let me. The tincture is followed by water that I am allowed to sip on my own as he continues his side of the tale that brought us to this place at this time. Though he is purely Hylian, it takes his name intruding in the murmured flow of syllabary to jolt me into recognizing the language of my people. I hide the shock beneath trembling limbs and sweaty skin, the strain of my injury hiding the surprise at his fluency easily.

Lewenhart informs me that Alisaiie and Murie’s roof is nearly repaired after I so inelegantly used it for a door, and that my head was definitely the worse of the two for the encounter. Bandages encircle my skull when I lift my hands to check, and he expresses sincere regret at having to cut my hair so closely to not only see the injury, but repair as much of the damage as he could. I in turn apologize for the inconvenience and damage to their home which he promises to convey, and thank him for his care. I cannot thank him for shaving my head, but I can appreciate the neat and tiny stitches he left in his wake. They will heal cleanly and nearly as smoothly as if the injury never happened. My hair will grow back. My head cannot.
“May I have your name, young Sheikah?” He asks, and from cadence of the words he has repeated the question often enough that he doesn’t really need to think about it, though it is considered to be too direct and therefore quite rude in polite company. Of course, upon meeting someone new, it is expected that introductions are either given by the facilitating party or made before true conversation starts. It tells me that, while his instructor in my people’s language was exacting in pronunciation and grammar, social custom was not a concern.

If Impa was truly thought to be the last, I can understand why. If there is only one woman of a people, functioning in Hylian custom, there is no reason to overburden a student with the niceties of a dead race. My musings have taken slightly longer than is appropriate to expect a response though.

“Tor Aein.” I blurt out, and he starts, then laughs. I wonder what my response has been previously to illicit such a reaction.

“Oh good.” He smiles, the irises of his eyes disappearing into the wrinkles of his face. “You didn’t rattle your brain about too hard.”

“Just hard enough.” I mutter, and his still sharp Hylian ears pick the words up as clearly as if I had shouted.

“Aye lad, that’s about the shape of it. Just hard enough.” He agrees, those gentle hands reaching out once more with purpose and taking up a cloth pungent with the distilled spirits of wine and cleaning the thin line of stitching marring my scalp. The faint burn makes me wince, and Lewenhart decides that I need a distraction.

“I’ve seen my fair share of nasty bumps to the noggin all right, even before the Civil War. Most of the damage to your skull is on the outside from what I can tell, though if there’s anyone who would notice changes of personality you should consult them once you are well enough to travel again.” The nurse is back, and the jovial old man disappears beneath the solemn lines of brow and lip. “Do you speak Hyrulean? My Lord would like to speak with you if you do, and I am getting too old to play translator.”

“I do.” I reply in the common tongue of this place, and am rewarded with a small smile lacking much of the vitality his laugh contained. “Though your grasp of the Shaekha’ri tongue is impressive.” Until she relearned the form, even Impa was hard pressed to be as eloquent.

“Ah, I trained with some of the last guardians when I was as young as you and twice as foolish. What was left of my platoon after the Civil War ended found their way here for the most part, so there are a fair number of us who know the words, but few who bother to use them anymore. After Kaki-eh was killed there was no one left to teach it, and the youngsters didn’t really care to learn beyond a few basic phrases and curse words.” He admits, seemingly shamed.

“Just the necessary and the interesting.” I chuckle, and after a moment his hesitancy dissolves beneath a genuine smile.

“I suppose that’s true.” The smile turns into a soft laugh, and I am pleased that he can see the humor of it. “Though with you here, I must assume that General Impa is not the last of her people?” The truth behind his reluctance is revealed in his posture, even if I could not see the way his spirit flares with both desperate hope and old pain. “To lose an entire race through our own foolishness is a desperate sadness.”

“Officially, Impa-han is the last Shaekha’ri in Hyrule.” I inform him. “I am only here at the behest of Nayru’s Chosen. Were it not for her need of me, Impa-han would truly be the only one
left.” His face crumples at my words, and I cannot give him the comfort of revealing Derinkuyu. I cannot risk Zelda’s safety, even to so genuine and negligible a person.

“You are a survivor of a dead people, then.” He sighs. “Though I cannot fault them for running. The Civil War was hard on everyone, but the Sheikah most of all.” His hand rises to cover his face, though not before I see the moisture falling from his eyes. “Forgive me. It’s just…you look so much like her.” He shudders. I wait for his grief, old and aching, and take the hand not shrouding his sorrow in comfort. He recovers faster than I anticipate given the depth of his emotion, and wipes at his face with a clean bandage.

“Who was she?” I ask once he is recovered and steeled against further upset.

“Tor Ilia, my wife. I lost her the same day I lost my Lord, and my Lady and their son disappeared. Our current Lord, Lord Thankard’s younger brother, did his best to search for them, but with our fighting force decimated, our homes in ruins, and our trackers injured, we dared not enter the Lost Woods to search. They didn’t come out, and we moved on, but I can’t help but wonder.” He sighs, eyes looking to the past and not seeing what is right in front of him.

“What do you wonder?” I prompt when his thoughts take him into a history at least nine years previous, though more likely older still.

“I wonder, if I had been here instead of out guarding the trade caravans, would I have been able to help Ilia? Shield Lady Iriada? Brave the Woods?”

“Die with them, and lose everyone you’ve helped since?” I counter, instinct rising within me desperately and interrupting the decade old process of self-doubt and recrimination and startling him out of the mental path he’s worn in his mind. “What would Ilia-eh say to hear you doubting her abilities?”

“…she’d hand me my own skin. You’re right, you’re right.” He breathes, the air releasing a lifetime of turmoil and the sensation of purpose flees me as quickly, leaving behind exhaustion and pain from more than my bruised and battered skull. I have to wonder though, if that is how Zelda feels when Nayru speaks through her. If so, I am doubly content to remain her servant rather than bear such a presence myself. Lewenhart’s attention returns inward, and I find myself capable of pouring and sipping at more water. I am remarkably thirsty, and, now that I am thinking of it, hungry as well. Business comes first, however.

“When did Lord Throri wish an audience?” I ask once my cup is empty and the man nursing me returned to the present. His pain lingers, but the wound is lanced. It will bother him for the rest of his life, but it no longer poisons everything he touches.

“Not until I deem you fit for one, Aein-eh, so not today. Possibly tomorrow, if you are well enough, and even that is unlikely.”

“My proper title is shiik, Lewenhart-sai, and the sooner I may have discourse with your Lord the sooner I may go about the work that has brought me here.”

“The sooner you bathe, eat, and have a proper night’s sleep, the sooner you’ll heal enough for me to consider it, though I promise to use the correct title when I introduce you.” Fully the professional healer once more, he gathers himself to stand and helps me accomplish the same. I am not overcome with dizziness or nausea, which seems to be good, and can follow his lead under my own power to emerge into the late afternoon sun from a remarkably well concealed hut. The bathhouse he takes me to is communal, fully stocked, and aside from a mother with a toddler boy and the proprietor, completely empty.
That means there is plenty of room for the older man to move as I am disrobed and my bandages removed. Lewenhart quickly accomplishes the same for himself, then goes about scrubbing both of us free of the dried fluid and scents of illness and injury, taking care with the delicately stitched skin of my scalp and skull. He leaves more intimate areas to my discretion, and neatens his beard while I remove the beginnings of mine. With my hair shorn nearly as closely as my shave, having any facial hair adds years to my appearance and an air of slovenly disorder that I find repugnant.

By the time I feel clean again, I am also ravenous, and three more people have come to the baths. From the blond hair, blue eyes, and elongated ears, they are either purely Hylian, or so close as for the distinction to be of no importance. I stand apart, pale skinned and brunette, with my eyes as red as the lines of broken skin on my head. Lewenhart hands me a robe that could be the twin of the one I was wearing aside from the level of cleanliness, and I cover myself hastily, not liking the way one of the women’s eyes linger on both my body and my wounds. Fresh bandages await in the small room that I take as Lewenhart’s workshop, as does more alcoholic sponging and a full bottle of red potion.

“If you think you can keep it down, I want you to drink it all.” He instructs, and I shudder in anticipation, but take the bottle from his hands and down the contents as quickly as I can. The magic of the potion surges through me, taking care of the multitude of scratches and bruises that were insignificant enough to be ignored and sealing the still raw edges of where the attempt was made to open my skull. I gag, and it takes all of my concerted effort not to hack the liquid up again. It tastes so horrible the first time that I have no desire to find out what a second experience of the same would be like. None what-so-ever. I get enough of a hint at the back of my throat that my willpower redoubles itself, and the potion stays where it should.

Broth, bread, and cabbage stewed to the point of disintegration follow, alongside a full bottle of Lon-Lon milk that I share with Niakara when she begs. My elderly nurse guides me to a proper bed, and I comply even though I am not tired only to find myself waking to an already prepared breakfast. Another bath, examination of my stitches, and proper grooming, and the hour’s walk to Lord Throri’s audience chambers is spent in relative silence. Lewenhart fatigues quickly, our pace faltering to match his increasingly shorter steps, and I understand why he was given care of me. There is nothing wrong with his mind, but he is prematurely aged and older to begin with. Caring for an unconscious man is well within his abilities. Now that I am mobile again, it is he who requires consideration. Slowing my pace to one that is comfortable for him is the least I can do in return for all he has done for my sake.

The Keep is different from all others I have been in within the borders of the sacred lands. There are no protective gates or enclosures, no overly large and imposing buildings, only a multitude of subterranean structures that become more and more apparent now that I know what to look for. The Lord’s summer audience chamber is nothing more than a clearing paved with cobbled stone set in mosaic and surrounded by cultivated shrubbery giving the illusion of privacy. I must assume other locations are available in unfavorable weather, but in the autumn air the space seems perfect. One of the stonework benches is occupied, and from the change in Lewenhart’s posture I know this is the man I have been summoned before.

“Lord Throri Elydis, Duke of Elydis lands and Lord of Kondor Keep, I present Tor Aen-shiik, servant of Queen Zelda and priest of the Shadow Temple.” Lewenhart says to the silvery-blond Hylian man in simple linen and wool clothing bearing a scar from temple to chin on the right side of his face. Were it not for the brass circlet about his brow, there would be no way to distinguish him from those who work his lands aside from the way he holds himself. For those with the Sight, his posture is only appropriate to bear the burdens he does. This is a man who has seen much, and lost much, and I don’t know where to begin with him. His quiet surety and calm wielding
of both political and physical power leave me speechless, and I bow to hide my reaction, holding my head down longer than I normally would in order to school my expression firmly. He is smiling softly when I look up.

“Kajima Aein-shiik. Nayru bi neun, mahdas bi niahn.” He greets me, his pronunciation passable and intentions clear. The attempted Shaekha’ri sets me at ease, as it was most assuredly supposed to do, and though our discussion proceeds in Hyrulean, the effort Lord Throri went to in order to make me feel welcomed will not be forgotten. While neither a child of Nayru nor a gift from Zelda, I can see where the equivalent phrase originates, and the honors are well meaning. Mutually held desires for my Mistress to regain her rightful throne and genuine respect blossom into evidence, and I leave the interview heartened.

The spirit may be willing, but at the moment my flesh is weak, and so I find I must rest once my nurse guides me to the guest-house that the Lord has offered for the duration of my duties within his lands. A box-bed is quickly filled with straw beneath the elderly healer’s watchful gaze, a shielded lantern lit, and a basin and pitcher filled with clear well water set and covered for when I feel hale enough to rejoin the rest of the inhabitants in their daily tasks. My brief nap rejuvenates me enough to provide entertainment after the evening meal in the form of song. Though my words are understood incompletely by only a few, I make certain to choose either round-songs or ones where the chorus is simple enough to pick up. Those contemporaries of Lewenhart still living join in with surprising vigor, and the younger generations respect their ancestors enough to attempt the same.

As I expected, of the seven near my own age, five approach afterwards with requests for further instruction in pronunciation and translations of particular verses. Zelda leaves me to it, my place amongst her people somewhat assured, and takes to her bed in expectation of an early morning. Given the season, after dinner discussion wraps up before the sun has truly sought her rest, for the harvest brought in is needed to survive the coming cold and every person here knows it. There is much work to be done, and a limited time to do it in.

My own task is much simplified, and I should be free of it in time to return to Krisidi Keep before the week is out. There are a number of homes, proper dwellings with water and sanitary facilities for the full winter that are currently unused in the surrounding countryside that I have been given leave to appropriate as a safe-house for Zelda. There are maps and records as to which families currently live where, and it is one of the other places I am to use. By checking the empty places, I am also serving Lord Throri’s need to be aware of bandits, brigands, squatters, intruders, and other unsavory individuals that may take such places and not contribute to the community to which it belongs. Those willing to come under the Elydis banner are to be welcomed. Those not are to be removed, either through my own means or by summoning the guard.

I do not have to create a place by hand, which, in this area, means digging deep and shoring with sod. Even if it takes me a turn, being able to claim a pre-existing location in Zelda’s name saves me the same again of work that I may have to do in secret. The relief I feel allows me to sleep quickly, easily, and without dreams of incident. I take the time to help Lewenhart prepare his home for the winter, and he shows me what to look for in a solid, well-constructed shelter in the Elydis style. Far more work goes into building what are essentially caves than I had originally thought. The floors are raised so the fire that heats the room can be sunk into stone lined ground and the heat is trapped to flow beneath the feet and keep the entire structure a steady, even temperature. The walls are build first of wood, filled with a limestone mixture similar to the concrete in Derikuyu, and then reinforced with wooden beams that support the weight of the roof and the sides. Being covered entirely in earth and sod, that is a lot of weight.

If it is poorly constructed, or loosely maintained as in the case of the one I fell through, then the weight of the construction materials alone is enough to collapse the entire thing, whether
there are people inside or not. If there are, their home simply becomes their tombs. It is too difficult
to dig to recover destroyed property, and simply too much dirt to move to uncover a corpse, only to
have to bury it again. I resign myself to checking the spirits of those lost in such circumstances, and
to searching every dwelling for even the slightest signs of slumping in Zelda’s retreat. During high
noon I find I must rest from the punishing brilliance of sister sun’s radiant light or I become nauseous
with the intensity of the pain in my head. My elderly nurse assures me that such sensitivity will fade
as the bruises do, and by the time my stitches are to come out should be gone completely.

At least my hair is growing back at a seemingly astounding pace. My scalp is covered with
a soft, downy fuzz by the time I am deemed healthy enough to travel once more, four days after
waking under Lewenhart’s care. First, I contact Zelda through one of the speaking stones boosted
by the Heart of the Forest’s proximal power. She is concerned for my well-being, while Impa is
more focused on the timeline of my journeys. What Impa does not say and Zelda does not appear to
catch is that in order for me to do what is asked of me, I must be healthy and strong. I must move
quickly. I can’t be seen. The last informs me with blatant subtext that the patrols of mandrag
Ganondorf are growing more numerous and better directed in their steady consumption of all that is
good and natural in Hyrule. I am one of their targets of acquisition, for in holding me they have the
closest tie available to Zelda, who is the rightful queen and hope of the people.

I cannot be found.

This makes my job both easier and more difficult, for if I do not have to put in appearances
at court or in public, I do not need to assimilate into Hyrulean social circles or become available for
questioning and entertainment once the official communication is completed. That also means I
cannot rely on the kindness of strangers or the cooperation of the common people, for their Lords
and Ladies will not command it. Shelter, food, water, clothing and companionship are to become
much more costly both in terms of time and actual currency. I am grateful for Niakara’s presence,
her warmth at night, and her company, but she is not a substitute for people. It will be a very lonely
life.

My solitude begins when I come across the remains of the third home I am to check and
find not one, but three lingering Poes of the former residents, lanterns swinging and voices howling
in a wind that is not physically present. There is no consciousness left, and the growth of greenery
over the collapsed dwelling says they have been dead for more than a year. I gather them to me, one
at a time, tugging on metaphysical strings and the yearning that binds them here, and send them
down the river and through the First Gate to the Sacred Realm. It takes me long enough that I seek
shelter from the sun on the shaded side of one of the walls to sit and eat and replenish myself. I leave
an offering of part of my meal to soothe the land-spirits upset for my disturbing their patterns,
confident that the rodents and birds will remove the physical presence of my passing quickly, and
continue on.

The fourth is still inhabited, and by the people who are supposed to be there, the fifth by
newcomers glad to go to Lord Thorii’s banner in return for ten percent of their labor. This year, and
last, it is more than fair. Perhaps there will come a time where it will seem an imposition, and I
would wish that day here now. The sixth, they assure me, is empty still, the roof sagging and the
floor unsound. While these things are true on my own inspection, the space will hold for at least the
rest of the season, and so I use it as my shelter for the night, Niakara warming the small of my back.
The shared well between the two provides water for both washing and drinking, and I refill my
canteens with the chill liquid before moving on to the next.

It is only when I come to the fourteenth potential location that there is the possibility of
trouble in the form of men with swords, pikes, shields, and war axes congregating in the clearing
outside the small space. I slide quickly into the shadows before they can catch sight or sound of me,
and spend the next three marks observing them from a good distance away. It means I cannot hear what is said, but I can watch them drill with their weaponry, judge their ability, and smell their supper cooking. There is not much of it, they seem moderately proficient with their chosen blades, and I cannot do anything about their presence without risking more than my own neck. Dark draws them close to the fire, sentries sent far enough out that the light of it will not impair their night vision, and I use the contiguous shadows to glide unseen and unheard all the way back to Elydis hall.

The Duke is surprised to find me in his bedchamber, while I am merely relieved that he does not have regular companionship there. I bequeath my intelligence to him, handing over what notes I can and repeating my observations for him to record his own, and in two days’ time if the interlopers are still present a contingent of the guard will be there to greet them. I will seek an alternate route, and am treated to not only access to what would be the maid’s quarters had Lord Throri’s wife been present, but a meal brought up at his request. The door locks behind me, cutting off all apparent exits, and I simply glide into the pervasive shadows and find my way to an old storage closet that hasn’t been used in long enough that a thick layer of dust covers the floor.

My precautions are for naught the next morning, but my reputation in the Lord’s eyes has grown for escaping his arranged confinement. While bearing Zelda’s mind for discourse with those who knew her has given me access to options I would never have thought possible, it is good to be recognized as having my own talents as well. I join the flow of those heading to field and orchard, and am gone before further requests for my time are made. The twenty-first place I check is still sealed against the elements, the floor solid, the roofing beams straight. Having come across enough that I know better now what unacceptable looks like, it takes me longer than it should to come to a decision. It is small, but my Mistress hasn’t need of abundant space while she is in hiding. The enclosed water pump which, once primed, spits first mud and then clear, cool water, decides for me. There are no physical needs that cannot be met here.

There are three more locations to visit and report back on, but the longer the twenty-first sits in my mind the more I like it. The twenty second is useable but empty and has no water supply. The twenty third has collapsed. The twenty fourth appears days away from the same, though the skulk of foxes that scatter from the front door at my approach seem to think it a perfectly reasonable shelter. The quarter-turn I have lost searching and giving my findings to the Lord of these lands is more than made up in the time I do not have to spend constructing the shelter myself. I omit the condition of the twenty first in the report I give him, including it among those uninhabited and unlikely to ever hold tenants again by assumption alone. I then return, and spend the next few days building an illusion about the place that will discourage looters and squatters alike. I cannot hide what it was, but I can and do make it seem uninhabitable to even the most desperate.

It is only then that my work truly begins. Under the shield of the illusion hiding the condition of the shelter and my presence, I go about first tearing up the floor and specific portions of the walls, leaving just enough space to sleep in when I grow weary and eat when I am hungry. The water remains pure as I pump it for both hydration and cleanliness, which is a greater boon than I expected and one that I doubt I can repeat in future construction. The ceramic plates have baked solid from years of protecting the floor from the heating fires, and are easy to mark with salt and chalk. The circular ward I inscribe is exacting and precise beyond even the creation of the stones, two of which I lay at the heart of the scrolling spell work and shield from the heat with more of the coarse rock salt. They will bake in place and become one with the structure as they do, ensuring the safety of hanyana for as long as the floor and walls still exist. Once I am certain of the stability of the flowing patterns, I carefully replace the insulating cushion and then the floorboards, and move on to the shielding wards that will hide the presence of all life inside from those who can see such things.

The paper tokens holding the magic of Nayru’s Blessing are at once easier and more
difficult. They will not last as long, but are much quicker to create, and can be constructed by any with the knowledge even if they haven’t the power to activate them. Keiko’s elegant hand graces this first batch, though Nahdo too has a steady hand and knows as many patterns. Zelda may even carry batches with her as she travels, in case any of the locations I am to arrange have had their warding fail. Careful not to interrupt any of the lines I tack the full set about the perimeter and seal them in place before replacing the panels used in smoothing the walls into a visually cohesive whole. Glue and nails secure the lot in place as though I hadn’t disturbed anything, and I whitewash the entire interior in an attempt to bring some brightness to the reconstructed and remarkably comfortable cave.

The work takes me another quarter of brother moon’s regular journey across the midnight sky, and a further three days of testing the moonstone pairs now that their brackets of sorcerous intent have been set. Only once I have visited the four warp points that I know are still safe for me to not only be seen in but stay long enough to recover, and returned via the turns of spell work Zelda and I put into the small crystalline structures, do I consider the effort a success. The first safe house is finished, and now only needs to be supplied.

The rope supports for the bed are solid still, and though my cloak is an adequate cushion now a proper pad and blanket should be put in place. Something to cook in. Something to cook with. Coal instead of firewood, a lantern and oil. Comb, soap, basic repair items for clothing. All these items I list to my Lady still ensconced in the safety of a town populated by a people dedicated to her fruition as a legacy of a minor Goddess turned mortal for the sake of all. I am tired, and so rest the night with Niakara curled on my stomach before returning to Derinkuyu to both supply and resupply.

_Hanyana_ is waiting for me in the home she has chosen for herself and those neighbors so able helped her restore and repair. A small garden of squash flourishes next to roses whose hips have begun to fruit. The harvest after first frost will be small this year, but the plants are already benefitting from having someone tend them and so next year may be much more abundant. Zelda herself is inside, curled up in a large chair, her golden hair spilling in thick waves over the arm and down the side, obviously damp from a recent bath. I feel the pang of loss for my own hair, for though it is growing back it is still too short to even comb.

“Welcome home Aein-ah.” She greets me, marking her place in the book she is reading and sitting up properly only to drop the tome with a thud that makes me wince at the damage to the spine and rushing over to raise her hands to my head. “What happened to your hair?” She whispers, distraught, and I bend enough for her to touch the soft fuzz.

“I told you about my injury, yes? The healer needed to see the wound to place the stitches.” I explain, my own voice soft as she examines the mark and then tugs me upward to wrap her arms about me. The beauty I saw in her in the caves of our desperation and her exile is blossoming even as her body pressed against mine from knee to shoulder is. I return the embrace, having missed physical contact even more urgently than I anticipated and finding the sympathy a perfect balm for my bruised ego. The reaction to her form is because I have been ignoring that part of me as well for even longer than simple contact. Turns. It’s inappropriate under these circumstances, and I do my best to quell it and just enjoy the embrace for what it is.

Thinking of what Impa would do to me if I acted on this impulse does the trick quite efficiently, though there is no way she has not noticed. Perhaps sensing my emotional imbalance at being so long away from those I call friend and family, she says nothing, but is much more physically affectionate than normal and I appreciate her understanding. Niakara appreciates the same butter covered bits of dried liver that Enzo’s dogs would run through blizzards for, and a place in the sun to curl up while her person gets a single bundle together and uses it to turn the warded and sealed
and weather-tight safe house down right comfortable. It will never be a home again, but it will be a sanctuary. Doubling my precautions, I call upon the mage craft that is every Shaekha’ri’s birthright and weave the strongest Nayru’s Blessing that I can, drink a bottle of green potion followed quickly by clear water, and send my Mistress the summons she is awaiting.

Knowing exactly where I placed the sunstone beneath the boards of the floor, I wait patiently and watch the spot closely. The slow moving air pushes outward, clearing the space of small things that may cause trouble, and then there is a rush of light and energy that leaves an impression behind my eyelids for long minutes afterward as a soft pop sounds in the air and Zelda coalesces into being. Inside my warding and shielding, I immediately call up Nayru’s Kindness, watching the magic settle over her in a protective bubble of vibrant blues that disappears but does not dissipate in moments. Should an attack come, the energy may flare into the visible spectrum again at the point of intrusion, but otherwise it will last until it is worn down or wears out. My casting for others is not as powerful as the Nayru’s Love I put about myself, and I estimate four, maybe five days before it is gone completely.

Zelda, for her part, ignores my workings and simply takes in being in Hyrule proper once more. I can see her aura flowing outward and restoring itself to proper balance even as the land itself rises up to greet her like a child rushing toward a parent. She belongs here. Who better to govern the land and its peoples than someone who can know exactly what is normal, good and healthy, and what people and places are under duress. Given the state of the country currently, I am not surprised by the tears in her eyes or the pallor that comes with sudden nausea as the local life shares itself with her entirely. I can feel some of it, see most of it, sense another portion, but cannot know the breadth and depth of what ails. From the look of it, I consider this a blessing.

“Farore’s Wind, Zelda-hanyana.” I remind her when she begins to shake, and she is gone in a burst of power that should see her safely back in Derinkuyu. While I could carry us both to the warp platform, it would be at the platform and not somewhere that she can lie down and process what she has learned from the spirits of the earth here. I would be useless for the rest of the day as well. This way, she is safe, comfortable, and can summon assistance easily.

::Rest and recover:: I tell her, and pull my mind from hers as it seethes with overloaded sensory experience. While she recovers, I leave the interior by sliding into the shadow and ride on the hidden pathways as far as I can. This close to high noon, it is not far, but I am cautious enough to allow myself to emerge laying close to the ground and as still as possible. I wait, senses on high alert, for any sign anyone noticed my sudden appearance. When all seems calm and at least nominally safe, I rise, and I hunt. I am not at all proficient at it, and must return empty-handed that evening to the shelter of the safe house. My lack of skill is compounded by the need to hunt what will not be missed and is not considered livestock, however feral. From the lack of complaining, Niakara was successful in thinning the pests from the fields, either running or flying, but both devouring the harvest of the season.

From the thick bean stew simmering on the stovetop, my mental grumblings at my inability to provide for myself were heard, so I know that the Queen is feeling better. Obviously well enough to travel, I taste the waiting meal and know that she is also capable of cooking. Her recovery from the second-hand illness through the aether is both rapid and heartening, for it means that the problems Hyrule is facing are superficial. They can be fixed. I must assume that the most expedient way would be to excise the blight that is causing the balance to fail. I know that I cannot accomplish that monumental a task. I haven’t the skills, aptitude, ability or, at this point, allies that could achieve that goal.

I wonder how Link is faring, his solitude much more thoroughly imposed and the duration as long as his entire living memory could reasonably hope to be. He has Navi, I have Niakara.
Zelda helps keep my mind stable even as I must assume anak silar does for him. I, however, have the option of fleeing, rejecting my tasks and abandoning my Mistress and all that I have worked for, betraying everything I hold dear for survival. I cannot fathom doing so, but I am aware of the possibility as an escape. I know that resusangeul bi aiyuu is not aware of even that much.

I could, if I were so inclined, even join those that have thrown their lot in with mandrag Ganondorf. The prospect raises my gorge, and I distract myself with a warm cat and a warm meal followed by a warm bed. The warmth has begun to dissipate by morning, the fire extinguished as thoroughly as I can manage, to the point where I cannot detect even the faintest trace of spark or coal glowing on the infrared spectrum. Only then do I seal the sanctuary against pests, reinforcing the illusions protecting it, and begin the journey back to Krisidi Keep.

It is obvious that in the time I was gone those in the Keep managed to fend off some of the Usurper King’s standing army disguised as brigands and bandits. The scars from bomb flowers dot the fields where the harvest lies ripe and untended, great gouges of earth bare to the sun. I am late enough that the pyres no longer smell, though the exposed wood of what used to be an ornamental garden tells me that there was a need for a lot of wood in a small space of time.

.:Zelda-hanyana, inform Impa-yana of this, and I ask to be allowed to show my presence openly.: I think at the young woman I can no longer consider a girl, and know her grief at her people’s suffering. I have to assume it is the gift of either Hylia, her ultimate ancestor, or Nayru’s favor that gives her such stability that her voice doesn’t waver as she relays my report to the acting General of the Loyalist forces. I cannot hear Impa’s reply, nor can I anticipate my orders, but I want with a desperate yearning to be able to go to the survivors and provide what succor I can. Physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, it does not matter. If I can help, I want to, badly enough that I am vibrating with the desire as I wait for permission to give it.

Noon passes. I watch as a small contingent emerges to glean some of the fruits of the season, enough for a meal and no more, and returns inside the foreboding walls of the main defensive keep, the out buildings still and quiet and apparently abandoned. I hesitate, but eventually do the same, though my picking is just that, just enough to delay my hunger, and no more. I cannot know what will be necessary for the residents of these lands to survive the winter. I have other options. They do not. Niakara has a nap on my lap. I have a nap under the trees of the orchard. Dusk falls.

.:Seek out whomever is in charge. Offer assistance. If they cannot support you through the winter, return here. Otherwise, aside from how openly you display your presence, continue to build sanctuaries. Ask what remains of the noble family what they wish regarding your extended stay, if anyone does. If not, help with the harvest and report to me on who takes charge of order.: Zelda commands.

.:Yes.: I agree, pleased that I can finally do something instead of watch, and head towards the barred gate. Unsurprisingly, I am met by armed guards. Their weapons are not drawn, but they are wary.

“State your name and purpose.” The voice sounds from behind the helm of the guard on the left of the gate, and I pause my slow steps to display open arms and hands, assuring her I am carrying no weapons. My cloak is open, my pack clearly visible, and Niakara walks by my side.

“I am Sheik of the Sheikah, servant of House Harkinian, here to provide assistance as needed.” I say, and the blades sing from their sheaths.

“House Harkinian is dead.” The pikeman to my right growls. “I was there when Castletown burned.” From his posture, his tone, the burning sparks and arcs of his grief and his rage,
I know he is not lying. He truly believes what he says.

“Did you see her body?” I ask in return, keeping my voice calm and cool and collected and as steady as the concept of Zelda dead allows. The tip of the pike trembles.

“No. I did not.” He admits, though the blade does not move from against my throat.

“We din’na find naught in th’ palace, nor the hills, nor sign nor trace o’ either th’ King nor the Princess. Not then, not since.” The axeman behind them both informs me.

“Do you not trust the word of her Guardian then?” I accuse, revealing my distain for their intellect in my tone. To mistrust a Sage…

“How can we trust the word of a woman who has locked herself away in the town of her ancestors to wait for death?” Counts the woman.

“All of the Sages have been forced to defend their Temples since mandrag Ganondorf seized the Triforce and it shattered.” I say slowly and deliberately, as though I am speaking to a particularly stubborn and fatuous child. “Impa-yana…”

“Wait.” The bowmistress who has remained silent the entire exchange orders, raising a single hand and receiving instant obedience. As she comes closer I see the badge of a Captain on what remains of her uniform, and recognize the fletching on her arrows still in her hip-quiver. She stalks across the distance between us with determined steps, ignoring Niakara’s yowls and hisses, and the pikeman lowers his weapon so she can stand as close as the weapon was.

She is slightly taller than I am, and her blue eyes remind me of a stormy, cloud-filled sky, as much steel in the mix as azure. Dark hair shows her mixed blood, but the pointed ears of a Hylian rise from beneath her cap. Her hand rises to tilt my chin, and I let her examine me much to Niakara’s displeasure. She removes the hood of my cloak, and nods sharply.

“He’s not lying about the Sheikah bit, at least.” She informs her squad, and, in searching my packs and pockets, comes across Zelda’s missive. It reiterates my story, but she still does not trust me. The caution is admirable, the restraint from violence a relief. “You intend no harm?” She asks of me. I bow my head.

“I was sent to serve in whatever capacity you have most need, Captain.” I inform her. “Harm is the last thing I would consider.”

“Liah, Nolan, stay on watch. I’m going to escort our guest to where he needs to be.” She says, her words courteous, even as she knocks an arrow and directs my movement with the head against my back.

That it is Holt she brings me to in the infirmary corroborates my story as he greets me by the name I gave her, and after an exchange of few words, she returns to her duties having been relieved of me. I tuck Niakara up against my shoulder as the healer sets me to tasks that an apt assistant can perform. There are children to fetch and carry, his regular helpers, two simplers, and a handful of others I do not recognize recovering from a battle I learn occurred three days ago. The immediate tasks are done, but those that performed them are failing, sometimes literally falling over as exhaustion takes its toll. I am fresh, can steep teas, mix poultices, measure herbs, clean bandages, and re-wrap most wounds on my own.

I can also comfort. The emotional wounds are as serious as the physical ones now, as limbs, lovers, family and friends that have been lost are mourned. To my immense pleasure, Niakara
is as effective in some cases as I could be, simply by going around and begging pets and cuddles from the ill and infirm. She takes a nap with a boy only just three cycles old visiting his mother who has an infected gash on her broken right arm. I time my cleaning of the injury with said nap so as not to distress the child, and leave the cat curled up half on top of him to attend to the next.

When the supper bells ring, I find Holt asleep in a chair and fetch his meal for him. A thick soup is provided for those unable to leave but relatively healthy, while there is clear broth for those worse off, and buns baked with cheese and apples in addition for those better still. The lanterns are dimmed quickly afterwards, and the thirty-nine patients fall asleep before the sun has completely set. The rest will help what healing arts were practiced today, and I volunteer for night watch to allow the others a full night’s rest. I am tired, yes, but cool water and pacing to check on those under my care keep me awake, and chewing some of the dark brown beans that one of the assistants gave me keeps me alert. Though unpalatable, these koufi beans could prove useful. My heart beats slightly faster, and I seem to be able to make decisions almost as quickly as I can when well rested. Whether they are correct or not remains to be seen, but no one dies. I ease pain, soothe nightmares, and help a man with a broken leg to use the chamber pot.

Uneventful as my evening and morning are, I am exhausted by the time the refreshed locals return, and beg off to find a bedroll of my own. I do not fall into it, but that is only because it is the top of a stacked set of beds and I must climb a small stool to get in. I wake briefly when the frame creaks and someone makes use of the mattress on the layer below, and then fully just after noon. The next three days are a repeat of the first, including the wary glances and mistrust. I do not leave the infirmary often or for long, but that is more due to the nature of the work itself rather than a reluctance to face such obvious unwelcome. Those I treat, those I aid, those that visit anyone within the healer’s wing quickly learn that my purpose is exactly as I proposed, and that I do not shirk my duties.

My restriction to the small wing of rooms and the kitchen via the servant’s paths means that aside from Holt himself, I only see two others I recognize, one of whom I do not remember the name of and the other only because he was assigned to serve Zelda in my body. Those of any authority are kept far away, and I assume it will remain so until I either prove myself or there is no longer enough to do with the healers to keep me confined. Given my timeline, that is unacceptable, and so on the fifth day of my attendance upon the healers demands I instead of slinking off to my allotted cot I retire to Holt’s workroom and wait. Given the situation within the Keep, he is a very busy man. I am patient.

As anticipated, he takes to the solitude of the space for his noon meal. Given that I have slumped into the corner and am more than half asleep, he does not immediately note my presence, and I do not react to his. That changes the moment Niakara smells the soft cheese he carries and twines about his legs, mewing pathetically for a bite. As with most called to the healing professions, he is not inclined to ignore suffering and gives succor freely, though he is rewarded with a purring ball of fluff on his lap for the rest of his meal. I in turn have been listening to the tenor of this particular cat’s cries since birth, and wake fully upon hearing the plaintiff tone.

“You should be in bed.’ Holt murmurs to me between mouthfuls of soup and bun.

“I should be continuing with my duties to the Crown by discovering what type of aid the Keep needs as a whole, not just tending to the injured and the ill. I must ask a respite from the infirmary to seek out audience with Lord Artura, Lady Emilya, or at least the Keep seneschal.” I yawn around the start of the second sentence, and the moment I am finished cannot hold back another, this one strong enough to crack my jaw and set my eyes watering.

“You should be in bed.” The healer reiterates with a touch more force, then sighs. “An
audience with any of those worthies will be impossible for at least three more days. Lord Artura and Lady Emilya mourn their son Rikhart and remember his twelve years with them tomorrow. Seneschal Arren remembers his wife Patience the day after. The Keep mourns all the fallen the day after that, and so if you wish to speak with any of those who embody the land, you must wait.”

“Can the harvest?” I ask, knowing that the time spent recovering and mourning is needed, but planning for the future is just as necessary when there are mouths to feed in the winter. Fewer now, but not so many fewer that the product of field and orchard can be left to rot.

“It will be tended promptly, all able hands lending aid to the task. Even the wounded are being set to preserving as much as possible.” He assures me, and I do relax slightly. Only slightly, for though all capable will be working to feed themselves and the rest of the settlement, that does not tell me if it will be enough. Perhaps he does not know, which is why I must ask someone who does. I do not decline the invitation to attend any of the funerals, for knowing the ways of mourning and comfort among more than my own culture will be only beneficial to me considering my work, if not my calling. Holt’s assessment that I will be unable to converse with the highest ranking members of the Keep is more than accurate, I don’t even see them during the first two ceremonies, and then just briefly at the third. It is only the morning after when I join with the rest of the Keep’s residents that I can get close enough to speak with Lord Artura.

Given my experience in harvesting herbs, I have been set to glean the last of the sage in the morning and setting the resultant bushels to drying in the afternoon. The leafy plants are in what used to be a strictly ornamental garden, deep within the Keep itself, and so we are relatively secluded. There are two others hard at work with tiny scythes to better reap the produce, but given the size of the space it is unlikely anything we say will be overheard.

“Lord Artura.” I greet once my row has circled back to start again, my hands sticky with the sap of the plant and smelling heavily of herb.

“…Sheik?” He blinks, the sight of me catching him off guard. Of course, the last time he saw me my hair was long and ornately braided, and Zelda was possessing me. He stares. I take the time to look at him. At the sorrow that has sapped some of his vitality, the way his shirt hangs on a frame that no longer fills it, at the dark circles of restless nights spent fretting over the fate of thousands. His is not a position I envy, but it is one I understand. It is my position to offer assistance, both looked for and unasked, and provide for both.

“Yes my Lord.” I dip my head in an abbreviated bow designed to show the respect he deserves as my better and not draw attention to our conversation. “My Lady sends her regards.” I tell him, bending to the next shrub and continuing my interrupted work. He does the same. We cut, I braid, he lays bundles in a basket to be processed later. There is much to do.

“Are you or your Lady capable of miracles?” He asks me four braids later, sounding resigned. “I’m afraid I am in need of one.”

“I cannot bring back the dead.” No matter how much I may wish it, once a spirit has passed the Second Gate there is no calling it back, and severe repercussions for retrieving one that has been past the First. His son did not linger in this world, and I tell him as much, giving him space for his tears. I soothe him as gently as I can, not interrupting or blocking the emotions that roll through him, but supporting what hope and joy he has left, bolstering his passions and sense of responsibility. His honor is encompassing, his love for his family and those he rules complete. That he supports my Queen is a boon, and I shall support him as best I can. Once the storm of emotion at the mention of Rikhart’s death has passed I take a deep breath and continue. “I cannot bring back the dead, but I can call those that linger. I can send them to the ferry, or I can give them purpose.
The dead, the scavengers, the guardians of the Shadow Temple. There...are many dead here, now.” I tell him. "Is..." He begins, but is unable to continue. I know though, Nayru’s gifts giving me that much paranormal knowledge, what he wishes to ask.

"Rikhart is in the hands of the Goddesses.” I confirm. “He would not be amongst those that I may summon.”

“We need to get the harvest in. If this had happened five years ago we would be fine, but the poor harvests from the last two years have left our stocks and larders bare. There are nine hundred and twenty three mouths to feed, eight hundred and six of them capable of helping with the harvest, another fifty nine able to work in preservation and storage. Only five hundred and twenty two of those can put in a full day’s work for days on end though. If there are no injuries, no illnesses, and we work from sun up to sun down, there will be two orchards and seven fields that go untouched, and we will starve.” He sighs, his hands stilling. “Even twenty hunters, or twenty hands to replace the hunters I have in the fields, would be enough for us to get to the third month.” It takes me a moment’s thought to orient myself in the Hyrulean solar calendar instead the lunar one I am familiar with, and equate that with the Sprout moon, where plants bloom and the beginnings of the stupid young herd and flock animals come into being, giving leave to hunt the old and infertile.

“Which orchards, and fields?” I ask, and bend to the sage once more. None of the beings I can call on would be able to handle this task, and so I must. There are certain traits and actions that each is able to perform, and I will not raise them and purpose them to something they cannot do. That is simply cruel. Lord Artura will have a plan, to be so precise with his measurements and his understanding of his land and its people, and it would be best to integrate into whatever processes have already been accounted for and arranged, rather than upsetting what efficiencies already exist.

“The onion, parsnip, turnip, winter squash, cabbage, beet and parsnip fields, and the crabapple and hero’s apple orchards will have the fewest people in them, for they retain their wholesomeness longest. The crabapples even benefit from a little frost, though the cabbages won’t do as well.” He muses, and I hum an acknowledgement that is neither commitment nor refusal. Most of those crops involve digging, and Impa has trained a number of denizens of the Shadow Temple that are particularly good at that task.

The floormasters that were crossbred with the wallmaster stock would serve my purposes well. If a digit or three is bringing in the harvest, should someone see one digging, they will not question what they are digging. The wallmasters themselves will be quite adept at carting what the floormasters dig up, and a skulltula or three to sort, could make the difference needed.

“Have you stock to spare? One, perhaps two cows, or four or five pigs?” I ask. “And a cold, dark storage space that isn’t being used?” Food and shelter for the duration of their stay.

“Does it all need to be the same livestock? Or would sheep and goats suffice as well?” He asks, and I nod.

“It is more the quantity of meat, and the degree of putrefaction, than type.” I confirm, and can feel Zelda running to find Impa and get her agreement. If she would allow me to borrow those she has trained rather than purpose the wild ones in the area then the work will go faster with less loss of product due to error. “Though a mix of fresh and foul will be needed.” I stall. “Possibly. Let me check.” Focusing on our bond and allowing Zelda to draw on my physical stamina renews her pace towards her destination, allowing her to speak on arrival rather than being winded. I cannot hear the discussion, only know it is happening and the emotions that run rampant through a teenager’s body. My own adolescence was not so long ago that I have forgotten. When she asks, I
give over control, and within a quarter of a mark arrangements have been made.

Her leaving is gentler than last time it happened before the Lord of this place, though his hand steadies me in the space between seconds where neither Zelda nor myself is in true control of my form.

“Thank you.” I murmur, bowing my gratitude, and he nods.

“Is it difficult, letting her use you so?” The question is borne of concern, but misplaced.

“No, truly it is not. Our minds are as one in this, and it is an honor to be able to serve her thus.” I assure him, and smile to show I mean it. “It is only her leaving that gives me pause.”

“…very well then. What do you need? Not for your…friends…but you, personally.”

“A warm meal and bed, afterward. Green potion, if it is available.” I admit. This level of spell casting, using Farore’s magic, will be hard on me.

“All three then. Come, let me show you where I intend to house your creatures.” Taking up the full braids of sage and the bundled baskets, I follow. Slightly less than a mark after a light lunch of soup and salad, I am grateful that my stomach is mostly empty as I supervise the butchery and accelerate the process of decay enough to be suitable.

Ten marks later, six digits of wallmasters, nine of floormasters, and five skulltulas have taken up residence in what used to be a wine cellar and are beginning the trek out to the indicated fields. I make sure of their destinations with four Poes that will report on their progress once I wake, and am asleep before my head hits the pillow.
The Manumission

Chapter Summary

By these hands be free.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the longest, so it'll take the most time to read...unless other chapters make you take a break as you go through them, in which case this is still probably the chapter that will take the most time. It's not excessively longer, but it IS longer.

Warnings include: nightmares, precognition, mild depression, panic, mental anguish, mass death of original minor characters, magic - both thaumaturgy and theurgy as well as LoZ OoT specific types, pseudo-military action, more forward time jumping, masturbation, racism, self-sacrifice, and being a dingus.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Happy birthday hannuhn.”

“Happy birthday nuhnah.”

“Happy birthday kariah, hannuhnsiu.” Keiko chimes in, and I can hear Insu burbling in the background. Though most of his words are unintelligible to me, there are distinct sounds that are almost words close enough that I can determine he is talking to the stuffed Goron doll I gifted him nearly a full cycle previous.

A large, roundish, brown shape with shiny black dyed bone button eyes is not that difficult to construct on the go, and I have not stopped in nineteen turns. Not for any longer than it takes me to complete my task, at any rate. In the nearly twenty turns I have been clearing, creating, and casting to construct multiple hidden sanctuaries for the Mistress of my Soul, much has changed. I count Insu’s growth on the positive side, next to the children I have sired but have no part in rearing. Zelda’s growth as well, has been rapid and stunning. I could hope for nothing more in that regard.

The fact that I must use the speaking stones surreptitiously to have any contact with people aside from speech of the mind with the queen of a realm under siege is driving me more than a little mad. With the price on my head a sum greater than all the coffers of Kakariko combined, there is no other choice. I cannot abandon my duty to the scion of the Goddess, nor can I be seen. At least my use of the eleven sanctuaries has guaranteed that they are well provisioned, well secured, and well hidden. Would that I had but some means of posting a guard, I would not hesitate to jump between locations daily if needed. With one moonstone and sunstone set remaining and the location chosen, I can take my time in the creation of the space and go only when I know it will be safe to do so.

“It’s good to hear your voice.” I murmur, softly enough that only Hylian ears should be able to pick it up, but my twin has always been beyond perceptive in regards to my moods.
“What do you want me to tell Ummai and Papa?” He ignores the desperate loneliness in my tone and the quavering whimper that escapes my lips at his question. Two years is far too long to keep the latest member of the Ren clan from taking his proper place in the bloodlines. Our parents too, would like to meet their first grandchild. Insu himself must know where he comes from in order to better choose his future, and he cannot do that in the now small, secluded town of Derinkuyu.

“. . .I continue my service. It is what I was born to do.” I affirm. “And that I miss them both, very much. I am content to remain.” My longing for home, for family, for civilization in its most basic form is something that drives my every urge. I want to go home, return to the peace, the discovery, the interaction, the wonder that used to be such an integral part of me. Were Yoru or Keiko Hylian, that too would not remain my secret to keep. For other Shaekha’ri though, I can modulate my tone enough that they cannot tell.

To think that only a few cycles ago the very concept of lying was foreign and repulsive. Now I can do it with the best of them and not think twice about it, though I do regret every instance. I cannot even be certain that my motivation for doing so is for the greater good, or if it is simply my ego unable to take yet another blow to my sense of self and community. Niakara bears the tears of my lonely exile when the urge grows too strong to be contained.

“Will you at least be able to see us off?” My younger brother asks.

“We won’t leave until first Sprout.” Keiko adds.

“It’s nearly two turns, hannahun. Surely you will be finished by then?” Yoru’s voice is thick with emotion that I cannot fault him for. He and Keiko journeyed all the way from Sahila just for him to be able to be near me in my divine duty, and I have spent most of the time since beyond his reach and knowledge. Even this conversation is a great risk, the only speaking stones still functioning well within the territory claimed by mandrag Ganondorf. That land which is held by the loyalists grows continually smaller, every day. I can no longer even remember all the names of the dead, though some of their remnants trail after me like ducklings wherever I go, waiting for the release of the Silent Realm.

“It is my most sincere hope.” I do not promise anything. I cannot. He knows it. They both do.

“At least swear to me you’ll do the best you can to stay safe and return to us one day.” He sighs.

“Speaking of which…” I divert, again not capable giving him any form of surety.

“You need to go.” He bites out, and it is my turn to sigh.

“Yes.” I have lingered here as long as I dare.

“Nayru guide you then.”

“And you.” I whisper, and release the spell holding the line between speaking stones open. The platform I stand on is remarkably exposed, given its height, but concealed from below for the same reason and awkward to reach amongst the water warped paths leading to the Zora’s Domain. They, at least, have proven as steady an ally as the Gorons, and I would have any number of them at my back, were they allowed to know I was amongst them. The twisted stone and earth leaves many paths open during the day, so at twilight it is simple for me to step into the shadow and bypass the octoroks, the stream, the rickety bridge, and the waterfall blocking my way.
Were I here diplomatically, I could simply play the Royal Lullaby and be admitted. As I am here covertly at best, I rush past the guards in the element of my people and pause only long enough to whisper of my arrival to the rotund monarch. He shivers his acknowledgement, and I move past the honor guards keeping vigil over Jabu-jabu’s altar. Though their patron deity hasn’t been seen in turns, His presence is still felt in this chamber. A physical form now means vulnerability, and His withdrawing to the Divine Realms only helps preserve His strength and thus His guardianship of his people.

The marks of my geas seared into my flesh are the only reason He allows my regular trespassing, and I respect His space by moving through it as quickly, quietly, and unobtrusively as possible. I am not unnoticed by the giant fish, but neither am I revealed or rejected, merely another ripple in the water. This close to the mountains, the air is always chill. This time of year, ice coats the walls and ground, clear and crystalline. The small shack I have built of smooth logs chinked with clay and earth is water-tight, the tiny coal stove providing enough warmth that I can disrobe somewhat. Not entirely, not all at once, which makes bathing interesting, but enough for comfort. My hair is almost long enough to braid again, and could use a good combing, so I stoke the flames and start my late supper to boiling before doing so.

The wall of my shelter backed against the cliff face is taken up by a rope bed piled high with the fur of the wolfos that inhabit the area and try my wards. Those that leave me alone are safe. Those that attack I eliminate swiftly and surely. There have been enough driven to seek prey they would not normally attempt that I have an additional three skins on the floor to protect my feet. My table I brace and pull down from the wall, and leave my damp outer wear to dry above the stove itself. It is not much space, but again, it is all that is needed. I am alone, with no possibility of guests, the only other person to know of my location is the one I have sworn to protect. Should she need the space, I have other options.

Taking down the one spare set of clothing I have, dried from yesterday’s washing, I set to mending a small tear in the cuff of the pant leg as I wait for the thin, watery broth of cabbage and potato stew to cook, the last of my protein gone with breakfast. I have a handful of bay leaves I am saving for a special occasion, and deem the anniversary of the day of mine and my brother’s birth twenty cycles of the seasons previous sufficient for their usage. The mild herb will give some variety of flavor, if no extra nutrition. If only Valyarie could see me now. I snort at the thought. Though no longer a boy in her understanding of the word, the milestone of having achieved two decades in this body, this life will be celebrated by brief words with the only family I have left, a dry leaf, and an early bed time.

.:Aein-ah, happy birthday!: . Zelda’s mental voice chimes in as I spoon the hot broth directly from the pot. There is no need of bowls when I am the only one eating.

.:Thank you, Zelda-hanyana.: . I reply in the same manner. .:How goes the meeting?: . While I have been trudging through waist deep snow in an unsuccessful jaunt to hunt something for my pot, she has been sequestered in the Chamber of Sages as they attempt to locate the rest of Ganondorf’s army and the Dark Sorcerer himself. His coup nearly complete, the population cowed through brutal murder, public torture, and the disappearance of entire towns overnight, he has been remarkably quiet this winter. While Torisu of the Zoran contingent, Marc coordinating the Aversa Keep populations, the Kakariko council, and Lord Bradley are certain that it is simply to spare his forces the task of moving and fighting in winter, others are not so sure.

.:We are divided.: She sighs, and I can feel her frustration. Given that neither of us have been able to sleep well or long due to the nightmares for the entirely of the Wolf Moon, I am inclined to side with the pre-cognitive Queen, but my voice is not one admitted to the Chamber’s call. Zelda can take over my body at will, so who is to say she cannot do the same to my mind? I echo both the
sigh and the frustration, and wish desperately there were something I could do to offer tangible proof for the disaster that both of us can sense coming.

.:Have you any support?: I ask, sending a burst of reassurance and comfort through the link that neither of us can completely close off. Not anymore. I keep as much of my depression from her as I can, but there is only so much I can conceal.

.:Only the usual. Impa backs me fully as she always has, Rauru acts as a balance. Darunia is enthusiastic about every option and chooses none. Ruto listens to Torisu and her court as much as our council and representatives.: Zelda grumbles as she flings herself down into the chair in her own kitchen. :I wish I could remember more of my dreams, or make better sense of them. Fire and Ice? Stillness and flight? One half of a whole, two sides of the same coin. And terror. Pain. That much is always the same.:.

.:I know.: I reassure, my mental presence moving to embrace hers about the shoulders, curving my spine around her to shield her from the evocative memories of dreams that show what is to come, if only we can decipher their riddles. They are familiar memories, familiar dreams, I have shared them with her, seeing less, feeling a breeze where she stands in a blizzard. The feeling of nauseating fear is the only thing that I receive completely, and I know that is only because there is a limit to the amount of dread one can experience before it overpowers all senses.

.:Did you speak with Yoru yet, or should I go drag him to the speaking stone? He wanted to ask you something that he didn't feel comfortable telling me.: My Lady changes the line of conversation, and I take the escape from our current struggles for what it is. Hidden as I am and guarded as she is, I can expound on more than minimal pleasantries before fear of discovery drives me to shelter once more. My soup is cool by the time I return to myself fully, and I set it back on the stove for breakfast. Adding more water and some beans to simmer overnight means that I will have alternative proteins then, though Niakara will require meat soon to maintain her health.

Gazing at the waning moon means going outside, for there are no windows in my rough hut, and I choose instead to simply sleep. The rest means I need less food and burn less coal to keep the space heated beneath my wolfo skin blankets. As expected, my dreams are interrupted by premonition, and I try desperately to cling to what information I can on waking. Niakara sneezes her displeasure and returns to dreams curled at the foot of the bed, but I do not have the same luxury. Zelda is awake, terrified, and unable to respond to my calls. She has seen more, and the shock of it is keeping her from action.

I am under no such constraints, and take only enough time to dress for the weather before playing the Lament of the Lost to take me to the forgotten sanctuary where my people are dying a slow, inevitable death. The warp stone is as cold as ice, but its hidden nature keeps it free of snow, and my usage has lead my brother to keeping a path clear to the inhabited areas. This early in the morning with dawn at least three and a half marks off, the waning moon provides just enough light reflected off the frozen water for me to find my way. My bond leads me directly to my Lady, gasping and staring into nothingness as she sees what is beyond even my eyes.

The bedding is soaked with sweat, cold and clammy to the touch, and I lift her from it and cradle her close to the fire. It has been banked for the night but is still giving off more heat than my small stove could hope to produce. Given the frequency of her visions, my Lady has taken to keeping paper and ink close to the bed, and I write down what I myself can remember as I wait for her to come back to the present, both as means of recalling what I have seen and as a distraction from how good it feels to be close to someone. Anyone. It is not much, not compared to the full leaf she manages once she is coherent again, but it does reinforce some of the pervasive themes. I use the time she takes in recording prophecy to put together flat cakes, rolling a thick layer of preserved
berries inside while they are still malleable and leaving them close enough for her to consume with her free hand. She does not question my presence at her side, and that in itself comforts me. I will always have a place to belong.

“Aein-ah, wake Impa please.” Her voice quavers, but the core of steel is evident as she presses on. “It is already too late for the Keep itself, but there may be survivors.” The shuddering breath she draws holds me there long enough for her next words. “Do not be seen by any but the Sage’s chosen.”

“Yes, your Majesty.” My bow is in the Hyrulean form, my words in the language of her childhood, my obedience purely hers no matter what language or custom binds us. It has been over two cycles since last I played the Nocturne, and the vile, repulsive malice emanating from the well has grown in my absence enough to disorient me briefly. The guards of Kakariko follow their patrols, listening for any sound, watching for any sight of anything out of place. With regular streets swept and shovelled free of snow and ice, lanterns casting flickering shadows on the walls and showing clearly the paths of the town, moving unseen and unheard past the guards of uncertain alliance is child’s play. Impa’s house, on the other hand, is a much more difficult puzzle.

Ever my superior in the Shaekha’ri Arts of War, I know that for every trap, trigger, and ward I can see there will be at least three more I cannot detect. Should I attempt stealth in breaching her dwelling, I am not certain I will survive the experience, for what I can see is enough to make me wary. Yet she is still the titular authority of this place, and as such must have means of summoning her from sleep in an emergency. The clapper on the front door is not an option, as it would definitely alert the guard patrolling one level beneath, and though I would fit, using the same door as her cow would result in triggering some nasty traps. She has guarded herself against all manner of spell work, and a simple thief attempting entry is likely to end up with broken limbs.

The power from the Shadow Temple is a steady stream sustaining her vigilance, and it is there that I know I can wake her without coming to personally grievous bodily harm. The thickest flow is from the north-east, which is also the most concealed side of the large building, and gives me plenty of space to furtively place myself for greatest effect. Carefully, I sink into the flow of Shadow, then brace and shield myself from it, much like putting a large boulder in the way. The course of the stream moves around me, altered but not interrupted. When no Sage appears to chastise me for the disruption, I drop the spell and channel the energy into a funnel instead, causing the force of the flow to increase as it is restricted in space but not volume. Fortunately, that gets a response. Unfortunately, it is not a pleased one.

The Sage of Shadow, General of the Loyalist Army, and Master of the Blade herself emerges from the back door to her home clad in her night clothes and boots, hair unbound and extremely irritated. When she sees me, however, I am grasped by the collar and pulled inside faster than I could run if my feet were allowed to touch the floor.

“What in Farore’s name are you doing here, you idiot?!?” She hisses at me as soon as I am within the safety of her home. Before I can reply, I am no longer faced with a woman woken from an exhausted slumber, but the commander of armies and survivor to two wars. “You are under explicit orders to remain outside the furthest boundary markers at all times. Under no circumstances…” The Sage of Shadow looks at me, seeing no doubt the bags under my eyes from restless nights, the tightness of skin over bones from too many missed meals, and the changing tone of my skin and hair as Zelda exerts herself and takes control.

“I have remanded your previous orders and sent Sheik here to wake you. Aversa Keep has been destroyed and a command must be sent to assist any survivors as quickly as possible” Before Impa can absorb that choice piece of information, Zelda presses on. “To that effect, you are to
alert and gather the required personnel and equipment here before dawn. At first light, Sheik will
take the command via the Serenade to the Water Temple. He will accompany the command enroute
until I dismiss him.” Zelda orders in my voice, with my body standing in proxy for hers. Impa
knows this, and it is that fact alone that keeps her from striking me in her vexation.

I understand it, truly. She has spent as much time and effort keeping me hidden as I have,
while simultaneously using my existence to fuel rumor and, in some cases, breed a cowing fear into
those who need it. I would like to meet the legendary figure she has cut me as, but my presence
here, now, and with these people will need to live up to that legend while simultaneously remaining a
clandestine whisper to the rest of the realm. Expediency, however, has also left me as the best option
she has to respond to the emergency on the other side of the county. Every hour the refugees of
Aversa remain in the elements means more deaths, and if there is anything the Goddess of the Hylian
people abhors it is needless death and suffering. It is not so surprising then, that Her descendants feel
the same way.

“Understood.” Impa snaps a salute to Zelda in my body that is sharp and straight and
utterly controlled, and then my Lady is gone along with the confidence she feels that I am up to the
task. Given that she is looking right at me, the silver haired Sage notices immediately, and her
posture softens ever so slightly before she slaps me, hard, across the cheek snapping my head to the
side and raising a red welt that will bruise in a matter of hours. “Stay there.” She barks, pulling on a
cloak and disappearing into the night. Not wishing to upset her further, I obey, and wait for her
return. I dare not even sit on the floor, though I am tired enough that sleeping there seems like a
good idea. Fortunately, she is not long in returning, throwing a bundle of cloth at me.

“Impa-yana?” I ask when she simply stares.

“Put it on. If I have to turn a runt of a Shaekha’ri cleric into a fearsome Sheikah warrior
then I need to see what I have to work with.” Her point is valid, but that doesn’t change the fact that
I haven’t been keeping myself in the best physical condition. The muscle of hard labour is there,
lean and lanky for all the walking between, but I do not cut an impressive figure. My hair hasn’t
been trimmed since it was shaved in my attempts to gain as much length back as possible, and I
haven’t shaved my wispy mess of a beard in turns…almost as long since I’ve had a proper bath.

The last is remedied immediately, with a rough corn husk brush for the worst of the grime
that scours me to the new skin, leaving me pink and sore. She lets me shave myself, for I balk at the
sight of the razor blade in her more than capable hands, so instead she trims my hair at the same time
as I take care of my face. It is not long enough to pull back in anything more than a simple tail when
she is finished, but I feel much better. Though the contact is not intimate, nor entirely voluntary, it is
more than I have had in longer than I care to remember and she is not an enemy or stranger. Her
gaze is judgemental, yes, but not insulting or degrading.

“You’re too skinny, too short, and too pretty.” She tells me. “Let’s fix that.”

By the time the first of her summoned chosen arrive, I have been outfitted in the winter
gear of a Han clan warrior. The skin-tight body suit is of a blue between that of the depths of Lake
Hylia and the indigo of a shiik, while the reinforced portions are purple dyed dodongo hide. The
purple of royalty. Had I need of any other indicators that the clothing was designed for Impa in
mind, the restrictive nature of the gusset of the trousers is uncomfortable, and I must bind the ample
fabric in the chest down or risk injury as the hidden armoring and pockets do not properly align to
my body. The arms of the shirt, also, need to be held up so as not to cover my hands. The gloves
are a lost cause. The sleeved cloak is deeply cowed, leaving enough room for a layered filtration
mask beneath. My hair has been bound beneath a skull cap, over which a hood of wolfo's fur fits
snugly. Should I allow my locks to grow any longer, they will spill from beneath.
As it stands, all the arrivals can see of me is the whipcord muscle of my legs, the thick-skinned boots, a shrouded form, and a pair of crimson irises. I let them look, stare them down if they meet my eyes, and wait, as still as statuary and twice as hard. They are prompt, orderly, and aside from the occasional sideways glance, make no aggressive or dismissive moves towards me. They trust their commander, and that bodes well for their discipline and their tolerance of my presence within their ranks. When fifteen soldiers stand before me, four women and eleven men, Impa ascends three of the brick stairs towards the sleeping area of her home to better be seen and heard by the assembled command.

“I’ve called you from your beds, your homes, and your families tonight because you are the best I have, and you are needed. Tonight, Aversa Keep was destroyed, and I need ten volunteers to leave at first light and attend to the casualties there. Those that choose to remain here will be charged with organizing refugee camps and building relief packages. Those that leave will be following Captain Treesha from the Water Temple to Aversa Keep’s holdings to both search for survivors and provide as much aid as you are able should you encounter the need. We leave at true dawn, which gives you almost two hours to prepare. Who will answer the suffering of our people?” She queries, expectation so thick in the air I can almost see it.

Seven hands rise, and with the Captain that means two more are needed. When none join their compatriots, those going wait for Impa to note down their names in one of her many ledgers while those remaining move out of the way. The seven are dismissed immediately after to prepare, and the seven yet to choose form a loose circle with Impa, myself, and the woman I must assume to be Captain Treesha in one small arc. A tall man, with arms as thick as my thighs, raises a hand and waits for acknowledgement.

“My wife is ill. It’s a simple cold, but with Olivia and Sander being so young I’d rather not leave them alone.” He says, and his reasoning is sound. Young children should not be without an able caretaker.

“Opposed?” Treesha asks, and at no dissenters protesting, the man is allowed to remain in Kakariko and help with building the relief packs. Should his wife recover, he will follow with them as soon as possible.

“Who’s he?” A stocky axeman with his weapon on his back at this early hour and in a place of relative peace asks, jutting his chin in my direction. Impa simply raises an eyebrow, which I take to mean I should give my own introductions. Rising from my place braced against the wall beneath the second floor I walk into the light and let him see what there is of me to perceive. Having no mirror, I am uncertain as to how fearsome my appearance truly is, but Impa is satisfied. Pitching my voice to carry, with as much authority as I can call as a shiik, I answer.

“Sheik, Survivor of the Sheikah.” I tell him, making certain to direct my gaze precisely to meet his. Two of the other soldiers take a step back, and I would smirk if relief was not the predominant emotional surge at their reactions. The rumors Impa has been cultivating have borne fruit. Now to fuel their fire.

Sliding into the shadow my steps have taken me to that originates in his form, I re-form myself immediately behind him, close enough that he can feel my breath on the back of his neck. He turns quickly for such a wide man, but not quickly enough. I have already stepped back far enough that his axe is ilms from doing me harm, and the blow to his pride as a warrior makes it worth yalms.

“You?” I return as nonchalantly as I can manage.

“W-Warren, of Orville Keep.” The stammer is his undoing, and Impa steps in to allow him to save face.
"Sheik will be accompanying you primarily as a guide. He is familiar with the area, a friend of Lady Flora, and capable of transporting the entire command to the Water Temple via sacred magic in a matter of seconds." The Sage of Shadow informs the expectant faces surrounding us, and from there it is simple to gain the remaining volunteers, Warren among them. With explicit instructions not to mention my involvement, the soldiers are dismissed, and Treesha takes the time to find out what exactly I am capable of, and how far my authority extends.

Which is precisely nowhere. I am an autonomous agent, cooperating with the Kakariko militia. She can give me orders, but I am free to ignore them under my own jurisdiction. For the foreseeable future though, I will obey. One commander for one command, one voice and one purpose. Unless the danger to myself grows too great, I am hers as much as any of the volunteers. I am allowed to question her as well, and conclude our interaction with satisfaction. She has her own preparations, and I buy some meat from the Kakariko stores to leave with Niakara. Though a proficient hunter, the snow hampers her stalking, and I would rather return to a content cat than a starving one. Extinguishing the fire ensures that I will not burn the building to the ground, and the soup will freeze solid in a day.

My second use of the Nocture brings me back to the forecourt of the Temple and from there to Impa’s is easier now that I am expecting the force of the presence in the well. Six of the command are prepared by the time I return, dressed in cold weather gear and finishing stocking the sleds that we will be pulling loaded with supplies. So grateful am I for the company, I cannot even complain at the weight. It will be a tricky thing though, to carry so many and so much with the Song. Rather than overestimate myself, I inform my temporary Captain, and she simply takes the information in stride.

By dawn not only has the entire outfit assembled, but they’ve moved the sleds and themselves over to the corridor leading to the graveyard from the town. No matter the time of day, the area is well shaded, and close enough to the Temple that I may restore myself somewhat from its energies. Hopefully enough that I don’t need to use any of the three bottles of green potion Impa pressed into my hands. I take the stuffed bun with thanks, sausage and leavened breads something that I cannot prepare on my own well, and breakfast is had on the go. It is not enough to replace the lack of sleep, but it does warm both my stomach and my heart. Captain Treesha calls for attention as soon as the last soldier’s family has stepped away, and I turn with the rest to face her.

"Listen up! Warren, Ean, Rechell, Lyam, and Konyr will be first, with Randi, Ondrea, Haruld, Lukan, and myself in second. Sheik will transport the first group to just outside the Water Temple where you are to clear the area immediately and assess any and all threats. The Zora are our allies, do not attack them." She pauses to reinforce her point, then continues. "Once the pad has been cleared, Sheik will then return to the Shadow Temple just beyond the graveyard and take the second group. We will then begin a march that will push everything you have and then some, so be prepared for a hard day. Konyr and Lukan, I want you to take lead first, with Lyam and Warren second, Rechell and Ondrea third, Sheik and Ean fourth, myself and Haruld fifth. When you get tired, signal the next pair, but push and push hard. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Captain!" Choruses about me, and I nod my agreement, too late to respond in like manner. I should be recovered from the Songs by the time the fourth turn arrives. As I will not be in charge of one of the six sleds immediately, I have time to position myself as effectively as possible to get as much coverage with my magic supported by the shadow in the corridor and the Temple so close at hand. Five other people and three of the sleds is a bit of a stretch, but definitely possible, and the second I feel steady enough I play the Serenade and feel the ancient magic activate.

The cloudy, overcast day in Kakariko is matched on the platform holding the massive stone pad of the Water Temple, with the addition of high winds making the wooden bridges between
islands sway. Despite the uncertain footing, the five soldiers this trip quickly clear the pad and move towards the closest island not actually bearing the magic of all the water of the country. With a breath, feeling the drain this time, I return to the Shadow Temple and set a brisk pace to where Captain Treesha has the rest of the command set within the exact same boundaries of the corridor as the first. While that makes my job easier, reducing our timeline, it also means I won’t have as much recovery time between major uses of my magic. The green potion may be needed after all.

With a sigh of resignation to having my taste buds assaulted, I extend my shadow once more to cover the rest of the command, and bring the whistle to my lips. Breath and intent, and the cold stone of the Water Temple’s pad is beneath my feet once more. While the remaining five orient themselves I down the smallest of the potions and scrape my tongue on my teeth in a failed attempt to try not to taste it. It doesn’t work, but there is work to be done. The difference in transporting living beings and inanimate objects is more than tenfold in how much effort is required, and so I am less than steady on my feet as we head for the shore of Lake Hylia. Combined with the swaying bridges and the icy rime clinging to every surface, it is no true surprise when I slip.

The surprise is in the hand about my waist, steadying me and keeping me out of the frigid water below. I do not know who it is, having heard names twice at best and only one being used as a direct address, but he is strong. Barely taller than I am, he manages my weight easily, making certain I have regained my balance before releasing his grip. I am thankful for the layers concealing my face and hiding my blush, as well as the cloak covering a much more physical reaction. Despite the precarious footing, we are on shore by noon where we stop for a short break.

A stomach full of hot food I did not have to prepare myself brings me dangerously close to napping, and the reduced pace while we digest does not help my weariness. The same soldier that caught me on the bridges keeps pace behind me in the single file line, and much as Chia and Taoh used to, makes certain that I maintain a steady rhythm. I get a third wind, my second having passed long ago, nearly a mark into our time breaking the trail, and it doesn’t fade until our camp for the evening is nearly set. When it goes though, it takes everything I have left just to stumble to the fur lined bedroll I’ve been assigned and slide inside, boots and all. Exhaustion takes over, and the next thing I am aware of it is well into the morning and the camp is being packed up.

“Rise and shine, sleepyhead. We’ve got a lot of walking ahead of us and only you can tell us which direction that will be.” The soldier from yesterday smiles even as he hands me a cold roll stuffed with preserved fruit, nuts, and honey. I take the time to rub the grit from my eyes before taking it from him, and as I eat he rerolls my bed and packs it onto the sled. Embarrassed by my lack of contribution to the camp as a whole, I make certain of my internal compass and knowledge of the area before directing our march in the quickest, if not most direct, route. There is little talk, less song, and an absolute dearth of joy, though there is a grim purpose that drives us all.

Restored somewhat by my hard sleep, I can easily outpace the rest of the command. With Captain Treesha’s permission, I do, ranging ahead to scout our path, checking for both dangers and potential boons. I come across one of the later much sooner than the former, and am pleased when my ever increasing skill with my throwing needles nets not one, but two winter white hares. I thank them for their sacrifice, so that we may persist, and carry them with care. While not as plump as their early-season relations, they will feed six comfortably. Fresh meat spread out to eleven meagrely is still fresh meat that we did not have before and a welcome addition to the noon pot.

It also restores some of the faith these strangers have in me, and in Impa by proxy, and for that I am beyond grateful. We take long enough to rest while the meal cooks, eat, and clean the site before heading into the snow covered hills once more. The soldier assigned as my partner and I are to take the lead along my anticipated route, breaking the trail for those pulling the sleds. By trading off on the duty, we can make better time, for those that are wearied continue after the sleds that
further level the ground. Even Captain Treesha takes her turn both slogging through snowdrifts ranging from a light dusting to waist deep, and hauling a sled that weighs at least what she does if not more.

We make better time than I had anticipated for a group of mixed peoples. Though, obviously, I am the only Shaekha’ri, the Humans, Hylians and derivations thereof are in peak physical condition and used to the kind of hard, sustained energy output that we must maintain if we are to be in the least successful. The type of deep breathing required combined with uncertainty over how hostile the territory is explains the silence of our travel, but not the camp itself. It unnerves me, and when it continues beyond first watch, I turn in my bedroll and watch the camp in the darkness.

At the furthest edge of my expanded sight, the faint flicker of heat shows me at what point Warren is in his patrols ever so briefly before even that is hidden by topography. I shift, focussing closer to where I lay in my slight hollow and water-proofed skins, and allow my vision to adjust. The coals of our cook-fire are truly dead, as dark and cold as the landscape. The Captain is deeply asleep, as are the other two women present. Of the five remaining in camp, not including myself, only three are truly sleeping. I do not know their names, but the one whose bloodline is as pure as Zelda’s is shifting rhythmically beneath his covers. My assigned partner is dozing, not truly asleep, but not really awake either. I am in a similar state, for though my body clamours for rest, my mind is too active with fretting to sleep.

Vidkun’s caravan under Chuki’s Traders was scheduled to be in Aversa by the start of the first month, and, though I am still shaky on exactly when that is, believe he would have arrived there already. Aside from my personal feelings on the matter, he is the sole support of his aging father, his sister, and her three children. I have learned much of them since we first met, and despite some hard decisions on both our parts and necessity driving me into hiding, I still enjoy his company. Or would, if I could see him, and I did not have to pay for the privilege as most who enjoy his company do. He does not make enough for trading goods alone to feed six, let alone keep them sheltered and clothed, and so offers other services as well.

Chuki, through Mukesh, instigated our first meeting by arranging Vidkun’s services for a member of Sheik’s staff. It was one of the hard decisions he faced in telling me, and one of the hard decisions I made in continuing our association. He can honestly tell his boss and employer both that I am Aein, and Sheik is not my employer or master. My letters have been infrequent and sporadic, while he cannot send me any. The routes of the caravans, however, he knows a season in advance. When our paths cross and he can get away, it has been good. Very good.

Even thinking about our last encounter is enough to rile me to the point of discomfort, combined with the shifting two bedrolls away, there is no way I will be able to sleep without taking care of it. I am no longer a teenager, with a teenager’s instinctual responses, but I know the results of what I am about to do and have enough presence of mind to arrange for the eventualities my actions will bring about. First, to ensure that the sounds I make are muffled enough that, even if the fully Hylian members of this command were awake and paying attention, they will be dismissed. Second, finding a clean rag to dispose of the evidence within my packs. It requires a bit of shifting, but by the time I’m prepared the camp is asleep and Warren far enough out that he will not return before I finish.

I know what I like, and as a result this will not take long.

Cold hands are never a good thing, and I chafe mine together to ensure I don’t do myself harm. Careful not to lift the heavy furs any more than necessary and let the frigid air in, I let one hand fumble with the ties of my clothing while the other places the cloth as best I can. Then it is a simple matter, even in the darkness of the new moon and the confines of my bedroll, to follow the
coarse line of hair downward to the juncture of my thighs. I am stiff, hot to the touch, and already moist with anticipation. A single finger is enough to swipe some of that fluid from the head and smear it down my length.

I am not impressively sized like Vidkun, nor am I of a length that makes nudity awkward like Enzo, which to my mind is all to the good. I fit comfortably in my hand, the gentle curve urging me to tug upwards with a light grip. Both of my previous lovers and a number of clients have told me they prefer a stronger grasp from the start, but I am either more sensitive or have less control, and cannot bear a heavy hand immediately. I must work up to it. I can, however, trail my other hand further between my legs, below my balls heavy in their sacs, and flick at the furled opening hidden there. I haven’t enough lubrication to do more than that, but it is enough to cause my breath to quicken and my heart to race.

Lifting my balls, I use my knuckles to drag over my perineum and help with the motion driving me into my other hand, tightening my fingers ever so slightly as tension ramps up. A steady stream of liquid starts, the slick glide exquisite beneath my calloused skin. My speed increases as I imagine my dream lover above me, his weight pressing me down and sheltering me at the same time. For all the visions of the future that I have, his face is never revealed, but the way I feel, the comfort, the safety, the arousal, the sheer joy, cannot be mistaken for anything else.

His hands, my hands, it no longer matters. The friction, the heat, the touch at the base of my spine and the tip of my penis, the thought of him on top of me…I muffle my moans as much as possible, breathless though they are. Quickly I find myself approaching that abyss that I seek, so quickly in fact that when Zelda joins me the foreign sensation of someone else using my hands as I touch myself sends me over the edge faster than I anticipated and with a great deal more force. I am still in control enough that my gasps of pleasure turn to ones of shock, which quickly become pleasure again as Zelda lets me share in her experience.

It is only much later that I can form a coherent thought, and long minutes after that before I can form a sentence in any language. Zelda recovers faster than I do, it seems, though that may be the prerogative of females on the whole.

:Oops:. She manages, and for once I can feel her blush in embarrassment instead of me being the one to do it.

:Hanyana, what…:. Maybe not a full sentence after all.

:I was going to check on how you were doing. How far you’d travelled from the Water Temple:. She clarifies before I can respond to the first. :Though Impa tells me that you’ve been neglecting yourself again:. She scolds me, turning the flush on my face from discomfited arousal to shame as quickly as the Sun’s Song brings the twilight.

:There’s been no one to impress:. I finally admit, both to myself and to my Mistress. :When I am to be unseen by all, what is the point of using time that could be spent furthering our goals in maintaining my appearance? Why burn the coal to heat a bath when a basin and cloth keeps me sanitary?:

:Does not the book of Nayru state that “To put the world in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must put the family in order, to put the family in order, we must cultivate our personal life; and to cultivate our personal life…:. She trails off, expectant.

:….we must first set our hearts right.”:. I finish. :I do not see how that applies to my grooming habits:. :.
I have been neglecting you, Aein. How can I expect to be able to rule a country well if I cannot take care of the one person as close to me as anyone has ever been? We share a purpose, a devotion, our thoughts, and your body. Yet I have been remiss in attending to your needs in favour of serving my wants. The self-recrimination hits me harder than I thought, yet I know it is from my Lady and thus muted in intensity.

I pledged you my service, Zelda-hanyana. Resusangeul bi hundeou. I am your instrument. I am to be played. I remind her. The Book of Farore says “A ship is safe in harbour, but that’s not what ships are for.” If she is going to quote scripture at me, I will return it exponentially. She has only been studying for a handful of years, while I have been doing the same since before she was born.

And it is a poor musician indeed that does not care for his instrument, and a poor captain that never sees a dock. If I must, after the refugees of Aversa are cared for, I am ordering you to rest. Recover some of your joys, Aein-ah. Be selfish. She encourages me, and I can feel my mouth moving to form a smile that matches the one on her lips. Your pleasure shouldn’t be spent alone, cold, and in the dark. The smile is joined by a blush on both our parts, and as she withdraws I spend the time needed to clean up.

Fortunately, I am finished and drifting towards sleep when Warren returns to camp and wakes one of the women for her turn on patrol. I must remember to learn their names, if only for my peace of mind. My turn will come, and so I slow my breathing and let my mind free, finding dreams easily. I am given the darkest of night for my patrol of the camp, and with the moon finished waning and not yet waxing, it is dark indeed. At first I take the low moaning to be the wind whistling across the snow, the flickering light that of the stars reflected in an infinite prism of ice. The further I get from camp, however, the louder the sound grows and the brighter the light shines. As I cross a small tributary frozen completely solid just out of sight of our camp by virtue of the rolling hills of the area, the light coalesces into distinguishable form.

Ghosts. Hundreds of spirits of the recently dead, well on their way to becoming undistinguished Poes, bound within some sort of barrier that I can pass through easily but they are completely confined in. At this point, however, they are still ghosts, still coherent, still only as violent as they were in life. I push my way through the barrier, feel the faint burn of dark magic on my skin, and seek out one of the ones wearing a uniform. A guard. Human.

Nataniel. He’s already seen me, and has adapted well to moving himself without a physical form.

“Sheik, can you get us out?” He asks once he is close enough for conversation without shouting. His words alone bring on enough of that from the nearby spectres that I need to cover my ears against the onslaught of sound. The flares and flashes as they lose hold of their sense of self and become no more than balls of light or bolts of lightning makes me need to close my eyes. There is nothing I can do about the swarming spirits except wait for them to calm down and allow me my space. Considering some of them barely come up to my waist, it is more difficult than it sounds to remain passive in the face of their distress.

Despite the clarity of Nataniel’s words, his form is wavering between a semblance of how he appeared in life and an orb of moderate size hovering at heart height. I must trust that enough of his memory and personality remain for him to give a final report. One of the small orbs floats to tuck itself into the crook of my arm, and I oblige it even as Nataniel coalesces once more into a seeming of his living self.

“Tell me what you know.” I order him, tempering the demand with as much compassion
as I can project and opening my posture to encourage conversation. The tiny ghost in my embrace giggles and snuggles closer in response.

“We’re going where the Goddess waits.” The blue orb to my left chimes in.

“As the crow flies.” A middle aged man, balding, supplies.

“The Silent Realm awaits.” A crone, easily half wrinkle, half comfort, croons.

“But we can’t go yet.” A young woman’s voice emanates from a green orb before me.

“The angry man said so.” A boy barely past toddling informs me.

“We have to stay here and wait for his return.” A guard, his uniform the only distinguishable feature left, mourns. I curse my inept handling of the recently deceased, and inwardly sigh as each spirit voices their current thought. I cannot hope to hear them all, let alone understand what they are saying, but three orbs of brilliant crimson vanish immediately after most of the din of a hundred voices speaking at once has faded into the night. Three, out of more than I can easily count.

Self-recrimination will get me nowhere, however, and I do not care to find out who the angry man is or what will happen to the trapped ghosts stuck here for his leisure. Redirecting my own magic towards a specific target rather than the general broadcast that is easier, gentler, when dealing with a single spirit rather than a large group, I find Nataniel once more and rephrase my question.

“How did you get from Aversa to here?” I ask, even as I feed him the energy to remain cohesive and manifest, with more still for focus and attention to detail. The orb against my side returns to a docile state as my regard falls solely on the spirit of the soldier that saved my life, once.

“He was watching as they came, watched as it all burned. Stone shouldn’t burn, but it did. It was hot and the walls turned red and melted. I was going home, to the north east, but home was where I started. It was confusing, and he showed me this shining stone. It was beautiful, but it was just a stone. Stones don’t light up like lanterns, but this one did, just like the others. I’ve been here since.”

“How many lantern stones were there?” If this man is using rocks as his focus, then altering the spell by altering the stones is the simplest way to deal with this wrongful imprisonment.

“So many. They hurt to look at.” Nataniel’s form wavers as his spirit instinctively reacts to remembered trauma, and I do my best to soothe the ache in addition to the other mage work I am already holding active. Sweat begins to pool beneath my scarf and cap, trickling down my spine as energy pours out of me like blood from a wound. I don’t have to maintain it long, but even that amount of moisture in my clothing is dangerous in this weather.

“How many could you count for sure?” I press, and am rewarded as his form solidifies from head to toe, thick enough for even a Hylian to see.

“Fifteen.” He tells me, and then is gone to the same resting state as the spirit at my side. No matter how much energy I supply, there is no rousing a ghost from that stupor. A Poe, yes, but a ghost, no. I would not wish that fate on even mandrag Ganondorf, let alone people I respect and who could have been friends in another life. Fifteen is too many though, for any kind of speed in first finding the focus stones, figuring out their enchantments, and altering or removing them without harming the spirits trapped within. I doubt the angry man will give me half a mark if I am lucky, let
alone the full course of brother moon’s journey should the Goddesses’ will be cruel.

That leaves few options, none of which are easy. I do have the good fortune of having an apt and capable captain, and it has been some time since I should have returned to camp. I may be the only member of the little group that has experience in the area, but tracking is something they are all proficient at, and the human archer has led half of them straight to me. Not past the boundary of orbs and wandering spectres, but definitely close enough that I can see the whites of his eyes.

“What…what are they?” Warren, ever reliable to voice the questions no one else wishes to for fear of giving offence or appearing foolish, whispers loud enough for a deaf Zora at the back of Jabu-Jabu’s grotto to hear.

“Ghosts of those who died at Aversa Keep.” I tell him, keeping my voice as neutral as possible and turning to face the small party slowly, careful not to startle anyone. The archer’s eyes are not the only set opened fully to the dark and the faint glow of spiritual energy so many concentrated spirits give off.

I know what the angry man plans.

“Ghosts?” Captain Treesha manages not to squeak, but her expression is the clearest I’ve seen on her face. She is frightened.

“People.” I correct quickly. “People who need our help. They are being held here to fuel further magic against the Loyalists, and must be sent on to the Shadow Temple before that happens.”

“All the people?” One of the women, either Rechell or Ondrea, gasps, appalled.

“No.” I am quick to correct. “Some of the people. I don’t know where the rest are, but there are just over a hundred here.”

“I can show you where they went.” The tiny orb at my side has gathered enough energy to manifest in the form it wore in life. Though the two blond tails of hair have been replaced with braids, Grace is still so very young, and looks the part. “If you can help me get out.”

Despite her fear of the spirits of the dead, Captain Treesha knows a child when she sees one, and more importantly, knows how to interact with one. She kneels down to be on eye level with the girl ghost, and speaks simply.

“What would be the best way, do you think?”

“Maman usually cuts open a hole when things get stuck in people, and then has lots of potion to keep the bad things out. We would need a really big knife though.”

“Not necessarily.” One of the thinner men says, stepping closer to the small form of Grace and as a result towards boundary of spell work keeping the ghosts imprisoned. “You were small before, can you be small again? That way you could get through a small hole.”

“There are lots and lots of us though. And I can’t show you where Maman went when I’m small ‘cause I can’t talk an’ only Sheik can see me any good.” Grace prattles, moving close to my side again as her energy flags and her form wavers.

“We can see you just fine sweetling.” Captain Treesha reassures her, going so far as to pat the air where she is manifested and no doubt feeling the chill air noticeably colder than the normal night in winter. She does not recoil though, and I must give her credit for that, or assume her mittens are thicker than they appear.
“Maman always said that the Sheikah had Eyes to See everything, which is why they knew where the Goddessess’ treasure was and tried to steal it. They could see it, but they couldn’t hear the Goddess crying for them to stop.” She tells the soldier whose name I do not know, whose face I cannot remember, who nods at her words. He is not the only one, every member of the command present agrees with her words in posture and attitude, coloring their auras and actions and making my heart seize and mind blank. “It’s okay though, Sheik is nice and wouldn’t do bad things like the other Sheikah did. He helps.” She continues, though the addendum is ignored.

“I’m sure he does. Say, what if we made a small hole for you to get out, and then Sheik can watch where you go when you’re small and follow along?” Captain Treesha draws Grace’s thoughts back towards the problem at hand. “Would that be alright?”

“Okay!” Grace agrees with the effortless acceptance and utmost trust in the adults around her to do what they say. It frees me from the pain of prejudice keeping me from action. No matter what she has been taught, she deserves help, and the confidence she has in me despite my ancestors’ failings spurs me to action.

“I will need some light.” I say to the gathered command, and within one breath and the next one of the thin, tall, pointy eared soldiers has a remarkably steady luminescent sphere of pure mage power held at shoulder level enabling me to better examine the trap. It also displays our location for anyone with eyes to see at all, and the Captain has him dismiss it almost immediately. Not before I can See that boring a hole in it is impossible, as with puncturing, sawing, dissolving, or burning. The ghosts are ingeniously trapped by the very means of their existence. Magic, spirit, and intention cannot pass, for they are simply absorbed and integrated into the trap itself. Only corporeal material, and that firmly bonded to it, can permeate.

I cannot bear so many and retain my hold on my sense of self as well as leave space for Zelda, and no one else here is Shaekha’ri, to be at all comfortable or even aware of the dead as intimately as even the most blind of my people.

:Zelda-hanyana?:. I call, hoping that it will be enough to wake her and receive some sorely needed advice. I can, with the knowledge shared with my Lady over the years, possess any one of the living present and use their forms as a gateway for the spirits caught by this malevolent and frighteningly adept sorcerer. That the thought even crosses my mind disgusts me to the point of physical illness. Perhaps, if we had shared our most intimate thoughts for years, I may ask someone to consider it after a full disclosure of risks and processes involved. Maybe. We have mark at best, and I am among people who are not overtly hostile, but could not be considered friendly under any circumstances. Our mutual purpose is all that allows them to tolerate my presence, their body language and reactions have made that much very clear.

Everything that I have personally worked for to become a shiik revolts at using another intelligent being as a tool for a dangerous task without their full knowledge and cooperation. Everything I swore to Nayru protests the rebuttal of the order of natural law. Farore would turn Her back on such a coward. Din would revoke what few of Her blessings I can call my own. Hylia would turn from me in life, Mokara in death. The Goddesses I serve above all others would erase my existence for betraying them so completely.

All that I am, have been, and will be, for over a hundred others.

With the time I have left, I send a quick prayer to Nayru for wisdom, Farore for courage, Din for power, Hylia for perseverance, and Mokara for welcome, and sink deep into myself where the cords that tie me to this world are visible and, with practise, malleable. There, I untangle myself from Zelda, reverse the weaving our bond has created. It wakes her. I can tell that much before I let
the cord go entirely, snapping away with the force of the magic around me, and I exhale with that loss as I return to the mundane world.

“Grace is the small orb of white light, her affinities only potential. Keep a close eye on it.” I tell whoever will listen as loudly as I can, and reach for the barrier with both hands. Thinking of those I will be abandoning, those I will be freeing sense the disturbance of their cage that is already searing every nerve I have and flood towards me in a rush. “Please, forgive me.” I whisper, and touch the magic directly to open the way.

Chapter End Notes

Edit 06 17 2017 - quotes use in this chapter
To put the world right in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right.
Confucius

A ship is safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are for.
William G.T. Shed
“Great deeds are usually wrought at great risks.” Herodotus

“Look! He’s getting better! Hey! Listen!”
“Where did you say you found him again?”
“Over by the big cliff, between the sand and the lake. He was cute, so I kept him!”
“He looks like a Poe to me.”
“He’s not a Poe, he doesn’t have a lantern.”
“He doesn’t have much at all. Are you sure it’s a he?”
“Yes! Mostly! He felt like a he when I was carrying him, and hasn’t said anything otherwise, so…” The higher pitched voice trails off.
“Can it even talk?”
“He.”
“Can he talk?”
“Of course. He was talking when I picked him up. That’s how I found him in the first place.”
“What was he saying?”
“I dunno. Sounded weird, but pretty. I didn’t know the words.”
“What did it sound like?”
“Like you know more languages than I do.” The higher voice is smug, and the other one scoffs.
“He could just be crazy. I wanted to know if they really were words or if I’ve been staring
at mist for the last day hoping that the remains of an active memory or whatever you called it…”

“HIM!”

“…him. Whatever you called him could pull his pieces together enough to become something interesting. Or edible.”

“You can’t eat him! He’s a person!”

“But I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“I’m a growing boy!”

“…we’ll need to get you some more clothes soon too, huh?”

“These are still okay.”

“Yeah, but if I feed you, then you’ll grow, and they won’t be.”

“We can deal with that problem later, I think your mist-person thing is actually really getting better. He sort of looks a little bit like a Hylian, if a Hylian were half Poe.”

“He’s not though. Hylians are light and breath and life, and he is made of shadows and memories and stillness.”

“You’re sure you don’t remember what he was saying?”

“I didn’t say that. I said I didn’t understand it.”

“Well then what was he saying?”

“You won’t understand it either.”

“I want to know.”

“Fine. There were a bunch of things I don’t remember well, but he kept repeating the same words over and over again in between, so I remember those pretty much. Naemolla, jicheo un. Over and over again, like a prayer.”

“…that, sounds…familiar almost.”

“I know, right?! But I don’t know from where and it is super frustrating!”

“Say it again?”

“Naemolla, jicheo un.”

“It sounds sad, somehow, those words.”

“I’m pretty sure he mentioned Zelda in there somewhere too.”

“Really?”

Zelda
“Not entirely, but yeah. It could have been a combination of other words in his language that just sounded like her name, but I don’t think so. I think he said Zelda.”

Zelda-hanyana

“How would a not-Poe know Zelda?”

.:Aein?!

“Look! Link!”

“What’s happening to him?”

.:Zelda-hanyana, I….

.:Aein!:

.:That’s my name.:.

.:Aein-ah, come to me.:.

“He’s fading away.”

“Is he dying?”

.:I’m already dead.:.

.:No, you’re not. Trust me.:.

.:Forever.:.

.:Now, come to me, Aein. Return to Our service.:.

.:Yes.:.

“Aein.” A voice, familiar and not at all ephemeral becomes a tangible touch on the skin of my face and I open my eyes.

Light. Painful and soothing, stabbing into the back of my skull with a blurry edged softness that defies spectrum. The umbral edges of my vision spider across the mist, multiplying and dividing only to return suddenly to a cohesive whole. My eyelashes. I blink, and they flicker like the flames I can feel engulfing both my hands. The vibration of the moan rising in my chest only makes the faint hints of color subsume to shades of grey once more, and draws my attention to the act itself. Simply breathing is more difficult than I remember. It takes all my effort to manage at all well, and so I close my eyes to preserve what energy I can.

“Aein, can you hear me?” They’re persistent, I will give them that. And patient. The rough skin of callous is balanced with the deft and gentle touch, checking my vortices alongside my reflexes and general condition. It’s been a long time, and I do not bear good tidings for her.

“Mercy-sai.” I murmur, feeling tears of sympathy well up for her loss.

“Hush now.” She chides. “There you are. You’ve a number of people worried over you, including my cousin Treesha. I’ve not seen her so rattled.” She moves away, and a small pulse of chill inserts itself against my side. I haven’t the strength for Grace to take, and the tiny ghost seems to understand, simply cloaking herself in my patterns as shelter from the upset all around her. Her
presence tells me that Zelda has withdrawn as far as she can within our restored bond. My touch
draws her back. With the Triforce of Wisdom to fuel her, and the blessing of Nayru Herself, I
suppose I should have known better than to try and escape any part of my geas. Even if it was only
to keep her from pain. It leaves me feeling immeasurably small and insignificant, too tiny to fill even
a fraction of my own skin.

:Rest, Aein-ah. Recover. Nayru obviously has plans for you yet.: Zelda, alerted by my
thinking of her, pushes slightly to make sure she is understood, then pulls back once more with her
message delivered. By all rights, my spirit should be fragmented beyond recovery, let alone
coherency. The actual memory of the ghosts of Aversa using me as a conduit to the outside world
and the freedom of the Silent Realm is distant, like a recollection of an overheard story told in an
unfamiliar language. I know that it happened, but the visceral effects on my body, mind, and spirit
are not there, aside from my hands.

They burn, as though I placed them in boiling water and forgot to take them out. I can feel
the remains of my skin split as they spasm, hear the healer of the former Aversa Keep tut in
disapproval, smell the fluid and the distinct odour of cooked meat. Like the knowledge of what
caused the injury, the pain is muted, distant, and agonizing. I drink from the cup held to my lips
without protest or hesitation, and obey my Queen’s command.

Weak as I am, I cannot know before the dreams come.

As the murky slime of malevolent intent oozes over the edge of the stones of the well I
fling the strongest Nayru’s Love I can about myself in the second before I am picked up and tossed
about like a leaf in a windstorm, only to open my eyes on to what I know now is a portrait of Lord
Throri’s dead brother, the Lord Thankard. The stone is cool beneath my feet and I turn at the sound
of my name.

“There you are.” Vidkun says, moving close enough to take my face in hand and as his
lips touch mine a second set brush against my forehead and I grumble, wanting to be touched, held,
cared for. Loved. The faint prickle of tiny claws brush against the small of my back even as the gentle
thrum of Niakara’s purr at my side registers. She is warm, hot, burning my hands as I reach to pet
her, and I recoil, crying out in pain as my hands clutch at the incorporeal lives ended before their time
to fuel malicious magic. Turning, I plunge them into the near frozen waters in Jabu-Jabu’s domain,
and the creature breaks Impa’s hold, clawing free of the well in Kakariko to grab at my wrists, pull
me in.

Bitter. Sour. Musty. They flow across my tongue and I settle back into the here and now,
staring at the ceiling of what looks like rough thatch with tear filled eyes.

“It’s okay.” Mercy tells me, her hands holding tight to my shoulders and keeping me from
sitting up. “It’s okay, Sheik. It’s only a dream. It’s okay.” From the sound of it, she’s been saying
the same thing for quite some time. I feel as though I’ve just raided the Forest Temple again, but
without the potion to help. Sore. Tense. I can breathe, though, and relax my aching muscles
beneath the Hylian healer’s hands. She notices I’ve stopped struggling against her hold, and relaxes
her grip to grin ruefully at me.

“There you are.” She murmurs, and rises to bring a bottle of potion over. “Since you’re
awake, I want you to drink all of this.” She tells me, and helps me sit up. There are dozens of other
people in various states of health in the room, the floor liberally peppered with bedding of every
description. I am one of three that has an actual bed, and the other two share a single mattress and
winch holding their broken and bound limbs immobile. It appears to be a small farmhouse, though
all unnecessary furniture is gone and every available surface is covered with either a person or what
looks like whatever they could grab and run with. It is not much. My hands throb when I attempt to
balance with them, and are bandaged as thoroughly as I could wish. I cannot see them, but given her
success with saving my frostbitten digits on our first meeting, I could not wish for better care now
that my fingers feel like so many moist sausages, fresh off the grill.

“Open up.” She says, and I do, choking down the potion she pours into my mouth as best
I can. Sleep follows quickly, the strange dreams riding pillon behind. Memories, nightmares,
recollections of prophecy and potential spin tangled snarls of thought and I don’t enjoy any of it.
The moment the alternative of physical pain is preferable I turn my head from the dose of medicine
keeping me asleep and immobile. I have been moved again, recognize the ceiling of the hut behind
Jabu-Jabu’s altar and Nikara’s coiled form at my feet. The cot on the floor is new, as is the large
kettle of stewing beans and bacon over the stove. The blonde hair that is all I can see of the person
in the cot is familiar, and I let Mercy sleep, attending to myself as best I can.

My hands are no longer bandaged into obscurity, and the reddened flesh and shedding skin
smells sour. Great swathes peel from them both with the sound and texture of tearing paper, though
the outermost layer does not pain me. There is an ache, a dull throb, in using my joints, and a faint,
spidery tingle of nerves constantly being set off. But I can use them. The stacked stones are close
by, and I am capable of attending to the pressing need of my bladder on my own despite weak knees
and unsteady steps. Each time I put my feet on the ground, however, I can feel my strength
returning. The weakness passes, the hollow sensation giving way to an emptiness that fills me with
the impression of being cleansed. As though my soul has been scour. I know, too, that my
capacity for magic has increased alongside my physical stamina. How much, I cannot tell, but it is at
least one order of magnitude greater than before.

Just because my capacity has increased does not mean that I am at capacity, however, and
it is cold outside. I know better than to linger, and return to the shelter of both bed and blanket as
quickly as possible. Mercy sleeps on, oblivious to my activity, and I can see the strain the recent past
has put on her features. The loss of her home and her child weigh heavily on her, and I swear I will
ease some of that pain the moment I am capable of it. For now though, it is all I can manage to stay
awake. I know better than that, too, and allow myself to return to the deep sleep of a major healing.
There is no need to make Mercy’s life more difficult still by being an uncooperative patient, no
matter how my mind is telling me to find out what has happened and how I got here.

Like all of my Lady’s safe houses, a large portion of their sanctity is dependent upon
secrecy. Mercy could not have brought me here alone, which means at least two more people than
should know of this place, rendering it useless as anything but what it appears to be. The reclusive
shack of a poor hermit, difficult to access and bereft of most comforts. Once I am capable of it, I
must remove the moonstone and sunstone from their brackets and secure another location. In the
moments before dreams come calling, Niakara curls against my side, and comforted, I sleep.

“Sheik, can you sit up a bit?” The gentle feminine voice asks, and it takes me a moment to
process the words. Longer still to respond. Mercy checks my condition and approves of my progress
enough to hand me a bowl of thick bean soup in a towel both to keep from spilling on myself and to
protect the cracking skin of my hands from further burns. I can manipulate the hewn wooden spoon
well enough, and finish both my original portion and a second before I am sated. I do not own any
bowls, or the spoon, or beans. There are a lot of beans, variety enough that I can live off them
without requiring alternative proteins or starches, though the warm ball of fur butting her head
against my elbow and purring will still need meat. Then there is the cold mist of spiritual energy
crouching against my other side to attend to.

“For your service, Mercy-sai, what am I owing?” I ask, stumbling through Hyrulean
words and Shaekha’ri grammar.
“I’ve been paid in full, Aein. Or do you prefer Sheik?”

“Aein is my name. Shiik is my title. Sheik is a name I use to protect those who ask it of me. As you are both my caretaker and I hope a friend, I would that you use Aein.” I request, and feel Grace pulse excitement and altruism against my core. She is weak, and will need help if she is to manifest enough to speak. It is energy I have yet to acquire, though I have enough to send reassurance and patience back.

“That’s what she called you, I think. It sounded similar at least.” Mercy shrugs, utterly relaxed, but her words are enough to have me tense and alert.

“Who?” The question slips out faster and harsher than I intend, and the Hylian woman blinks at me before cocking her head to the side as though studying my reactions for some mysterious content. She probably hears more in my voice than I am even aware of, her divinely influenced senses informing her of as much as I can garner from body language and energy patterns.

“You called her Hanyana, and she didn’t seem like the name wasn’t right. She dressed in a very similar manner to you, and her coloring was between you and Sage Impa’s. Once we made the Water Temple and the Zora drained it as far as they could, she came and helped me move you here with some pretty powerful magic. I’ve never heard of the likes of it.” Mercy admits, and I can feel the blood drain from my face and sink into my gut where it churns next to what I know is the first solid food I’ve had in days. Zelda was here. Zelda was here and in the Water Temple and… obviously managed just fine.

Well.

“Did she say anything?” I swallow my nerves and am pleased with how steady my voice is, this time.

“Tell Aein Sheik that he’s an idiot, and I will be waiting for him in the usual place when he awakens and is safe for travel.” Mercy recites, and I can breathe a sigh of relief. If Zelda was the means of transportation, Mercy will not truly know where we are. As long as I take her out the same way, she will not be able to return on her own. Zelda is still safe. The usual place would be Derinkuyu, which is as safe as safe can be in such troubled times.

“How long…?” I manage, a handful of moments later. Used to following the thought patterns of the guard and hunters of her destroyed home, Mercy understands the question with ease.

“There was a brilliant flare of light on the horizon just before dawn, and Treesha’s crew hauled you into camp following an orb of light that I swear looked like a Kokiri fairy is supposed to, but it disappeared as soon as they saw the encampment. You woke up a bit two days later, and again three days after that when Hanyana helped move you, and have been dropping in and out for the last four days, so nine days total.” The woman who has had care of me for most of that time says, busying herself with knitting and making me wish I had the dexterity for my own needlecraft. Until my hands heal, now that I am awake, I face a lengthy period of boredom, broken only by monotony.

…and how long until I…” I begin once she has completed the row of purl and knit on the needles.

“I don’t know. By all rights you shouldn’t be alive, let alone have hands, let alone have all your fingers in working order. What in Demise’s fiery fart did you do, and which Goddess did you pledge yourself to, to have Her watch over you so?” The knitting forgotten, I flush under the sharp blue gaze of a hurting heart. Why was I spared, when so many were not? I have no answer but the...
one the Avatar of my Devotion gave.

“Nayru has plans for me yet.” I whisper into the silent air, the pounding of my heart loud in my ears. It must be deafening to her. I swallow thickly, the beans churning in my stomach, and take a deep breath to steady myself before attending to the small cold spot still clinging to my side. “As for what I did, I tore a hole in a dark magician’s trap to free the ghosts of Aversa, and they used me as a conduit to the Shadow Temple, where they may board the ferry on the river of souls and travel safely to the Silent Realm.” I pause, the enormity of my actions hitting home. A shiik is an assist, a support, for a spirit’s own efforts and desired goals. There is a name for the task I have just performed, a title for one who does the ferryman’s job in his stead, those who serve the spirits of the world directly. It has been generations since one has been born amongst the Shadow Folk. It has also been years since I spoke my people’s language exclusively, longer still since I have read of it. I cannot recall, and am not sure I want to. Naming it makes it real, and I am not ready for that.

Mercy sits in silence, sorrow a thick shawl of intricate weaving about her shoulders. I know what she needs to ask, but she must ask. If I answer before she acts, then I become not only the vehicle but the instigator, and she will cling on to that and on to Grace, preventing her passage. A child so young should be free of the imposed burdens of adults, in life and in death. I will not be the cause of such a bright child’s slow deterioration into the wrathful wraith that unpurposed Poes become. The soft tears and shaky breaths from across the room I expect, and move to embrace the young mother before me despite the pain it causes me. It is nothing compared to hers. The thick cotton of my tunic absorbs most of the moisture that falls there, and I hold on until she is ready to let go. She does not go far.

“…was Grace…there?” She manages. It is enough.

“Yes.” I confirm, setting off another spat of tears. This time, after over a quarter turn of useless weeping, there is relief when she is done. Not from all of it, not even a good portion of it, but some. It is a start.

It is also exhausting, and I lay us down on the small cot without letting go, tucking myself around her as best I can and letting her find a comfortable spot against me. Niakara joins in by jumping up onto the edge, walking across my face, and lying on my ribs to knead at Mercy’s back. Though it is early afternoon, we sleep.

I wake alone, a thick soup simmering on the oven top and Mercy once again working on her knitting, in the early evening. Grace is persistent in her hovering, agitated and upset, and will not be comforted with emotional interaction alone. I am rejuvenated somewhat from the nap, and have enough to spare her the energy to coalesce in my open palm.

“Nah’habe, neun.” I reinforce the order for calm with a wave of the same from deep within me, the place where I know, beyond a doubt, that Nayru still welcomes my service and worship. Like floating in a still spring the exact same temperature as a living body, there is a stillness there that enforces peace. I can share some of it, normally, but whatever happened in those moments in the early morning allows me to easily enfold Grace and stabilize her enough that she can take the power I gave to enable the solidification of her spirit and she manifests fully in the small hut.

“By the Three, Grace!” Mercy’s arms pass through the visible form of her daughter, who attempts her own embrace in return with as much success. Before either of them can lose any hold they have on their emotions or bodies, I send a prayer to the Goddesses and open the faint channel between myself and the girl ghost further. Instantly I begin to sweat, even as my body chills and my muscles shake.

“Quickly.” I gasp to Grace, who can feel the strain I am under as easily as Zelda in full
possession. Hanyana is alerted by my sudden need and is on the move, while I am firmly rooted in place. This time, when Grace reaches for her mother, there is contact. An embrace, and my shakes stop, my body no longer having the fuel for even that, even as three of the bonds holding Grace to the world dissolve.

“I love you mommy, but I have to see daddy now.” Grace says solemnly. Zelda bolsters my limits with her own supplemental spellcasting, and I cough as my lungs spasm. Another bond falls.

“I love you too, bunny.” Mercy manages through her tears. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

“’kay!” Grace agrees, and that removes the last of the bonds holding her to this realm. She fades first from touch, then sight, then sound as the river opens and carries her to the gate before the Silent Realm swiftly and neatly. I can follow no further. The pull on my own resources dissipates alongside her, though Zelda continues to feed her power into my depleted stores until I no longer tremble with fatigue. Mercy is staring when I can glance at her again, her eyes holding a type of awed discomfort that makes me more than a little nervous.

“You really are the Sheik that Sage Impa and Sage Ruto spoke of.” She murmurs, barely loud enough for me to hear.

“I can assure you that most of the rumors are vast exaggerations of my abilities.” I reply, attempting to downplay as much as I can to relieve the hint of fear in her posture.

“Most.” Her eyes widen even as her voice rises in pitch. “Which ones are not?”

“…I don’t know?” I admit. “I wasn’t even there for more than half the one’s I’ve heard.”

“The one that says you can summon legions of the restless dead and make them do your bidding?” She asks, but I am already shaking my head before she completes the thought. That one is one of the most prevalent, and one Impa encourages…but I need Mercy to not be terrified of me if she is to help me as best she can. With my hands oozing fluid and shedding skin, aching fiercely when still and roaring pain when moving, I need help.

“Greatly exaggerated. I can ask any intelligent or semi-intelligent spirit, corporeal or not, for help. It is their choice whether or not they do anything, though I am not above bribery. The instance that began those rumors I asked a number of denizens of the Shadow Temple for help getting the Krisidi harvest in. They were housed, fed, and paid as any other hired help. Twenty adults and their children do not a legion make.”

“Your kiss can revive the recently dead?” She queries, the scepticism apparent in her tone even for me to hear.

“False. It can help wake someone up gently though.” I offer no further explanation and one does not seem to be required.

“You single-handedly brought down a dozen Stalfos.”

“Greatly exaggerated. I distracted one Stalfos long enough for the real warriors to defeat it.” Heinric is at peace now, and Johanna has found new purpose in the orphaned children of Kakariko, and with the means to fight the Stalchildren, they have become useless pawns in Ganondorf’s coup.

“You can disappear from sight any time.” The disbelief is even more prominent, though considering how acute Hylian eyes are, it could very well seem so.
“Technically true. I can move through shadows cast by all things of lesser intelligence than an insect.” I acknowledge, and some of the fear in her gaze returns.

“You know the Songs of the Wind.”

“True.”

“You are Queen Zelda’s messenger.”

“Also true.”

“You are her assassin.”

“Entirely false. I help those already dead, as you have seen, and can assist with the dying process, but I do not kill. In addition to finding even the thought distressing, it would be abhorrent to Nayru’s laws, and an insult to Mokara’s order.”

“Why do your skin and hair change color when you perform that kind of magic then, if it doesn’t go against Nayru’s laws?” She asks, and I can understand her confusion.

“Normally it doesn’t. The change is a result of close magical work with a Hylian, who was feeding me the necessary power to maintain Grace’s physical form. It burns me, ever so slightly, to be in close contact with the light.”

“Is that what happened to your hands?”

“On a much grander scale, yes.”

“What did you say, to make Grace appear?”

“Nothing, Mercy-sai. I simply gave her the energy she needed to do so. It was her choice and her prerogative. Sound is magic for Hylians, not Shaekha’ri.”

“It sounded like “I have none.” but it wasn’t that. Is that why you were so pale and trembling?” The healer is coming to the forefront again, the knitting put down and her hands brought up to my clammy forehead, testing my temperature against her own.

“Nah’habe neun.” I say again, slower and with distinct pronunciation so she can hear it clearly, realizing what she heard and how she interpreted it. “It is Shaekha’ri for “Peace, child”. I was attempting to calm her down, but instead used the opportunity of her determination to give her access to more energy than I truly had to give. A Hylian mage who is close to me supplemented my failing power with her own, but in doing so exposed me to more light magic than I could handle without some obvious changes to my corporeal form.” I say, and yawn immediately after. I am growing weary of this exhausted state of being, but again, know better than to refuse when Mercy pushes me to lie down and rest. I doze, the flickering light of the coal fire keeping the hut warm and faint click of knitting needles the only variance in sensation.

It is half a turn of days filled with chatter, soups, stews, sleep, and my duties to the living left behind as a shiik before Mercy allows that I should be able to live alone once more. My hands are merely flaking dead skin instead of shedding it in great chunks, a faint itch replacing the aching sting of my burns. Under her tutelage, for lack of other activities, I have learned some of the healer’s craft beyond what basic aid for simple problems I knew before. In exchange, Mercy has learned some of my people’s legends, how to care for the recently dead despite not being able to truly sense them, and what type of belly rubs Niakara likes best. With spring on the horizon, my hut is more thoroughly stocked with supplies than it was at the beginning of the winter.
Hanyana has visited twice, bringing with her books containing sheets of information stowed surreptitiously between pages on the movements of Ganondorf’s minions and three of his generals. Of the lot, Kotake and Koume seem to be the most dangerous. Kinoko is an unknown. Kabocha is all wax and no wick. I was impressed by Hanyana’s magical glamor disguising the colors of her person, if not the shape, and sent her as much approval as I could. Now, as a test of my fitness to resume my duties to her, I am to transport my healer and myself to the Water Temple.

The whistle Impa gifted me with so many cycles ago is warm from being held against my skin as I bring it to my lips and enfold Mercy and her packs in Shadow. She shivers, and I breathe my intent alongside the five notes of the Serenade. The ancient magic lifts us gently, placing us on the platform of the large island in Lake Hylia. The shrine to the water spirits has been adjusted, exposing the tunnel to the Water Temple for those unable to swim, and is guarded by two Zora, one of whom has familiar scales.

“Sheik, you move as the tide!” Toruto calls in Hyrulean, waving a webbed set of fingers in an approximation of the Human greeting gesture. I can’t help but smile at his enthusiasm, even as Mercy laughs at my side.

“May your heart be balanced.” I return in the same, cupping one hand over the opposite fist and pushing both hands towards him in the formal greeting of my people. A budding envoy, I try to honor his yearning for knowledge at every opportunity. Where he will have use for a Shaekha’ri greeting in Hyrule, I haven’t the faintest clue, but precognition is not my strongest gift. It is not even in the top ten. Zelda, however, is exceptionally powerful when it comes to receiving and interpreting visions of the future. I had not thought to question my duty or destination as anything more than that. A duty, and a destination to place Mercy so as to keep the hidden hut in Zora’s domain a secret. From the waves of smug accomplishment coming from the young queen now, though, I have to wonder.

Toruto, true to his goals of becoming a Zoran envoy to Hyrule proper, escorts both Mercy and myself into the areas of the Water Temple that have been drained and dried as a refuge for those displaced in the fall of Aversa Keep. There are more than I expected, given how many ghosts were present in the snare. Glancing around, I am fairly certain that those trapped represented the sum total of the deceased, for there are still thousands in almost every available space. There is nearly no privacy, every function of daily life being carried out in large chambers communally, but the people are, for the most part, alive and well.

It confuses me, for there is far more in the way of material goods than a city of fleeing people could hope to take with them, and far too many things that would have been impossible to carry. The large cauldrons, for instance, would need two horses, cattle or donkeys to move, and are entirely unsuited to the mostly raw vegetarian diet of the Zora themselves. The sheer number of blankets, bedrolls, and rugs, too, the hosts would be hard pressed to supply. Even the food; flour, barley, mushrooms, preserved vegetables and dried fruit, is not something that anyone would have predicted the Water Temple would require. Perhaps this is the reason for Zelda’s satisfied pride. If so, I cannot fault her for it.

Then I recall the shock, terror, and paralyzed fear that woke me from my slumber as the extent of the destruction caused as it was occurring, and know that these supplies were not part of divine providence through my Lady’s talents. On the second level, Mercy is given a bedroll, bowl, and spoon with the rest of the healers, whose section has been scrubbed to the stone and tiles and has a curtained alcove where those working may rest. Those in need are laid on cots and cushions, depending upon the type and severity of injury or illness, and I bid farewell to her there. I have one more sanctuary to construct, and this near to the Sprout moon, the earth will be thawing enough to make digging easier. If I am to attend to my brother, my sister-by-choice, and my nephew before
they leave, I must hasten to compile any messages for those on the other side of the mists, and gather or construct gifts. I have five days.

Toruto does not notice the faltering of my steps as he leads me where the Sheikah Hanyana bid him to. As I am not dressed nor fit for swimming, a small alcove of coral has been set aside for me to speak with the Sage, who is waiting with an air of imperious impatience for my arrival. Guarded by two full grown Zora, the Princess is obviously still adolescent, though her arrogance is starting to be replaced by authority. Her laugh, however, hasn’t changed. She and Zelda speak at length, though I am tired enough that I only occasionally pay attention, certain that my Lady will relay any important information when I am more alert. It is all I can do to remain distant from my body and awake enough to maintain that distance. I have no idea what would happen should I sleep while Zelda is inhabiting my form, and no desire to find out, and so set my mind to figuring out what gifts I will be able to get for which people, and what I want to say in the letters I will send with my brother and his family.

It takes Zelda calling me back to alert me that their meeting is over, and longer than I care to admit to be able to take my feet and stumble behind one of the guards I have not met before and who does not introduce herself. She leads me to a chamber on the second floor that has a small group of people sleeping in artificial darkness inside. Given the general communal life, to be given a bedroll in a room with only fifteen to twenty others is an honor that I appreciate. I murmur as much to my guide, have the presence of mind to toe off my boots, and fall into the blankets with less grace and more exhaustion, tug the cover over myself, and am asleep in moments.

I wake warmer than I’ve been in a season, the scent of skin in my nose and the feel of a man behind me, hot and hard and heavy. Before I can cry out, a hand covers my mouth and nose and he breathes in my ear.

“Good morning Aein.” Vidkun says, his voice rich and sultry as his hips shift enough for me to feel exactly how excited he is. When I exhale and it is not a shout or scream, his hands fall to caress me between my clothing and the blanket that I now know covers us both. It feels good, to be touched. Covered. Held. His advantage in both height and weight is minimal, but it is noticeable enough when he curls around me and clings. If my still sore hands hold onto him just as tightly, he makes no mention of it or any effort to pull away. If I tremble in his grasp, he is gentleman enough to hold me closer still, giving me the reassurance I seek in his touch freely and easily. He is aroused, but not doing anything about it, turning the gentle contact into a light massage. When that uncovers tension throughout my frame, his strong hands go to work in easing some of the knots that have been causing me discomfort for so long I’ve come to accept it as normal.

I roll when prompted, and his warmth shifts to sit on my rump even as his palms press against my spine, releasing the ache there in a series of faint pops and cracks and making me grunt softly as the air is pushed from my lungs. Blood rushes to my skin and I grow increasingly heated, so when he asks if it is alright to take off my top I do it myself. The chill air is a balm as much as the oil he uncorks to spread across my torso. His hands works upward, releasing tension from my shoulders, stiffness in my neck, rubbing at my jaw and scalp and loosening every muscle he can reach. I purr like Niakara with the treatment, and know that it is simply a part of the service he offers his private clients, but am too starved for contact to care and too boneless to contemplate moving. I feel like a malleable dough, ready to go to the ovens.

My pants go the same way as my shirt, though the blanket rises to cover my back as Vidkun turns around and moves the massage to my feet. I am moaning within the first few heartbeats, the dexterous pressure and deft strokes sending lighting quick spikes of pleasure up my spine. My calves follow, once I am nearly incoherent in lax muscles, shared body heat, and sensitized skin. By the time he starts on my thighs, incoherency is complete and every major muscle
group has received enough attention that phantom touches run along my nerves, singing a song of sweet surcease. The low baritone of his voice registers, even as his hands withdraw, and I hum my satisfaction. He laughs.

“Seriously Aein, how far do you want this to go?” He asks, most likely again. I understand his words this time though. It is a measure of my own need when I consider the question. How much do I want from him? Some cuddling? I do want more of that, since I was asleep and unable to enjoy it earlier. The massage alone? While appreciated, I am not entirely content. Kissing would be nice. Having more of his hands on me would be nicer. The thought of his hands and his mouth on me has my body interested, and the awakening of that part of me is enough that, after so long without, I want it all. But want and need are different things, and there are other things I must consider. There are those that depend on me. Those that are expecting me. The more mundane aspects too, must be thought of. Time. Money.

“How much?” I breathe, knowing now where the supplies for the refugees came from and that no one, no one, would have had enough on them to cover the cost of the entire caravan’s worth of goods and services.

“It’s been taken care of.” He tells me, which is no answer at all.

“You need to be paid, Vidkun. Your family is depending on you.” I protest. I haven’t much in the way of coin, but I will not ask someone to work to my benefit with no reward.

“Honestly, the Sheikah lady was quite adamant about finding out my rates, and paid up front for the full range. Any extra I’m to give the refund to the people of Aversa, but since I know you’re on a schedule a good portion will be going to them anyway. Right now though, what do you want?” His green eyes are clear and bright, and I have a sneaking suspicion who the Sheikah lady is, since I know it could not be Impa and Zelda has apparently found herself a disguise in the last fortnight. I would be smug too, were I in her place. As it is, I send her a bit of affection and a lot of gratitude, and smile.

“Fuck me.” I tell the man above me, and am rewarded with a choked moan.

“Yessir.” Vidkun agrees, and reaches for the oil again. It has been far too long since last I took a lover, and there is some difficulty in the preparation. Vidkun doesn’t seem too impatient with the need to go slowly, the same strong hands that massaged me earlier moving the purposeful and steady strokes inside instead of out even as his mouth descends to distract me from the initial discomfort. It works, better than either of us anticipated, and I huff an apology for not warning him before it was happening. He laughs, wiping his face and hands on one of the nearby rags, and gives me the kisses that I wanted. More oil, and I am capable of three fingers where two before were tight.

The gathered and beading sweat on his brow turns the thick, lush waves of his dark hair to curls and I can’t help but run my fingers through the lot, pulling his lips back to mine and tasting him, short and sweet and again. As I stroke his scalp and drink his mouth, he runs his fingers through my darker, curly hairs, and strokes the firmness he finds burgeoning once more. I buck upwards into the touch, over sensitive and still wanting, and press back onto the oiled digits spreading me open ever so slowly. I know, intellectually and experientially, that rushing this part of it hurts, and what follows hurts more. I also know, that if given enough time, there is nothing but pleasure. Curbing my enthusiasm is more difficult than that simple acknowledgement, and I turn to teasing to divert my focus somewhat.

A flick of a nipple, nip of teeth, cat-like sampling of pooled sweat gathered in a collarbone, and the hands working at me speed their pace. Light scratches on a muscled back, gentle tugs of hair, a breath, hot and wanting, placing words of encouragement over a pierced lobe, and Vidkun
growls low in his throat before grasping my hips and turning me over. I go with the motion, knowing this way is easier, expecting the press of his penis with baited breath. I am not waiting long.

His hands spread me open, and the moist tip rests against my stretched sphincter less than a heartbeat before he shifts and pushes and breeches me. The oil eases the way, and a series of small thrusts and short pauses later he is seated as deep as he can go. I know this fullness, the satisfaction it brings like no other. Far from satiation, though the sampling has eased some of my hungering, I wait long enough for the breaths on the back of my neck to even out before clenching down on him. Rocking on my hands and knees beneath him is enough to convince my sometimes lover, sometimes friend, always confusing acquaintance to move.

And move he does. Having touched that spot inside me earlier and sending me soaring, he knows where it is, knows how sensitive I am to having it stroked, poked, and prodded with his now engorged erection. And I am sensitive. He is cautious, avoiding direct contact and angling his hips so his penetrations leave me gasping without true relief. Dropping my chest and spreading my knees does nothing but make the wanting worse, and so I bury my shoulder into the mat and use my hand to ease some of the building pleasure. I want this to last, even as I want to find my peak again. Even having come once, I can feel my balls grow heavy in my hand much faster than the ones pressed against me. The steady, shallow movements grinding pressure in all the right places, and when Vidkun’s hand reaches around my hips to join mine on the downstroke, I am done. Muscles tense and release faster than I can control, my seed seeping out of our combined hands to drip to the mat beneath me, even as he shifts and rolls us both. Allowing me time to recover, on my side and with him still and hard inside of me, it is only when I am coherent enough to welcome him with words and touches that he begins to thrust once more. They drive harder into me, pushing me forward until I brace against them and attempt some muscle control. Soon, far sooner than I want, he tenses, grunts, and I can feel wet warmth seeping from the place of our joining. Pliable and content, if sticky, I cuddle back into his chest, not wanting to lose that connection even as he softens inside of me. An arm wraps around my ribs, toys with the sensitized skin there, and settles as Vidkun intertwines our fingers. Pleased that I didn’t even need to ask for it, that the sting of new skin is minor, I relax into the sweaty embrace and recover. I am slightly chilled from the late winter air, though it could be considered early spring, by the time Vidkun shifts to sit up a bit and kiss my shoulder. It is supposed to distract me from his withdrawal, and it does, a little, but not entirely. The vacuous feeling left behind makes me yearn to be full again, but he was right. I have a schedule.

“What do you need?” His query is as soft as his breath against my bare skin, and sends as many shivers along it. I need so very little, really, but I want so very much…

“A bath, clean clothing.” I say, not wanting to let go of his warmth just yet but knowing that I must. My stomach growls, but I am used to ignoring it and there is so little food here to begin with that I cannot in good conscience take what these people do not have to give. Even if offered. Even in good faith. There are other things that I need that he cannot give me, could never. I’m beginning to doubt anyone ever could. Regardless, Vidkun is an excellent and attentive lover, and gives me the touches and kisses that I ask for without words before leaving for a wash basin and my pack. Only once he is gone do I notice my solitude as other members of the caravan he rides with come back into what must be their allotted space. Most of them ignore both my nudity and the obvious signs of amorous activity about me, but Selah accounts for everything in the caravan’s books, and that apparently means me now as well.

“You’re the only one he doesn’t use a sheep-sheath with…” She tells me, staring at what
skin is exposed and making me want to cover even that. “…so I assume you’re clean. If that changes though, I can’t have you compromising his ability to perform. Have you other lovers?” So blunt, but that is Selah and her forthright manner hides a shrewd bargainer and logical mind that can see the numbers behind everything. If she had her way, any excess in payment from Zelda for services Vidkun has rendered would not be donated to the refugees, but rather kept until such a time that his services are called on again. I don’t like her, much. I like her less when she attempts to get an exact accounting of what services, exactly, he provided.

“Leave him alone, Selah.” Vidkun grumbles as he returns with cloth and basin and my pack slung over his shoulder. The baths they are to use must be close by. I’m grateful. “He came twice, I came once, and now I’m cleaning up my mess. It took a little more than an hour.”

“You’re usually faster than that.” Selah remarks, but her body language tells me she will not argue or chase after me now that Vidkun is back.

“Aein’s been without a lover for years now, so I needed to take my time.” He explains, even as the warm, damp cloth begins to clean up the mess of semen and sweat left of my skin. Careful not to expose any more of me to the others of his travelling cohort than necessary, he nonetheless makes quick work of the signs of his service and hands me my small clothes, tunic, trousers, stockings and boots. I dress quickly and silently, bundling the soiled clothes into a ball and shoving them into my pack to clean later. My whistle is waiting, and though my muscles twinge as I stand perhaps a bit too quickly, it can wait a bit longer.

“Thank you.” I tell him, willing him to read what for in my eyes and seeing his expression soften ever so slightly when he does. Before Selah can see and charge me extra, I kiss the small smile from his lips and flee. The coral grove I met Ruto in yesterday is empty, at least temporarily, but all I need is time for the modified magic of Farore’s Wind to call me back to my hut on the shores of Jabu-Jabu’s grotto. It takes me next to no time to organize the small space, and Niakara obligingly comes to me when I call her. A dried liver and butter treat as a reward for behavior I wish to encourage and an admonition to stay put, I focus my will and allow the Lament to wail from my whistle.

My brother will be leaving soon, for a long time, and I will spend as much time with him as I can.
The Echoed Reflection

Chapter Summary

In time, it strengthens. In time, it grows. Blossoming, it becomes a gift.

Chapter Notes

Over halfway there!

Warnings - Original Character Death, Ghosts, Metaphysics, Proposals, Thaumaturgy, Heterosexual Sex, Oral Sex, Vaginal Sex, Consensual Underage Sex, Masturbation, War, Destruction and Pillaging.

Gingerly, I remove the cover of the marimba that was a solstice day present from Hylia’s Legacy. Though I made sure to store it properly and cover it and cast spells for both preservation and protection, they were not designed to last nearly two years. A month, perhaps two at best, and I have been gone far longer than that. Perhaps it is the Picori that crowd around, the spirits of the plants stirring in the soil beneath the last of the winter’s snow, the remains of the previous shiik’s work, or the fact that Zelda has occasionally tidied and reset the basic wards in my absence that makes it feel like home. Everything is where I left it, in nearly the same condition I left it in.

It may also be that I received the welcome of a dearly missed friend from far more than I had expected to. Taoki’s coil of sausage lies in the ice box, Hora’s baking in the cupboard. Biyu’s oil is bottled again after scenting the air with a rich perfume from the moment I uncorked it for the anointing. Juen provided more woven bandaging than I could need, and Hahron and Yoru helped me move Kaiel’s body to be washed. There are not so many Dar left that Hahron could call on another. There are not so many Shaekha’ri left that Yoru, Keiko, and Insu will not be an ill-afforded loss to the community here. Even if they choose to return, there are not so many children that Insu will be able to pick a mate of suitable bloodlines. Unless all that is left of my family decides to bring others, of diverse backgrounds, the generation I helped sire will be the last.

The generation that sired the generation that bore myself and my brother is passing. Kaiel is not the first, will be joining two wives, three children, and two stillborn infants in the Silent Realm. He waits for me, patient and content, about three paces from his corpse. Cleansed of all the fluid I could manage, anointed with oil and herbs, bound and wrapped with the ashes of bomb flowers and blood of the earth, the astringent odor is familiar to me and tells me that my work is well done. Decay and rot, blood and bile, though natural, are not helpful. Neither is the fact that Kaiel is still present, the last tie holding him to this plane visible but untouchable to me. Hopefully, music will help reveal its mysteries.

The soft leather bound mallets have hardened, and so I take up the rattan instead and strike the full four and a half octaves in scale. Pausing to tighten some of the bindings, loosen others, listen and adjust, soon the mahogany bars sing out their full voice in perfect pitch. I let the reverberations float in the early evening air until the last has dissipated, breathe deeply, and begin.
The full funeral dirge is solemn and ponderous in the beginning, to recall and honor and mourn the loss of the stories that are the sum of a person’s existence on this plane. I settle into the rhythm easily, assured of my pacing and purpose. Hahron sits next to his sister, whose name I do not know, as I command the magic that will allow them their recollection of their mutual sire and the outpouring of grief at his loss. My affinities for the dead, for spirits in general, allow me to know without words when the fresh batch of tears can be soothed, and when it should, for the two are very different things. Patterns and rhythms, breaths and pauses, motion and stillness. I become the bridge between.

The tempo slows further still, though my tenor changes as I move from dirge to elegy and add my voice by the time the aria begins and full night has fallen. This close to the new moon, it is very dark indeed, and the lantern oil that Alhan brought is put to use. Though there are not many Dar, with Hahron and his sister here, there are enough present for the fugue that follows. The older woman’s alto is shaky and hesitant at first, but the words of generations and repetition of my own introductory lines lead her into the hymn and into the magic that dissolves the last of Kaiel’s bindings to this plane.

He must have been worried for her.

Hahron’s baritone completes our chorus, though by the subdued and steady tone of it he, too, knows that the sending of his father’s spirit to the arms of the Goddesses is complete. Careful with the instrument, I let that part of the music fade and open my door to allow those not of the family in to say their goodbyes. The other mourners take up the song, and I sip at strongly brewed stimulant tea to remain alert for the full mark that the residents of Derinkuyu take to view the bier, pay their respects to the living, and honor the dead. Close to a Hylian bell, or two Human hours, I resume my duties.

As the younger, stronger members of the Forgotten City lift Kaiel’s remains and begin the trek to the columbarium I sing to Nayru recalling the Wisdom of Her laws. From Shadows we are created, to the Shadow we return when we shed our mortal form. The Silent Realm is full of shades, only the Watchers bear light. I sing to Farore for the Courage to continue honoring Her gift of life, and remembering the life of this man. The living shall tell of his stories, and harvest the fruit of the work he has wrought. As we near the pyre, I sing to Din, calling on Her Power to give over the flesh to the earth in flame.

Perhaps it is my recent exposure to the souls of hundreds moving through me, perhaps it is my own brush with the path to the Silent Realm, perhaps it is neither, perhaps both, but the bundle of Kaiel’s body ignites and is ash in a matter of heartbeats, not the mark or two it usually takes. I manage to hide my startlement well in the dark and recover before those around me can from their own surprise. Though the ash is still warm, Hahron and his only living relative begin to gather it into the small urn Kaiel had prepared for this very purpose. It does not take long, though Hahron’s eyes are relieved when he turns to me afterward.

"Swiftly done, Aein-shiiik. My thanks.” His large, calloused hand clasps my shoulder briefly, and then he starts the journey back to his home. Yoru nods to me, his wine eyes darker for the lack of light than I have seen them in a long time, and he follows. Though not of Hahron’s blood, as his student, he is the closest thing the older man has to a son, and will perform the duties of one tonight. Keiko and Insu stayed in the city proper, Insu sleeping on her shoulder the entire time, so their absence is not unexpected.

"Aein-shiiik, for your work this night, you have my gratitude.” Kaiel’s daughter says softly, clasping my hands in her own in an effort to not only express her sincerity, but hide their trembling. Though she is old enough to be my mother, I was formed to comfort the distressed, and
move to embrace her and let her get the last of her grief out into the dyed wool of my fur lined cloak. There will be more tears over the coming days, turns, and cycles, but easing enough pain that she can sleep well tonight is something I can do, should do, and so I do. Impaz is waiting with a mug of herbs that will help her sleep when I part ways at her doorstep, and Zelda is waiting on mine when I return.

“Aein-shiik…” She begins, then frowns. “…that’s not entirely accurate anymore, is it?” So she has noticed as well.

“I hope that question is rhetorical, Zelda-hanyana.” I tell her, letting my exhaustion show. “I haven’t the words to reply, even when I am at my best.”

“And I have wisdom enough to see that you need your bed, so I will leave you to it.” She says, smiling softly. “I have some reading to do, so take your time with Yoru-eh. I will still be here when he is gone.” She tells me, and takes off towards the home she calls her own. I shake my head, and, because she is right, go to bed and sleep.

When I wake, it is to the Picori of my home and those of the homes in my immediate vicinity chattering over the small bowl of milk I left as thanks for the one who has been guarding my space. I refill it with the last of the liquid, and though I cannot understand their tongue, know enough to recognize the thanks for what it is. Niakara too, has guests, looking longingly at the icebox in calico, grey, tortoise, and white booted black fur. The birdsong is a chorus, and I wonder at the congress of creatures present even as I go to slice the sausage into small pieces for the furred before sprinkling a handful of starflower seeds for the feathered.

I break my own fast with the light and airy leavened loaf Hora left yesterday afternoon, only now crusting on the outside due to the proliferation of butter it was baked with, some blackberry preserves, and a slice of the wheel of cheese that was Hana’s welcoming gift. After so long with so little variation, the richness of the butter and cheese combined with the sweet of the preserved fruit makes my stomach complain, but I ignore it in favor of cleaning the bathing room. The task takes most of the morning, but I want to ensure no contamination from the cleaning of Kaiel’s corpse lingers before bathing myself. I am beyond grateful for the drains in the floor and the plumbing that supplies water directly, and the soap that still retains its cleansing properties even after such an absence as mine.

My hair is once again long enough to braid, though not long enough for any of the fancy braiding patterns I know, so I simply tie it back in four tails down the center of my skull, looping the result through the ties and under to give the effect of a braid but leave enough length that it doesn’t appear unusually truncated. Dressing, too, is something I take my time with, most of the clothing I left in the cedar lined chest still solidly made, though I am thinner through all but my shoulders, which have broadened to the point that I must forego two of the tunics entirely or risk splitting a seam.

Lunch is rice and sausage cooked in an onion broth with dried peppers and peas, and my stomach manages all but the sausage itself well. I assume too much fat again, and resolve to modify my recipes to reintroduce such things gradually. I then shoo Niakara’s fellow felines out the door designed for either cats or small dogs, and bank the fire in the stove for the time I will be gone. Donning the same cloak I wore last night and lacing my boots takes very little time, and I seal my home behind me intending to visit my brother as my Mistress bade me to.

The ghosts in my yard puts that idea to rest in short order.

There are more than a dozen, less than twenty, and a quick tally comes up with fifteen as they flicker in my sight. The moment that the one with the deep violet toned hair notices that I have
noticed them, however, she solidifies enough that I am more than certain a Hylian would notice her presence. The others follow quickly, gaining density and weight and the small actions and movements they had been performing still. I blink, unsure for the first time in all my years since Sharu-shiik took me under her tutelage, what exactly I am supposed to do or say. Derinkuyu’s previous shiik died seven years before my arrival, so their lingering is unusual though not improbable, especially for a people who expect to be guided down the river.

As with all magic, expectation often becomes fact.

They are coherent, no signs of any of them becoming Poes are present, and all but one young man are elderly, leading me to believe their deaths were, if not peaceful, then at least anticipated.

“Suurin.” The Han man with silvery hair and tattoos and the feel of a warrior about him calls out, and it is my turn to freeze, my turn to become so still that I daren’t even breathe. Of course, one of the elders would know what I have forgotten, would be the reminder that names what I have become and brings it to reality. My immobility is enough for the Yin woman with muscled arms, darker skin and blonde hair to dart forward and take my hand.

She dissipates with a sigh of relief as my palm tingles and my fingers burn, gone to the Silent Realm directly. That seems to be enough for the others to crowd in, their voices mingling and their shades intruding in my personal space, though none is so rude as to simply use me like the Yin woman did. There is one enough alike to be her sister, and my attention sharpens her grasp on the Mortal Realm, her words cutting through the babble to strike at my heart.

“It’s been so long please, please, Aein-ah. Suurin. Please, let me go.”

I can no more deny her than I can deny my burning lungs. With a gasp, I reach for her, and with a faint moan of relief, she too, is gone.

The young man with the tanned though light skin beneath the sun’s touch and dark hair of the Mu watches as I take care of the Han man who named me, the Ren woman so elderly her eyes have faded to pink, and the Noh man missing his right hand to the elbow before presenting himself for my attentions.

“Yes.” I agree, and though my hand is warm, reach for him. He is the first that I can begin to sense the process with, and once I know where to look, following the progress of the others’ path through the bridge that is my form is possible. The foundation laid in my years of work as shiik, supports started with my willing accommodation of Zelda’s possession, the arches of travel and exposure to the divine peoples, and the solid surface my encounter in Hyrule Field with the spirits of Aversa Keep. It is not easy by any means, the crossing nearly instantaneous, but Sharu taught me well, then pounded the lessoning into my sense of self through repetition and increasingly complicated tasks. The next six result in blisters, but that too, is worth the momentary pain to bring these ghosts relief.

The three remaining ghosts are all men, all as old as any oldster I’ve encountered, and in no hurry to move, though their eagerness for the peace of the Silent Realm is palpable.

“I am honored you would attend to me.” The Ren clan’s ancestor murmurs as I move to him first, the closest of the three, with staggering steps. Perhaps this takes more energy than I initially thought, or perhaps I simply to not know how to control it effectively. The burns on my hands are definitely a sign of that very possibility, for magic’s first child is always fire. Always. It is
simply energy, condensed and directed. I ponder that as I send him to meet with the Goddesses.

“Nayru bless you, son.” Vibrant red eyes gleam with unshed tears on an incorporeal face, and I do not reach, but simply let him go. It is easier. My blisters do not worsen. I can do this. Maybe.

“For your work this day, Suurin, you have our gratitude.” The last of the ghosts says to me, fully formal as Hahron’s sister was, and I open myself for his use. Like the meditations that take me on the Umbral Paths, there is that point where I am not tense, nor am I relaxed, I do not dwell in the past or hope for the future, and this crossing feels right.

It is the last sensation I recognize before the world goes black.

The warm, thrumming pulse of benevolent magic greets me as I claw my way back to consciousness, though the last time I heard that particular set of voices together I was not on the plane of reality that I last remember occupying.

“He’s awake.” Rauru cuts through the hushed whispers of Ruto, Zelda, Impa and Saria, and I open myself for his use. Like the meditations that take me on the Umbral Paths, there is that point where I am not tense, nor am I relaxed, I do not dwell in the past or hope for the future, and this crossing feels right.

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“Rauru-yana.” I exhale, not believing my eyes. How is he here? For that matter, where am I? The stone beneath me feels familiar, though I cannot explain how stone can be familiar, and the sound of water dripping echoes endlessly. Six white pillars surround me with a ceiling so high I cannot perceive it, though the walls appear to be nothing more than cascading waterfalls backed by endless darkness…and not all of the waterfalls are moving down. I even appear to be in the epicenter of one such initiation point, a pool of clear liquid that flows over the edge of my small circle and drops, like the pillars, so far away that I cannot see the bottom. I do, however, recognize the sigils that I can see before me, beneath the feet of the Big Brother of the Gorons, the Princess of the Zora to his right, and the Sage of Shadow to his left. Rauru stands next to Mokara’s Chosen, beside Saria whom I and four willing sacrifices thought safe in the Forest Temple, and next to her Nabooru peers down her long nose at me, definitely not beyond the reach of mortals.

Sitting up is a mistake, my equilibrium not yet up to the task and remedying that vertical state by sending me horizontal again. I can distinguish the Triforce symbol beneath me, my flopping roll placing me firmly in Nayru’s quadrant and taking me almost entirely out of the center, with only my left foot in Farore’s and nothing present in Din’s. I would, however, have been splayed equally across the face of it on waking. The hem of Zelda’s trousers is very close, brushing against my nose, and Ruto’s laugh still sends my teeth to aching, but if the Sages are all here….

“If you were wearing a skirt, I’d have an interesting view.” I tell Zelda. Then I realize what I just said, and turn as deep a red as the seal of the Fire Sage that Darunia roars from, even as Saria titters, Ruto squeals, Rauru chuckles, and Nabooru cackles. Impa glares at me, and I am deeply, deeply thankful that it appears the Sages cannot move from their respective stations. Zelda, for her part, has a rosy flush to her own face, but helps me stand regardless of whatever social faux pas I have just committed. It is not just the immense spiritual and magical pressure of the chamber that keeps me from my feet, though that is the larger part of it. I am exhausted, very much like the last time I was in Rauru’s presence.
“Be that as it may…” Zelda clears her throat. “…we’ve come to a very interesting conclusion while you were sleeping.”

“I admit boy, you might actually be useful after all.” Nabooru grins to take some of the sting out of her words. Given her general perception of males to begin with, I accept the backhanded compliment without so much as a flinch.

“It seems that you have become a conduit for all of us.” Saria’s voice is light and child-like, though I am beginning to suspect she may be the eldest of her peers given the deference they show to her in her willingness to speak. “You carry Zelda, our leader, the one who gathers us and directs us, in your heart and in your body. While she is not the strongest, eldest, most powerful or most visible, she is, by virtue of that, familiar with what each of us is and can do.” The ancient eyes of the eternal child draw me in, and I cannot look away, even if I wanted to.

“Tor Aein-shiiik…” Darunia begins, and a small gesture from Impa keeps me from correcting him on my title. I suppose there are things she wishes to ponder before, or even ever, revealing them. “…through you, we may access the Chamber while remaining for all intents and purposes in our respective Temples, with no cost or effort to ourselves.” The Goron rumbles, looking distressed. The other Sages will not meet my eyes, and I turn to the Sage that commands the element of my people.

“We cannot be certain, however, that others cannot do the same.” Impa tells me when the silence grows over long. I know exactly which other she is referring to, and my blood runs cold at the thought.

“In order to prevent that, there are a number of options we may take.” Zelda assures me, though I know which would be the most expedient. Death does not frighten me, though I do have regrets. In seeking the Umbral Lines so long ago to see what futures I may, many of them came to this. I made my decision then to be a willing sacrifice for the people of Hylia’s Descent, and I have found no cause to change my answer now.

“I am an instrument for your playing.” I sigh. “My strings are yours to cut.” I bow my head to my Queen, hoping it will be swift. I do not want to suffer, nor linger over the process. The silence grows thick with tension, and I know that none of the other Sages can reach across the water to do it, so Zelda must be the one to end my life.

“Fool.” Nabooru snarls. “We are not him, to go about murdering innocents because they are inconvenient. Twice a fool! Who will the Seventh rely on to be her presence during her exile, if not you? Idiot! And what would happen to the Sacred Realm, should we shed blood needlessly? Huh?! Moron! Were you dropped on your head as a child?!”. The Sage of Spirit’s passion flickers as sharply as her tongue, and only Zelda’s touch on my cheek breaks the spell her words are weaving.

The touch of lips on mine is unexpected. I have also mastered the art of understatement. With her hands cupping my face, the support my Lady provided for me to stay on my feet is gone, and the kiss takes what strength I have from my knees like a hot knife parts butter. She kneels, following me to the floor, and kisses me again before wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

“Baboka.” She breathes into my ear, her breath trembling through my hair. I am suddenly very aware of the supple curves of her nearly developed form, the grace of her movements, the beauty she holds as securely as Wisdom. I cannot refuse her, in any way, and so when she demands I am already obeying. She does not let go, though she straightens herself up and pulls me to sit properly, my head resting against her shoulder and bosom. I hope she cannot tell how badly I am blushing.
“Options that don’t include desecration or murder were to block this ability and prevent you from using it.” Ruto trills, counting on her fingers…flippers?…fingers. “To place conditions on activation. To restrict the channel, allowing only those you deem fit to pass. To burn the ability out entirely. And lastly, to have Zelda tie it to her portion of the Triforce through the bond you share, and have her judgement decide.”

“The first is the easiest.” Zelda tells me, petting my hair and most likely unaware she is doing so, though if she continues the effects of it will be impossible to hide. “The last would require a level of trust that I believe is already present, but I need to know for sure. I need your consent Aein-ah, to use not just your body as a vessel and a mouthpiece, but as a gateway for myself and the other Sages.” I smile into her skin, breathe in her scent to voice my reply.

“You know me. You know what I will say. Zelda-hanyana, of course I trust you. I trust you with my truth, my life and my death. I trust you with my body and my spirit, my mind and my heart. Nayru may dictate the melody, but you strum the chords.” I know she has completed the working that will call me on Riahn Liahr, has had it ready for years. I know she must be reminded of the fact. “Call me, and I shall come.”

“…oh Aein.” Her eyes are so sad, but I choose this. I choose to be hers. My intentional use of hand-fasting vows to pledge my loyalty is not lost on her, nor on Impa, and most likely not on Rauru or Saria either. I cannot be certain of the others, but as they return fully to their Temples I know that they at least can appreciate the depth of my commitment, and away from their combined power, I can breathe a bit easier.

“Zelda-hanyana, do you accept my pledge? Will you let me guard your dreams?” The proposal is set, all that is left is for her to accept. I recognize that she will have to take another, a husband most likely, that will be an acceptable father and co-ruler of Hyrule, and have not placed any restrictions upon her acceptance that would cause difficulties when it happens. It pains me, but I will not be the reason for conflict. For any reason. She deserves every happiness, and I only wish to provide the ones that I can.

“Tor Aein-suurin, I trust you. I trust you with my truth, my life and my death. I trust you with my body and my spirit, my mind and my heart, and with all the Wisdom Nayru grants me I shall guide you and yours.” Her refrain of the vows my people have used for generations flows easily from her lips before they descend to claim mine much more thoroughly than the light, chaste kisses she has given me before. I lean back on my elbows and let her explore, wondering how far she wants to take this and how much of an instructor I will have to be.

Tangling my tongue with hers I taste her mouth, following as she sits up and back to straddle my hips and discovers my reaction to her touch. From the way she grinds down against me, there is very little instruction to anticipate, if any at all. Despite the pressure of the Chamber’s magic, the last of my tension leaves at that even as she toys with the ties of my tunic and pushes me gently downward. The rush of Farore’s Wind blows past, and by the time my shoulders meet the surface it has changed from the stone of the platform to the soft cushion of what I must assume is her bed in Derinkuyu.

My shirt is unlaced in short order, and her delicate yet calloused hands explore the planes of my chest and ribs, dipping so low as my stomach and as high as my collarbones before returning to toy with my nipples. She is not inexperienced enough to be confident, and I return the favour by sliding my hands from her waist up her sides to cup her firm breasts in my hands. Though small, still growing, they are pert and perky, and as my thumb glides over her areolas they grow warmer yet. When the opportunity arises, her blouse follows my shirt and her hands drop to tease at the sparse trail of hair that leads downward from my navel. I grab her wrists before she can go further.
“Are you sure?” She’s so young yet, though at her age I had begun my work as shiik of Sahila. I am barely six cycles older, now. It feels like a lifetime. “Hanyana, do you…” My hold is not harsh, not secure, only meant as a caution and not a true impediment. She breaks it easily and takes me in hand and anything else I may have said flies from my mind as fast as the gasp from my lungs. Nimble fingers free me from the confines of my trousers and small clothes, tugging as the fabric bunches at my hips until I shift to let her finish exposing my body. She must stand to do so, and takes care of her own pants at the same time.

Were that the Golden Goddesses were as lovely as my Mistress bare before me.

Her hair spills down her back, blonde turned to liquid metal in the lantern light, flame flickering and dancing to illuminate smooth skin and rosy tones under my regard. She is thin, hunger a constant companion and starvation too close for comfort making her hips prominent and her ribs visible, but vibrant in life and in power despite it all. Her eyes are the blue of a clear autumn sky and as full of heat as the summer sun, her cheek fresh as spring and her intent crisp as winter air.

As I study her, she studies me, and the sorrow in her gaze at my newer scars, the taunt quality of skin over my bones showing the privations I have endured, lean muscle and little else shivering both under her scrutiny and in the cool evening air. I hold out a hand in invitation, and she joins me, kneeling on the mattress to touch what she sees and come to know me in this way as well. Whatever worries plague me, she at least moves with intent and skill.

I lay panting beneath her, wondering at her assured movements briefly before recognizing their patterning as being the same pressure, the same pace, as I touch myself. I reach for her, trying to please even as she sets about pleasuring me with far more accuracy. Having been me while finding my release, she knows beyond mere knowing, and I cannot hold back my cry of ecstasy or my seed any longer. Spilling over her hand, I moan low in my chest both as heartfelt thanks and to get her to return quickly from cleaning up. She leaves the damp rag close by, and I see the practical side of Wisdom in action.

Lying next to me as I recover, she toys with my sweat dampened hair, petting along the line of scar tissue I received in destroying a roof. It is sensitive in a different way than the rest of my scalp, and gives me the space I need to build both the strength and courage to return the favor. Careful not to loom, I roll enough to lean over her and lay a series of short, soft, affectionate kisses over her face, taking time with the last and her lips but not moving beyond them to the moist heat of her mouth. There is another source I will turn to for that.

Her throat tastes of salt, the sweat there building but not yet beading, and I continue my downward journey of lips and teeth and tongue through the valley of her breasts, sampling each hill as I go, the soft skin of her stomach, and stroke the firm muscle of her hips as I shimmy to move between her legs. She parts them obligingly, and I kiss her inner thighs in thanks. The hair before me is coarser despite not yet being fully formed, curled and light brown, shifting as I blow soft, warm air over her mound. There is little moisture, and so I return to teasing the skin of her lower belly, the joint of her hip, the curve of her thighs with my fingers and mouth.

It is only when that skin has pebbled, twitching in anticipation of my next point of contact, and the slick liquid of her core shines through the cap of hair that I dip my head and run the flat of my tongue over her in entirety.

“Oooh.” The groan from her belly vibrates against my face as I taste her again, musky and slightly sweet, and her legs hook over my shoulders to draw me further in. Burying my face in her center I lap up the juices that flow, letting the full breadth of my tongue measure her response and enjoyment. The larger labia part with my explorations, though I am careful not to push, and the hood
at the juncture pulls back slightly to reveal a nub of such sensitivity that I know better than to touch just yet. Using my neck, she moans louder when I nod than when I move to the side, and so I keep a steady rhythm and pressure that slowly drives her up the bedding to grasp at the headboard and gain leverage in the cant of her hips.

Once the flow of moisture threatens to overrun my lips without suction I firm my tongue and delve into the tight hole buried between her thighs which constrict about my head even as her hands grab at my hair and her back arches up. With a deep breath, I press further, deeper, feeling her clench around my tongue and driving my nose to brush against that tiny bead. Quivering, her breath speeds up and her toes start to curl on my back, and I pull away to a stuttered gasp, followed quickly by a disappointed groan. Chuckling softly to myself, knowing she can probably hear it anyway, I find a tempo that keeps her anticipating but does not satisfy, then add my fingers. She is tight, and tight means pain, and I want her to only have pleasure.

My jaw aches by the time I have four fingers and my tongue inside her pink flesh, and the exhaustion I suffer is the only thing I can blame for forgetting she has had as many lessons by now with Hahron as I have. Distracted by the scent, the feel, the taste of my Mistress’ delight, it takes a moment for my brain to catch up with the motion and realize she’s flipped us and is squirreling down my body to take me in hand. I’ve had more than ample time to recover, and the stiffness she finds is almost painful to the touch. Almost. I am merely supremely sensitive, and then she smiles and kisses me deeply and distracts me once again with the gratification of such intimate affection.

“Aein-ah.” Her breath huffs out against my lips as she pulls back.

“Zelda-samaAH!” She sits, taking my entire length and arching back in sensual satisfaction. I would that she had gone slowly, gently, but she is determined and it is all I can do to hold on. It is a different tightness than the one Vidkun partook of, smoother, softer, and much, much easier for both of us as she creates the lubrication that must be dealt with separately between two men. By focussing on her pleasure, making certain that it is good, I can stave off my own completion. The texture of her hips beneath my hands, the way she shifts as she rides me, the expressions of gratification that flicker across her face serve as a map to guide my own hips in each meeting of the two.

Though she is no stranger to such indulgent hedonism, her sensuality has been allowed little exploration in the brief years that carnal pursuits have been in the sphere of her awareness. Watching her discover and affirm her decadences atop me has me gasping for breath as much as the act itself, seeing her find her delight with arched back and quivering muscles has my hands spasming to hold her in place and my jaw clenched as I grasp the cliff at the far edge of the precipice to prevent my own fall. There will be bruises later, though I am capable of sitting enough to catch her before she falls and does us both damage.

Lowering my Mistress, my Queen, to the waiting bedding while maintaining our intimate connection requires more coordination than I possess, though my withdrawal has her whimpering a protest as she clenches around me in a vain attempt to keep me inside of her. I replace that yearning with three fingers and feel her inner walls massage those digits as her body recovers before using my thumb to press on the engorged pearl at the top and giving her a second, though less intense, orgasm. When her trembling quiets I reach for the rag to clean us both off, ignoring the need that pulses in time with my heart between my own legs. Clearing the evidence of our activity from her skin, I do taste, unable to completely disregard my own desires, but do no more for she is already drowsing.

I am still slick with her fluids, and my hand works as well as ever, though the rag will require enough laundering that I am tempted to simply discard it after I finish cleaning my mess.
Soft snores fill the room, and I snuff the lanterns and bank the fire in the stove before returning to the bed and curling about Wisdom's avatar. My own fire will have gone out, though Niakara should be warm enough on her own that I have no qualms about spending the night next to the one young woman that I gladly allow command of my soul. I am happy, here, in her arms. Inspired. I have not been either in far, far too long. Her arm reaches out to pull me close even in sleep, and touched by the unconscious gesture, I join her in dreams.

Together we wait, though for what or who I cannot tell. We have been waiting since twilight turned to dusk and became dawn. The Temple of Time is deserted, very much the physical building that remains in the Mortal Realm rather than the version Rauru pulled out of time into the Sacred Realm to keep Mandrag Ganondorf from taking its treasures for his own. We wait, joyous, and I am weary. She is sad. In the early morning we wait, the spirits of the place rejoicing. I am resigned. She is scared. There are things we wish to tell only him. Things we can tell only him. Footsteps sound before I can figure out who “him” is, and I move to shield her before they can arrive.

I also fall off the bed intended for one, landing hard on the polished wooden floors of Zelda’s home as Impaz looks on with unconcealed glee. The coverings remain to preserve Zelda’s modesty, but I am still as nude as the day I was born and Impaz has surely seen other men before. There is no reason for her to stare so. There is also no threat, and I am still tired despite the full night’s sleep.

“Aein-ah, get up before you catch a chill.” Zelda murmurs. “Impaz-eh is just here to pick up her herb pouches, though she could have waited for a decent hour.” The last scathing chastisement is meant for the older woman cackling as she picks up the pile with neat embroidery labelling contents from the table.

“Ah, decency is for the young and the boring.” She quips. “Just make sure to take your Farore’s Lace, Zelda-hanyana, if you intend to keep that one in your bed.”

“I have every intention of keeping him now that he has been ensnared.” The pride of accomplishment and sheer possessiveness in her tone gives me pause, though I should not be surprised.

“He has given her his truth.” I grumble, moving only enough to return to the warm blankets, warm bedding, and warm arms awaiting me.

“About time!” Impaz chortles. “About time!” Safely ensconced in Zelda’s bed, I make certain to put myself between the herbalist and my Mistress, though the hand she wraps about me ensures neither of us will be sleeping again any time soon.

“Close the door on your way out.” The words are an order, and as contrary as Impaz is, she is no fool. Embroidered satchels in hand, she leaves quickly, with much more noise than she arrived as if to show us that she is gone. The door closes loudly enough for it to have been slammed. Zelda shifts, and I follow as her lips tease the nape of my neck, her tongue darting out to toy with my earrings. I sigh, tilting my head to give her better access even as her hands gain momentum and purpose.

“I left you wanting.” She breathes across my cheek when I am shuddering at her touch. She leans forward, breasts pressed firmly against my back as I rock my hips into the tight channel she is providing with her hands.

“It’s… fine, hanyana.” I gasp as the beginnings of the end start seeping from the tip. “I… took care of…it my….self.”
“It’s not fine.” She insists, sitting up further to allow her other hand to gently cup my balls. “It was inconsiderate and selfish.” Running her fingers through the tears of want she is calling forth, I have a moment to wonder if she is going to taste them before she smirks. “Consider this my apology.” As her one hand works, her other dips between my spread legs to tease the hidden pucker there. Like in all things, she has learned her lessons well, and is apt at applying them. I spill across her hand and onto the bedding with a moan of appreciation.

The orgasm must have sent me to ecstasy and from there to sleep, for the next time I am aware Zelda has tucked herself beneath my arm, her head on my chest, and is breathing slow and deep. I bury my nose in her hair and do the same, though both of us should be well into our day. My stomach and the light from the eastern window tell me it is past noon, and there are things to do and people to see. I am disinclined towards any activity but being here, in Zelda’s embrace, warm and half asleep.

I keep the sigh of regret internal to keep from waking her as I slip from beneath the blankets and find my small clothes and wrap them about myself. Chilled, I seek my trousers and shirt next, and stoke the stove fire before adding enough coal to warm the room and cook breakfast. I hesitate at her pantry, having to actually choose what I wish to make instead of simply using the only foodstuffs I have available stunning my mind momentarily. Oats are always a good choice, the starchiness providing long lasting energy, but I can add sweeteners and spices, and it has been long enough since I last had that option that I have trouble deciding. In my explorations of her kitchen though, I find the pods of Farore’s Lace, dried and ready to crack open.

The citrus hints of the seeds is almost enough flavoring, and two pinches of dried orange zest completes the balance. Honey to sweeten, milk for richness, and I wake my Queen with soft kisses to a waiting meal. Giving thanks, she sprinkles her portion with the small, white seeds and proceeds to clean her bowl.

“Food always tastes better when someone else makes it.” She sighs when finished and rises to clean up. The temperature is comfortable, but Yoru is waiting for my arrival, there are letters to write my parents, friends, fellows, and mentors, and arrangements to make for the spring and final sanctuary. Zelda in her turn must plan for thousands of refugees, discover who was directly responsible for the powerful earth magics that destroyed Aversa in the first place, plan for prevention in case of a second attack, responses in case one occurs, and do it all through two to five intermediaries. I do not envy her the task, and also have no time to wash my hair and have it dry. I can bathe, and do, but make certain to keep my hair bound and free from moisture that will attract illness in the cold wind and chill skies.

Zelda joins me in the bath, though goes no further than gentle touches and the occasional soft caress, and I am on my way with a firepot to restart my own stove and feed Niakara within the hour. That task done, I set out towards Derinkuyu’s heart and the home of my brother and sister-by-choice. Keiko is more than able to provide both paper and ink, and I set to in their workroom while Insu is still down for his afternoon nap. Having had sufficient time to plan what I wish to say and to whom in my letters, I start quickly and with confidence, putting pen to paper immediately in the hopes of finishing early and being able to spend time with my family.

It is in vain, for though I know what I want to say and how to go about doing it, the fine muscle control to write neatly and clearly is a skill I have not been practising often, and my hand cramps up past easing as the letter to Sharu-shiik is drying. My parents, our headwoman, and the representative of the Council of Hierarchs in charge of overseeing Sahila and the surrounding area have their letters finished, folded, and sealed. Alma, Enzo, his partner Keifal, Taoh, Chia, and my friends Aennah and Melo must wait until picking up a pen or brush no longer causes spasms in my fingers for their letters.
I spend the remainder of the time between writing and the evening meal playing catch with Insu who has a small bean-filled leather ball and the will to use it. Watching the boy gives Keiko and Yoru time alone together to be alone together as adults planning a long journey with a child that will commence sooner rather than later. They will not have another chance like this until next year though, if they do not take the opportunity now. Enzo’s dogs make travel much easier, the pack capable of carrying supplies, getting help, hunting, finding water, finding shelter, providing companionship, and even letting a three year old use their packs like a pony’s saddle. First Sprout is the earliest that the 41st party will arrive on Lana’s side, though they will have to be making better than usual time for it to happen. Yoru knows the route though, and they have supplies for a fortnight if they can find water. It should be more than enough time for the party to catch up to the pace of a family with a small child.

The home they have built here is already mostly packed away to await either their return or to shelter another small family. Keiko’s supplies are neatly labelled, Yoru’s weapons sheathed and cushioned, most of Insu’s baby supplies in chests in storage. While I would like another niece or nephew, that is a choice for my brother and Keiko to make alone. That they have kept such things means it is a possibility, but I am not going to force their hands in making a decision either way during such a time of upheaval. I know from looking around, too, what my parting gift to them will be.

I stay for the evening meal, help with Insu’s bath and story time, present the finished letters to Yoru’s safekeeping, and return to my home in time to rekindle the flame. Warm, safe, I check Niakara before her evening hunt, and give myself a proper bath. My dreams are the same as the previous night, repeating the same scene over and over, and I have my suspicions as to who “him” is, though they are not confirmed. I cannot See that much, and I do not ask Zelda if she can, more out of a desire not to know than any other reason. I have enough on my plate as it is without being the first suurin in two generations.

Seeing my brother and his family safely to the gate, then through the gate and into the icy side of mount Lana keeps me busy for the three days leading to the start of the Sprout Moon. I am busy enough with my letters and constructing a child-sized carry-sack with all the temperature control and preservation spells I can think to cast in the time I have in its making, that once the portal has closed and taken my family from my sight, I am at a loss. Sohna quietly suggests checking that the seals on their home are secure, and for lack of options I meander in that general direction, Niakara at my side. I hadn’t thought to question such devotion in a notoriously aloof species before the Han ghost called out, but now, in retrospect, it is quite clear that even then, I was, at least on some level, functioning as an intermediary for all spirits. I needed a companion, someone to remind me that I am not alone, and Cheesecake just happened to be carrying a kitten that needed to be needed.

The Goddesses work in mysterious ways, but only if we cannot see their patterns. Nayru knows Her own laws, I simply must learn to trust in them more, trust in Her. The Book of Nayru’s most simple instruction is to “Trust in My Laws, for they shall always guide you.” Simple, yet incredibly easy to forget. I had forgotten. I have forgotten. Niakara meows in response to my laughter, and I simply scoop her up in my arms to pet her thoroughly. I get her rubbing her face against mine in return, her purring loud and enthusiastic, and together we check the physical building that was my brother’s home and then the spell work to keep it pristine. If it holds up half as well as mine did while I was running about Hyrule, they will be very comfortable when they return. If they return.

It has been almost four cycles of the seasons since I last saw my parents, nearly three since my geas to remain in the land of the Goddess Hylia was incised into my flesh. I no longer notice how the scars pull when I move. They have become a part of me, even as these people have become
my people, this land now my home. Though a thief sits on a throne of his own making, the land itself is sickening under his subjugation, there is hope. Sprout turns to Egg before I venture forth again, secure in Zelda’s truth, to finish building the last sanctuary for her travel. Egg becomes Flower when the Loyalist intelligence report a name of a powerful Earth wizard responsible for the destruction and loss of life at Aversa to go with the Wind wizard Kabocha, Fire witch Kotake and the Ice witch Koume.

That leaves three of concern before we know the identities of all his allies, council members, and generals. Knowledge is power, for it eliminates fear. Overcoming fear is the key to Courage, and with Wisdom already on our side, Power is sure to fall. I know where Courage is, and now that my primary task for the exiled Queen is complete, can spend time with him that I could not, before. My expanded skill set allows for a remarkable ease in locating both resusangeul bi aiyuu and his fairy companion Between, though getting there is as much of a challenge as it ever was. His body has grown, but his mind is still that of a child, still unable to hold on to new information not immediately apparent. Planning for flexibility then, should be my primary concern, rather than keeping him appraised of current events and rote memory tests.

He is nearing his thirteenth birthday, if my approximations are at all accurate, and sitting still while I trim his hair to a more manageable length when the last half moon of Zelda’s dreaming of the earth collapsing and crushing her come true.

Kondor Keep’s audience chamber is gone by the time we arrive in the sanctuary there, the residents of Elydis’ inner sanctuary in shackles. Hanyana refrains from challenging their captors then and there by the slimmest of margins, and though I lose the battle with my tears I manage to not make a sound despite having to bite through my lip to do it. That blood is easily cleaned up, the urge to spill more not so much. Instead I note every one of those herding the bound survivors into chains of Human, Hylian, and mixed blood livestock, and sear their faces into my memory. As their journey to the Geru’do Valley begins, I take Zelda disguised as Hanyana with me to Kakariko and deliver the information to General Impa. She is much more capable than either of us in tactics and planning, though she needs as much information as I can give her to do her job.

Four days later, I watch from Kakariko’s Inn as two companies of Loyalists leave to intercept just beyond Lon Lon Ranch. I enjoy a bowl of Valyarie’s potato stew, and retire for the night to the shared room I have with Hanyana. Zelda dares not drop her disguise here, and so the illusions turning her hair burnished copper instead of gold, her skin tan instead of cream, and her eyes as red as the blood of the First Hero remain. The frustration of inaction leads her to mount me as a distraction, and I gladly give up control to let her have that. My own frustrations are erased in orgasm and later, sleep, and we begin the Berry Moon by starting rumors of our own.

The Hero is coming. Be patient. Have faith.
The Spirit of the Sword

Chapter Summary

To attain the future, we must give of the present, letting go of the past.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter include, in no particular order: original character death, racism, expansion of canon, metaphysics, possession, mild blood and gore.

It felt strange to give the Shaekha’ri rites of passage down the River to one not of Shaekha’ri lineage, but it is what Lewenhart’s ghost wanted. Cradling his spirit in a weaving of my own intent, having helped so many traverse the distance, I ride the ferry with him to the First Gate of Death in silence. He stands at the prow of the ship, the Carrion Crow guiding the way with the solemn elegy ringing from dual bells. Twin skol riddar’eh stand sentinel for the journey, their geas binding them to keep the living from intruding in the realm of the dead and perverting Nayru’s Laws and Mokara’s Domain.

As a spirit, Lewenhart is to-be-guarded. As suurin, so am I. It is my shroud he is covered in, my intent his destination, and so my presence on this side of the First Gate, still technically in the Mortal Realm, is considered acceptable. Still, the riddar’eh make me nervous, so like the Stalfos that still occasionally grasp at animation in Hyrule even though more and more Moblins and Lizalfos have come to take their place. They are also similar to the Watchers of the Silent Realm, whose blood runs in my veins, and the light emanating from their lanterns in not the baleful malevolence of a Poe. Still, they are purposed spirits, bound by a duty, and disinclined to chatter.

Lewenhart, too, spends his final moments on this side of the Gate staring ahead, searching for his long lost love. Tor Ilia, Shaekha’ri woman of some distant relation to myself, and yet another reason my presence on this ship is not protested. Blood calls to blood calls for blood here, and the small prick of a needle and drop of my blood in the maw of the Crow gives direction as no other can. I can see the line of his affection and memories trailing, taunt and steady, down the River after that, though I cannot tell what anchors the other end. Nor can I cross the Gate with him.

The ferry pauses long enough for me to disembark before the Gate, and those ghosts that required the Shadow Temple’s aid to arrive board in my stead. The gangplank is lifted quickly, for some of those recent additions are less than willing, and their binding is not much like the red chord of affection that ties Lewenhart to Ilia and more of a violet netting of restraint. The skol riddar’eh have the deck partitioned off in moments, and as the ferry sinks through the Gate Lewenhart smiles at me and mouths a thanks, then is gone beyond sensing.

From the end of the platform Charin beckons my shade, and knowing I have some time yet to return to my body, I follow. The guard post is stocked with certain items that, once I have returned to Life properly, will be more than useful, and I tender my thanks before reaching for the warp and weft of the weavings that make up my mortal form. I know the lines that tether me, though I cannot
see where they extend beyond the First. The silver cord stretched thin is what binds me to life, is malleable, stretches, and is easy to follow back. The red cord, no longer a single strand but braided length, unravels and spreads in four directions.

One I know to be Zelda, for it is thickest, strongest, and feels like the warm skin of her hand. The second, Link, is woven inexorably with the first, and though thinner, is just as powerfully connected to the fabric of my reality. The third is thin, hot and angry, a series of snarls and knots, hopelessly entangled about the other two. Ganondorf. Touching it hurts me, and I try not to acknowledge it even as I recognize fainter, yet steadier cording. The two entwined around each other, still red and still bound up in me even though they are not a part of my core, are my parents. Yoru is closer to my center, yet of a different weave entirely, curving off to join with Keiko and spin the threads that make up Insu. There are more, but my edges have begun to fray, and I use the silver line to reel myself in.

Elydis Hold’s people are fewer, many of the elderly and infirm and some of those in their prime unable to withstand the unexpected violence of Kabocha’s slavers. The Wind wizard styles himself as something of the second coming of Vaati, though even I can tell he has none of the finesse of that dark magician as his power comes from another and his discipline is non-existent. Despite that, the Loyalists know based on both testimony of reliable witnesses and their own operatives, that he is responsible for transporting some dozen Lizalfos to Kondor Keep and setting them loose. Though more intelligent than Moblins, that does not say much. They breed quickly, move quickly, and can wield blades, and that is enough for them to be the fodder sent ahead to soften a target. The Keep is simply the first major settlement to bear the brunt of their violence.

Lewenhart could have lived without his legs, but his hands he needed. He was not the only one I have given mercy to in the last sennight, nor even the only one I have taken to the First Gate. My rage has long since passed, replaced by cold anger, then sorrow, and now solemn duty is all that is left. Zelda is back safe in Derinkuyu, though her spirit rides my body, tending to the wounded in my absence. I am tired, but she is exhausted, and so on my return she releases her hold and I am just fast enough in the taking up of my form that our patient does not notice the faltering of my hands. The change, however, is easily seen as my skin fades from burnished gold to corpse-like pallor.

“Ah, Sheik. Welcome back.” Lord Throri greets, face pale and wane. Much like mine I suppose, though mine is concealed behind mask and cowl.

“Thank you, my Lord.” I return, and finish replacing the soft cotton holding the long line of stitching in place and keeping it protected and moist enough to heal. The sword was rusty, and the cut jagged, and he is fortunate enough that blood poisoning would be evident by now and he shows no signs of it.

“Neatly done.” He comments as I close the end of the bandage with a touch of binding magic. He would know, for this is only the newest in what appear to be a long catalogue of scars. “Un’a yourishou.”

His thanks in my tongue simply reminds me that, aside from two youngsters, there is no one here with even a hint of Shaekha’ri in their blood, as though the Lizalfos were targeting those families first. It may very well be, for Ganondorf is not alone in his hatred of my people. He is simply the most resourceful in effecting means of eradication.

“You’re most welcome, my Lord.” I bow my head, hiding even my eyes from his gaze. There is work to be done, and I cannot afford tears. Not here, not when “Sheik” is a name whispered between enemy and ally alike. Throri’s status will rise considerably, since I am
deliberately showing more deference than he actually requires, and Zelda did the same in her turn. Let them think my magic strengthens him, restores him, beyond what herb and knife healing we have actually done.

“Allow me to offer you solace this night, food and a bath and a soft bed.” He says, loudly enough that I can see the tensing of those around him at the prospect of my acceptance. They are afraid. Afraid of the monsters that have taken them from their homes and the one that stands there amidst them now. Sheik does not grow weary, nor does he require sustenance. Those rumors amuse me and frustrate me at the same time. I could use both food and bed gladly, a bath almost as much. But I have a spectre of perception to confirm in the minds and hearts of our enemies, and hearing the same from known allies will only strengthen that affirmation.

“I must decline.” I say, keeping regret from my tone and exhaustion from my posture. “I am needed elsewhere.” Where, I do not mention. Let the collective imaginations of the two hundred some rescued residents of the Keep spin some fanciful story far more elaborate and strange than anything I could come up with. I need not lie when rumor and fear do it for me.

“Very well.” Throri nods, knowing full well where I actually intend to go, having stocked the safe house with fresh food and blankets himself moments before encountering a single wounded Lizalfos abandoned by its master to face its fate alone on his return to the Hold proper. “Swift travels, old friend.”

“Farore’s winds guide you.” I return, and let that very spell send me to my temporary home. Niakara yawns a greeting before flipping herself over into a ball facing the wall on my bed and returning to her snoring. Since it has been a day and a half since I have eaten, and only a day since I last woke, I tend to my stomach and the fire beneath the food before passing out for another half day.

The first dawn of the Horn moon drenches the land in sunlight and warmth, and I bask in both the light and in the knowledge that the lives needed to keep the sky clouded and dark have returned to their intended paths. The heart of Elydis Hold lives, through Zelda’s foresight and the quick action of those loyal to her. It is a good day, even if the radiance of sister sun sears my skin to blistering when I fall asleep beneath her rays. I feel better both for the exposure to the light of life and the shade and ointment that are my quiet retreat. A day to recover, and then my feet again trek across the Field towards the Ranch.

Talon stumbled into Kakariko a sennight after the slavers were caught and given a swift, if somewhat gruesome, justice. He bore the seal promising refuge, and tends to Impa’s cow and Anju’s cuccos even now. The last of the slavers have crossed the River mere days ago, and I am to check on Malon and possibly rescue her, if needed and if possible. The Ranch still provides much of the sustenance of those in power, and is therefore somewhat protected, though the patrols that once roamed Kakariko now use the enclosed field and track within Lon Lon’s borders as their base.

There are too few capable of protesting Ganondorf’s cold grip on power to keep most larger settlements free of his agents, and the small folk haven’t the resources to be worth the trouble either way. It is slight comfort, and little protection, but Zelda in her Wisdom has commanded that those still loyal to the old King not spend their blood and lives in opposition to the Usurper. Let his patrol perform their tasks, let his women gather their tolls and taxes, let them demand shelter and sustenance from their own master’s weather-working, for the Hero is coming to lift the blight from the land and topple the unworthy from his throne. Pride is not worth all the years anyone has left to live, and his black magics feed on pain, suffering, death, and blood.

Our success here in the Elydis duchy’s center, restoring the Hold itself, provides a visceral
proof of her words. That alone will fuel rumor and spread hope even as my Mistress’ foresight allows me to do the same, in much subtler and smaller ways.

Such as attending to the ranch girl, who is most likely a young woman by now.

Four days of a steady pace, alternating between running and walking, stopping only to rest, eat, and on one occasion bathe, has me nearing the gates of the Ranch two marks before sunset. So late in the day, the shadows are faint but long, and I have no trouble sliding through the shadow within the corridor between buildings. It is quiet aside from the clucking of cuccos and the lowing of cattle. Two steps in the light, and I slip to the bottling building, checking inside for Malon. She is not there, but by the proliferation of long strands of red hair either there are a number of Gerudo women taking their turns at the machine, or Malon has taken over her father’s tasks in his absence.

The track is nearly barren of horses compared to the last time I was here, and of the fourteen I can see roaming about their paddock, a young mare catches my eye as no other. She is unusually colored, though her lines speak of both Human draft and Hylian racer. For all her bulk, she is elegant, and cavorts with youthful enthusiasm. I dare not leave my place in the shadows, but I do spend more time than I ought watching her dance out of the grasp of the Ranch hand whose name I forget. He leaves, frustrated, to herd the other horses into their stables for the night, and it takes a lithe young woman whom I must assume is Malon to coerce the mare in with song and more than one carrot.

The ranch hand leaves the stables first, heading to the main house where I must assume he has a room. Full dark falls, and Malon does not emerge. My asylum of shadow fades with the twilight, and I must move or risk fading with it, so I flee to the stable as well. I am cautious in stepping out, for there is but a single oil lantern lit and that is very, very close to the red headed youth softly crying into the side of the mare I admired. The horse notices me immediately, even cloaked in shadow as I am, though the young miss is too absorbed in her misery to pay any attention.

“Oh, daddy.” She murmurs once the spat of tears slows. “Epona, I miss him!” The snuffle is not at all elegant or graceful, rending the air with moist burbling and disguising the sound of my retreat from her immediate vicinity. The mare whuffs her caretaker’s hair and nudges her to turn towards where I stand, and I make the best I can of the situation before I can startle her too badly.

“Hello?” I call out, as though I have just come in. “Is someone here?” I can see as she dashes the tears from her face, using the water in the trough to cool some of the blotches that an extended bought of crying can bring on from her cheeks.

“Oh, yes. I’m Malon, caretaker of the horses here under Master Ingo. Can I help you?” She asks, and a number of things fall into place in my head, none of them pleasant.

“I am just a traveller, seeking shelter for the night. I won’t bother you or the horses, Miss Malon, though if there is an empty stall, I would appreciate an evening out of the wind.” I call in return, slowly moving towards her as I speak so she can track my movements and I do not scare her.

“Standard rates are five rupees for a stall, but since I doubt you’ll need either grain or hot mash, I can knock that down to three.” She tells me, gaining control of herself in the familiar exchange. I smile, remembering a night paid for and unclaimed years ago, though that was for more than a stall out of the weather. “You do get a blanket and hay, and all the clean water you can drink.” She teases, some of her normal good natured spirit coming forth.

“I would be most grateful for all three.” I accept, and dig through my pack for the necessary coin.
“The stall two doors in on the right next to Poloi was mucked out this evening, and the bales are above. I’ll toss some down, and grab that blanket for you.” She says, and then scrambles to complete those tasks with an agility and surety of motion that tells me this job is familiar to her beyond what Ingo would expect. This is not her first night, or first turn, in the stables.

“Many thanks, Miss Malon.” I keep my head bowed, my cloak wrapped tight about my shoulders, to hide my eyes and my clothes. She does not need to know she is housing a wanted fugitive, and I will be gone before dawn.

“What do I call you?” She asks as I tilt three green rupees into her open palm.

“I am but a wandering minstrel. On my journeys I hear many things.” I say as I make a bed of the sweet straw and thick, if coarsely woven, blanket. It smells heavily of horse, but not illness, sweat, or fear. The animals, at least, are well tended. “Perhaps you would like a tale?” I have no instrument with which to perform aside from my voice. There are things she should know, and though I can do it, I dislike lying and would rather she not know my name. A distraction from her question, and hopefully she will forget I never truly answered it.

“Oh, please!” Young enough still, to enjoy a story. She will be alright then, as long as she stays a childish shape. We will check again as she becomes more womanly, for a man who would turn on his master and keep the master’s daughter can easily slip to other depravities. In the back of my mind I hear Zelda’s murmured agreement, and set to spinning a tale of Heroes, exiled Princesses. Monsters and a seven-year sleep.

Thinly disguised as my words are, Malon has not the schooling of a Shaekha’rì child of eight, or even a Hylian child of ten, and does not see the truth of my telling. She hears it though, and I pray to the Goddesses that she can take some cheer and find hope from it, at least in the dark of the waxing moon’s night. Though dim by the standards of my people, she is charming, enthusiastic, and far advanced in the care of her four-legged charges compared to the same. Hanya would be pleased to have her as an animal-healer apprentice, in another time and another set of circumstances.

As it stands, she thanks me for the story and returns to the box with the mare before closing the lantern and sending the stable into darkness. It takes moments for my eyes to adjust, and she is sleeping within a handful more. So dark with the moon naught but a sliver of silver in the sky, there are still shadows enough for me to move through, and I quickly locate both Ingo’s rooms and the traps he has set for the unwary. They are dependent on weight and substance, and a shadow has neither.

It is petty of me, and will not change Malon’s servitude, but it makes me feel better to set a trail of the honey from his honey pot on the inside gusset of his trousers, splinter the tips of his quills, and carefully drill a hole in the corks of his wine casks with one of my needles. Ants, frustration, and sour wine are small things, and I am tempted to make sure that he never touches Malon as a man while he sleeps, but that is a big thing, evident, and his screams would wake the Geru’dó guard stationed just beyond the walls. With an internal sigh of regret, I return to the stables to gather Niakara before playing the Lament and seeking my own bed.

Gasping for air in the Chamber of the Warp pad for Derinkuyu I can feel the pulse of pain throbbing in time with my heart spread from my hands, up my wrists, and through to my forearms as blood stains the tiles, drips from the walls. That beat is rapid, as is the pumping of my lungs, useless in the enclosed space. I cannot breathe where there is no air. The tunnel is blocked beyond access, but I have to get through. I have to! Even as my vision swims and my steps falter, I know it. I must…

.:Aein, wake up!:. Zelda commands, her mental voice stern and imperative. I obey, and
blink spots from my vision in the dark of the night. I am in Derinkuyu, in the shiik’s house that I have made my home, in a soft bed warmed by body heat, next to an agitated cat. Niakara’s fur stands on end, muscles tensed to make her appear larger than she actually is, her growling fading as my breathing returns to a normal rate. My heart still throbs, my throat thick with remembered suffocation, but I know it was a dream. Not just a dream, but a dream. Not real. Not yet.

I’ve also soaked the linens through, and the faint sour odor of fear filled sweat wafts unpleasantly through the air. I breathe it in deeply regardless, and wait for the tension along my frame to relax before moving. Stripping the sheets, I carry the fabric to the wash room and light a single lantern with my magic, the process and focus required for that task further steadying my nerves. A spoonful of honey, as much water as I can comfortably drink and another mug besides, and I take the time to wash thoroughly. Dried sweat is not pleasant, but the warm water, sugar, and liquid to replace what I have lost leaves me somnolent once more. It is still late, or very early, and I crave rest.

Draining the tub, I leave the soiled bed linen for later, merely tying my hair up and back to keep from soaking the pillows. I do take three drying towels from the washing room to my bed, intent on laying them across the pillow and where my sweat has soaked the mattress to keep dry. Despite the temperate climate this time of year, catching a chill would be counter-productive. Niakara twines about my legs, staying as physically close to me as she can manage, purring loudly the entire time in a feline attempt to comfort me. It works well, though not as well as seeing my Mistress tucking new bed clothes about the mattress, garbed in her night dress and bonnet and nothing else.

“That should do it.” She murmurs softly, patting the last corner, tucking the fabric, and flicking my light blanket over the lot before crawling across to the other side and raising an arm. “Come to bed, Aein-ah. Dawn will come sooner than we could wish.”

“You could have, and I didn’t have to, which is why I did.” She insists, patting the mattress impatiently. Niakara, used to that motion from me as an invitation to cuddle, jumps up and does just that, much to my amusement and Zelda’s chagrin. Not one to disobey the Queen, I do join her, curling myself around the warm ball of fur that is taking up far more space than should be possible between us, and stroking Niakara’s soft belly. Zelda extinguishes the lantern with a word and settles quickly, leaving me to stare in the dark and keep the purring one content with gentle, rhythmic pets. I am unaware of falling asleep.

Zelda is right, and dawn comes far earlier than I want. Having no urgent tasks, however, I am disinclined to move and shift only enough to roll over without disturbing the cat at the foot of the bed before drifting back to an interrupted rest. Dreamless, the morning passes, and it is only when the sun grows too strong to be ignored that I slowly admit that I should get up. Slower still is the actual doing, due in part to the regular waking urges not occurring.

That tells me I am still dehydrated, and so fixing that is the first task I set myself for the day. Zelda has long since returned to her plans for the duration of sister’s sun’s journey, but has left a thick soup rich with mushrooms and leeks simmering on my hearth. Sending warm thoughts of thanks, I partake, feeding Niakara bits of cucco from my bowl as they surface, the meat itself unappealing but the broth tastier for it. Laundry follows breakfast, is followed by another bath, and I retreat to the small library Dian-shiik collected during his lifetime to both study and let my hair dry.
Closing my eyes, letting the part of me that is Nayru’s lead over the part of me that is Mokara’s, I reach for the shelves of scrolls, books, and folios and let my hand go where it will. It is only once I know, with unwavering certainty, that the one my hand rests on is the one that will be the most effective, that I open my eyes. Taking the thick, leather bound volume from its place, I am pleased to note that no bookworms have turned it into a meal, and find a seat with good light for the next few hours. I am nearly a quarter of the way through Yiga Nari-shiik’s Dissertations on the Seven Gates when the ringer on the bell at my door is swung with fervor and the chimes reach even the second story where I am engrossed in theory.

“Coming!” I call through the open window, and carefully mark my place. The Dissertations is a familiar piece, Sharu-shiik had me work through it once I was finished with the primers of my occupation, but like any good book I always find something new to think about after picking it up. Niakara is sunning herself in the kitchen when I open my door to find the Shaekha’ri healer and her human apprentice on my doorstep.

“Greetings, Master necromancer.” Juen greets, speaking formally and telling me that this is an official visit and not merely a social call.

“May your heart be balanced.” Darak says, his voice soft and consonants crisp.

“Be welcome in my home and at my hearth.” I return, stepping to the side to let both of them in and leading them to the kitchen. The soup had thickened to a stew, and I set out some small, crisp and dry flatbreads with it for them to eat while I make tea. Leaves steeping, I pull a small folding stool to the table and join them. “How may I be of service?”

“Zelda-hanyana sent us here to check on you.” Juen says after a lengthy and uncomfortable silence. “She says you’ve been having trouble sleeping?” I pause to collect myself at Zelda’s obvious meddling, and then realize what I am doing and why. She is concerned, and rightly so, and has taken the normal steps to fix the problem. I am oddly resistant to it, and it takes some self-critical observations made easier by my recent readings to understand why.

I’ve been alone too long, and afraid both for and of other people the entire time. I must remember how to trust, and how to mesh myself with the social fabric of my people. Knowing this, all that is left to do is open myself both to Zelda’s well intentioned interference and Juen and Darak’s examinations, alongside all the hurts that these things can bring about.

“Yes.” I admit, and once the word is free of my lips the others come easier. “Zelda-hanyana was woken early this morning by a dream of mine coming from Nayru’s boundless understandings. I don’t have them often, and can understand less of them than I would like, but our close bond has us unintentionally resting in the other’s thoughts more and more often. I cannot seal the link between us without destroying it, nor can Zelda-hanyana. There is spillover, and it interferes with regular sleep.”

“She has come to us before, mentioning this.” Darak says slowly, but with a confidence that reassures me. “You’ve had no success keeping your thoughts to yourself?”

“It is more in the realm of emotion that the strongest knowledge comes, only with direct concentration can I give her even the most basic of my thoughts. The dream…” I bite my tongue to keep from revealing too much, reorganize my phrasing, and continue. “…the dream was very emotional, and had very little content aside from that.” Just the sensation of suffocation and the knowledge of the death of at least all the inhabitants of one town.

“How often do you find yourself emotionally connected?” Juen asks, pushing her soup aside to take out a small pad of paper, quill, and ink pot.
“Constantly, but to varying degrees. Distance seems to affect it slightly.”

“How so?”

“I cannot receive or send more than feelings on the other side of Hyrule. I don’t know what would happen through the mists surrounding the land.”

“How close must you be for the connection to allow thoughts?”

“At Lon Lon Ranch we could understand simple ones.” I recall, though how much further and when exactly those thoughts turned to feelings alone without considerable effort and concentration I cannot remember. Zelda senses my preoccupation with our bond through it, and alters her course. “Zelda-hanyana can tell you more momentarily.”

“She’s coming?” Darak seems surprised, and I have to smile at his expression.

“I’m thinking about her and how I feel is so much a part of that she knows that I would like her here.”

“Can all shiik do this?” The Human man seems uncomfortable, and I swallow my own discomfort to ease some of his.

“No. This bond is not a part of what it means to be shiik, but rather one forged of necessity by Nayru through Zelda-hanyana’s birthright and my devotions. To be so connected to all of those I help with their journeys to and down the river would drive me insane within moments.” To be constantly aware of all those I have ever encountered and their lives durations and endings would overwhelm me quickly, and I have grown accustomed to a peculiar type of expanded consciousness through the one bond that I do have. A shiik without that experience would not be capable of even the level of connectedness I currently share with my Mistress, let alone one with all the dead.

“It is, however, an inborn talent of the suurin.” Zelda-hanyana says from the front entrance, her voice carrying down the hall as she joins us, leaning against the counter for lack of seating. “Which, Juen-sai, cannot be refused once awakened.”

“There hasn’t been a suurin born to the Shaekha’ri since the Sundering.” Juen protests, her crimson eyes turning from our Queen to stare at me, her pupils contracting as she focusses on the parts of me that she has spent a lifetime training to See. I am too preoccupied with the sudden intent and overwhelming power emanating from the slight form of my Queen to be at all disconcerted by the gaze of a mortal woman. “The gift was lost with our banishment.”

“Substitute “repressed” for “lost” and you would be more accurate.” The voice coming from Zelda’s mouth is no longer hers, and I stop breathing in the face of an avatar of my Goddess taking an active interest in the lives of mortals once more. “We thought it best, to ensure the voluntary exile was truly a winnowing of Mokara’s chosen people.” Nayru, wearing the form of my Mistress, turns eyes the blue of every shade of the sky to me, Her golden light a soothing balm and torrential cascade over my skin. I tremble before Her.

“Why now? Why him?” Juen asks of the Goddess, and were I not overwhelmed in awe, I would be shocked at her impertinence. It is a testament to the strength of the healer that she neither bows her head nor lowers her eyes in the face of one of the Three, even as I sink to my knees. Darak has passed out, sprawled across the table, his soup dripping slowly to the floor. I see it all, but it is not important, not when my Goddess holds Zelda in Her embrace and my mind in thrall.
“He is not the only one who is now awakened to the call.” Nayru chides. “Merely the only one of Mokara’s chosen within the lands guarded by Hylia. Were it not for the touch of My portion upon him through my Avatar, he would have woken to the call sooner.” The divine spirit in my Lady’s form smiles. “It is time for him to act, for Hylia’s gift shelters the Hero even now, and I shall heed the tool of my handmaidens plea.” The affirmation sounds, filling my home with golden brilliance.

When it fades, the soup is back in the bowl, Darak is awake, Juen is wide eyed and shaking, and Zelda is cursing fit enough to make Impa recoil. In my turn, I reach a single hand encased in burning agony to touch her arm. From there, I can slide down to her palm and raise the glowing mark of Nayru’s Chosen Avatar to my lips. On my knees, it is easy to bow my acquiescence to her imperative plea. Her litany of oaths is cut short as her fingers tangle in my hair, and I know she is using that grip to return to herself fully. Nayru’s portion of my geas mark has split again, for I can smell the rich, salty tang of blood, feel the linen stick to my skin.

“Aein-ah.” Zelda’s voice cracks on my name, and she swallows before trying again. “Tor Aein. Virtue. Love. Measure.” She names me, her hand clenching to keep me on my knees before her. “You have earned the right to my virtue. Now you must go to the others, and fulfill your part.” Her tears fall to my upturned face. “But know that I shall miss you terribly.”

“Distance is no barrier, Zelda-hanyana.” I remind her, sending the complex knot of emotion churning in me for her knowing. She says nothing in reply, only stoops to kiss my forehead, my eyes, my lips. A benediction, a fulfillment, and a command. That they are discharged with her tears only causes me to steel my will and obedience to her need.

And his.

“Aein-shiik, you’re bleeding.” Darak notifies me as I stand.

“I know.” I inform him in return, and begin packing. I do not need much, and it does not take long. The two healers wait with my Mistress for me to finish, then discharge their duty on both my back and my hands, and leave to spread the word amidst the others here. All of Derinkuyu will know within the hour, and the parties that arrive in the spring shall carry news of Nayru’s visitations to the whole of the Federation from village dullard to the Apices of the Hierarchy. My parents will know within a cycle. I am unsure of what I should feel, but I know what I must do. Zelda embraces me carefully, and I return the hug, surprised at how tall she is getting.

“Take care of Niakara.” I ask.

“Take care of him.” She instructs, counter point to my request.

“I will.” If it takes everything I am, I will. Hyrule awaits her Hero.

“…have you need of anything…” She begins as I break the comfortable circle of her arms.

:I shall ask.: I assure her, in the only way that would be an assurance. ....if you promise to do the same.:.

:Have I need, I shall call.: She agrees, humming the music she wrote to summon me.

Even without the power of Rian Liahr, the magic woven in the song calls to me, pulling me to attend to her. She smiles at the involuntary step towards her that I am unaware of taking until it is complete, and dries her face with a small handkerchief. “Farewell, Aein-ah.”
“I’ll see you again.” I promise, and lift my whistle. The Prelude of Light is imbued with my intent, and takes me to the empty room where Anak Silar once rested, and now waits for my arrival with crossed legs and a cool voice.

“Social custom has not altered since last I took this form. I am referred to as Fi.” The creature that is at once both sword and young woman and yet neither tells me. Her mouth moves but does not go anywhere, just as her eyes are open but do not see, and the language she speaks is odd. I don’t know it, but I can understand it easily. “Your people have legends about me that pre-date recorded history. You have helped my Master in the past. You come to aid him now. There is no need for your wary stance or weapons. I will allow you to travel with me, and extend a similar protection to you so that you do not lose your way or your sense of self.” Her reassurances are just words, I have no reason to trust them or her…but I do. Nayru bade me to.

The Spirit of the Master Sword is a part of the legends from the Time of the Descent, from the histories penned by Impa herself. The first Impa, that so many parents wish their children to grow up to emulate. She lived before there were clans, lived as the Shaekha’ri became, and her memory lived after Hylia returned Skyloft to the surface. Her devotion to duty and protection of Hylia never faltered. She is legend. The Spirit…Fi…is only mentioned as an aside, but I have read those tales so often that I can recite them word perfect without straining my memory in the least.

The sudden sense of insignificance that I first felt on reaching Derinkuyu, on entering Hyrule, on meeting the Sages and visiting the Temples, returns full force. Who am I to be here, in this place? With these people? Doing these things?

“You are Tor Aein. My Master knew this once, as did his companion. They falter. By my calculations, they have four hundred and sixty four hours, twenty-nine minutes, seven seconds remaining before irreversible damage occurs to their minds should the current homeostasis persist. You are adept at guiding, correct?” The spirit says, and it takes me a moment before I realize she wishes me to answer her, and with nothing but the truth.

“I gentle the way, Anak Silar, for those who would make the journey. The effort must be theirs, however.”

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“Then come, Tor Aein. Attend to the Chosen Hero of the Goddesses and preserve him for the Time that Will Be.” The sword-girl floats instead of walks, leading me through a tunnel cut in the fabric of reality that ends nowhere. Between.

Even her lustre is lost in a gradient grey.

The faint flickering of what I assume to be a lantern is Navi, prone and muttering in discordant chimes, lying on the ground. Her tiny body is frail in my palm, though she is warmer than something so small should be. The burned skin of my hands from divine presence alone blisters, those blisters pop, and the liquid seeping from them sears my skin into a patchwork of ichor and blood by the time I find Link. Unlike Navi, he is too cold. I cannot tell if the grey tinge to his skin is because of illness, lack of blood, lack of air, or a result of our location. He is also growing rapidly,
the tunics I brought merely a few turns previous tight across the shoulders, short in length, but large in the torso. He is too thin.

None of the objects I helped him create remain, the puzzles and toys lay in tatters, though not as though they’ve been purposefully destroyed. They look as though they have forgotten what they are supposed to be, and faded into nothing more than vague shapes and half-present texture. They can wait, though. The two bodies before me cannot, and I take my time looking at them before doing anything. If I make a mistake, I have doomed us all, for in the man-child cold and pale lies the hope of Hyrule. All the world, for mandrag Ganondorf cannot be content in simply holding the lands claimed by Hylia to save Her chosen people. The oaths of Demise began his path, but his own greed is the vessel that carries him. He will continue his conquests until he consumes everything and everyone in his path.

I am Shaekha’ri. I am Tor. I am shiik. I am suurin. I am Aein, and Link is depending on me. The middling of the three red cords interwoven with my existence is the one I need to strengthen, and that is Love. He is easy to read, spread before me like a well written novel and awaiting the book-binder’s skills. Fraying far worse than I ever managed in leading those spirits that asked to the First Gate, I send a plea to Nayru seeking answers as I have not done in far too long. Mokara should have taken him already…and I know what I must do.

The silver line of his spirit anchored in his body is razor wire, rending all but the essential essence from me as I use it to trail him through the unchanging not-existence that is Between. Flying through the almost-air, remembering what it felt like to travel with the wing of shiik from the Shadow Temple combating the Usurper King’s darkness, I rise on the currents of Zelda’s warmth and scan the surface. As the crow flies, so do I, and the most direct path is to the Forest. A verdant green in a place of muted vibrancy and suppressed brilliance, Kondor Keep cradles Elydis Hold with its roiling dots of life, the Lost Woods a vortex of despair. The Heart of the Forest is small, curled up in the form of a budding leaf, and opens at my touch.

“Hello, Sincere Feather.” Saria greets me, Sage of the Forest safe in her sanctuary that cost the lives of four Sisters to create. The shell that falls away is all that remains of it, and the moment she steps from it a blight covers the growth from stem to point. It crumbles to dust even as she extends her arms to me. I open mine, intent on taking her away from this place, saving her from the encroaching evil that has consumed her Temple, only to find my arms full of the spirit of a boy on the cusp of becoming a man.

“Saria-yana.” I murmur, and she smiles at me.

“Take Link and go, Aein. I will keep the Temple from Him and His servants.” She tells me, her ancient eyes holding a strength I could never hope to match. As with the other Sages I have known, it is all I can do to obey.

The Forest Medallion flares as it ascends, and the mortal form of the Sage slumps to the leaf littered floor. The bundle of loosely woven threads of being in my arms shifts, and I turn from the girl that is the Sage and begin drawing Link together once more. The warp and the weft must be straightened, the myriad of tiny tears repaired. Less tension there, more over here, a knot to secure the bindings. It is painstaking, back-breaking work, eye-strain making my vision blur and cross, double and collapse in on itself. My hands are little more than agony given form, and all the pain-blocking and mental distractions I can recall do nothing to ease it.

This is my task, though. I will see it through.

Delving deeper into determination, garnering the strength to continue from the trials I have overcome, I seal loose threads and trailing knots, pull the imperfections in the weave to smooth,
straight lines, lift the stains that my touch leaves behind with a cleansing wash of pure will. When I hesitate, Wisdom holds me steady. When I falter, the brilliant Triangle that is Courage lends me the will to go on. When I would fail, Power lifts me up to greater heights. Even still, it is all I can manage to return Link to his mortal form. Whole, yes. Uninjured, truly. Healthy…is far distant still. He needs more, to stabilize, to affirm. Not to guide the loom that spins the fabric of him, but to keep the ends already in place from fraying.

I have nothing left to give. There is an end to my strength, my will, my determination, my ability, and I have long since gone past where I believed that point to be. The rushing waters of the river flow over me, no longer a tug on my legs or a pull on my hips, but a raging torrent that covers me completely, filling my mouth and nose and whipping my hair about my head. Muted, I hear the chimes of the ferry, see the baleful eyes of the Carrion Crow come to collect the leavings of my life. I am Shaekha’ri, so the taste of Shadow not only does not bother me, but is calming. Familiar, for all it is never safe. I am Tor, and we have a close lineage with the Watchers that hover about me. They wait, their purpose beyond me. I am shiik. Death is an old friend, and though I had hoped, I am content. I alone did what I could to fulfill the wishes placed upon me by all manner of spirits, from lowly plants and invertebrates, through animals and peoples, up to the very Creator Goddesses themselves.

But I am suurin. I am a bridge between peoples, between worlds. I am Between, and here, there is tangible power in belief. A bridge is only as strong as the banks it is built on, as the pillars that anchor it. An entire country awaits the Hero, for good or ill, salvation or annihilation. Seven Sages stretch a spectrum of honest confidence, securing me in life. The spirits that I have helped to the First Gate give succor, old and young, Human, Hylian, Shaekha’ri, Geru’do, Zora, Goron, Kokiri, all lending their steadfast support in death. Together, they have built me. Together, we call on a common purpose. Together, Fi and Navi finish the binding on the extremities of the weaving, fold the fabric, and whisper for him to wake as I lay the finished whole of him back in the physical shell that carries him through life.

“Ngh.” He wrinkles his nose, scrunching his face, rubbing at his eyes. “Navi, what happened?” His childish treble shows no signs of warbling, but I know it will not be long before his longer limbs lead to all the characteristics of a maturing male. His shoulders are broader, his jawline more defined. As he sits up, leaving the cushioning cradle of my arms, I feel his spine protrude and know that nourishment, in great quantities, will be crucial in the coming seasons. It is all I can do right now to breathe, and continue breathing. Food for Link will have to wait.

“The disparate aggregates of your person were separating into their component parts. I contacted my maker for aid, and She sent a suou uurin to assist in gathering them again. I calculate that without his interference, I would have lost you, Master.” Fi says, and though I have not encountered the consciousness of the spirit in the sword before, it is obvious Link has. Either that, or he is so accustomed to the strange and fantastic that a talking sword doesn’t even make for a stutter in his mental processes.

I’m still growing used to it, to be honest. Fi is so very strange, for more reasons than the fact I See her as both blade and woman at the same time.

“But what happened?!?” Link whines. “That doesn’t explain anything!”

“Hey! Look!” Navi’s voice is a crystalline bell of sound, her inner light a subdued version of Nayru’s. “It’s a person! Hello, person!” A shower of false-sparks of magic fall from her to land on my hands as she hovers in front of my face, sending renewed pain along my nerves. I can barely track her with my eyes, let alone push her hands away when they brush against my skin like a
“He seems...familiar.” Link mutters, joining his companion in close examination of my features.

“Hellooooooo.” Navi buzzes. I have an urge to swat her, but that would just hurt more, exhaust the last of my energy, and serve no ultimate purpose. It would be satisfying though.

“Is he asleep?” Link’s head tilts as he asks, and the gesture is more attractive than I anticipated.

“His eyes are open, so he’s probably awake.” Navi’s wings have remarkable patterning, the filaments reflecting the light that is her magic into minor glints of rainbows and sparkling motes.

“The suou uurin has simply exhausted himself beyond his ability to move in his efforts to restore you both. Allow him time to recover and space to breathe and he will be capable of answering your questions himself. If you have further queries after that, simply summon me from the blade once again.” Fi intones, and her spirit stills itself within the Master Sword. I blink, for it appears as though a fully conscious being becomes nothing more than well-structured metal in the space of a heartbeat.

“How are we supposed to summon you?!” Navi yells, making me wince, for she is still hovering less than a hand’s span from my head. The motion does not tip me into unconsciousness, and I breathe a bit easier as a result. The deeper breath unbalanced me though, and I cannot stop the graceless slump to the side that is broken by the remnants of an idea of hard ground and soft grass.

“Waaah!” The Hero of Time shouts, jumping back faster than I thought he would be capable of moving. Had I the energy, I would laugh.

“What did you do?” Navi asks her charge.

“Nothing!” Link shakes his head vigorously, blond hair flying and displacing blades of grass, a few leaves, some twigs, and what appears to be a good sized pebble.

Oh dear. Please don’t make me need to cut his hair to get all the tangles out.

“Why’d you yell then?”

“’cause the man fell!” Link tells his companion, though he hovers closer rather than continuing to back away, eventually reaching out to touch my shoulder and shake. “Hey, mister. Are you dead?”

“Nnngh.” I manage, sounding more like a ReDead and less like a person than I intend.

“He’s breathing, so he can’t be dead.” Navi observes, landing on my forehead and sticking her hand in my eye, with predictable results. “…definitely alive, though I don’t think his eyes are his ultimate weak point. Maybe he’s just super tired like Fi said.”

“Is that what she said? I didn’t really understand it all.” Link admits, and Navi proceeds to give him a breakdown of what the words were and explains them to her charge in a way he can comprehend. It also allows me time to recover from the massive energy expenditure I have just made, and realize the enormity of the task before me. Link has regressed to the mental age of the child he was when first secluded Between, if not slightly earlier than that. I hope not earlier. It leaves him vulnerable to the depravity of Ganondorf’s devouring greed. Compelled by the need to remedy his loss I force myself to sit up before I truly should, and must spend the next few minutes
being stared at by two sets of eyes in a silence broken only by the sound of my ragged breaths.

“Suou-urrin?” Navi chirps once I am no longer gasping for air and capable of lifting my head. I will wait a bit more before attempting greater physical efforts.

“My name is Aein, Navi.” I manage in three parts, and she flutters away to hide under Link’s worn and tattered cap.

“How’d you know my name!!” She trills, even as Link takes his cue from her behavior and draws the Master Sword. Serene, now, there is no disparity in my perceptions of the artifact, and I am pleased to note that while he uses a two handed grip it is not entirely necessary. He would be unable to wield it for any length of time with one, and appears to slightly favor the left, but his grip and his stance are steady and balanced. Given the level of conquered fear in his eyes though, I believe it wise to begin with them both as though it were our first meeting.

“The boy said it, earlier.” I prevaricate, and then recall there is no need for subterfuge. The tension drops like a hot stone, and I breathe easier.

“Oh.” The fairy moves to perch on Link’s shoulder, whispering something in his ear. Whatever it was, he sheaths the naked blade on his back and sits gracelessly on the ground across from me, close enough to touch.

“I’m Link. You said your name was Aein?” He has no difficulty pronouncing my name, leading me to further suspect that the muscle memory of his previous lessoning remains, if not the reason for it.

“Yes.”

“Why’d my sword lady call you that weird word then?”

“That is my job, like someone can be a baker, or a smith, or a tanner. I am a suurin, and I am here to do my job.” What, exactly, that entails can be a lesson for another time, hopefully when I understand better myself.

“What is your job? I know what those other jobs are, but I’ve never heard of a sue-rin before.” Earnest eyes, eager posture, honest question. I must remember he is younger than he appears.

“Right now, it is to answer questions you or Navi may have, young Master, and tell you stories.” I will give him stories to keep what remains of his own from fading to nothingness. Enough tales to fill his days and nights, and hold him safe from the attrition of existence in a void. Everything he needs, anything he wants, I will give until he is satisfied or I have nothing left. Everything.

“Story?” He fairly dances in place, his excitement palpable. I smile behind my cowl, pleased that he has retained at least that much of himself.

“Yes. A story. The best place to begin, of course, is at the beginning.” The rhythm of the history songs comes quickly and easily as I start the first of what will become hundreds of recitations. “Before Time began, before life and death existed, the three Golden Goddesses descended upon the Chaos that was Hyrule….”
The Elegy of Blood

Chapter Summary

the horizon calls
for wings of surest glory
leaving sorrow here

Chapter Notes

Warnings pertinent for this chapter in alphabetical order because why not include: Blood and Gore, Depression, Disassociation, Harm to Children, Injury, Major Character Death, Magic, Mental Anguish, Metaphysics, Pain, Panic, Trauma, Violence.

I am late attending the conference in The Lost Cucco’s hidden room beneath the public Tavern and Inn, which means I’ll need to beg some supper from Valyarie later once my voice has returned. The recitation of the Trials of Dar Akima is not a simple one, and I am beyond pleased that Link seems to have retained the salient points three marks after I began my tale spinning. In just over a cycle of the seasons, I have managed to keep him from losing any more of his memories, and helped him restore most of his toys and training equipment. There is work to be done, but it must wait, for the summer gathering cannot.

Even though I dash as quickly as I can through the long shadows that spill in the streets of Kakariko, Impa has already begun speaking to the Captains and Commanders gathered by the time I ghost into my accustomed place behind and to the right of her. Zelda listens in for a moment with my ears, and quickly we know how far she has gotten in her preamble. I recognize most of the participants on sight, having been their covert transportation over the past half turn, though I know only a handful of names. There is a representative from each of the major holdings present, though they may not be held by the Loyalists.

I know, for instance, that Simoni of Orville Keep is risking much by being here, as that was one of the first places to fall under Ganondorf’s rule, before I had even set foot in Derinkuyu. Treeshia and Konyr stand as Captain and Commander in Kakariko, Bogorak cor Dalo and Tandiga cor Toko are easily identifiable as being the Goron representatives, Torisu and Ronulu from Zora’s Doman, Marc and his second of the displaced Aversa guard, Liah is the Commander from Krisidi alone as her Captain could not abandon his post, Talon tells us what he can of Lon Lon Ranch’s lands, and we lack representatives of the Elydis Duchy entirely.

Fort Heathersage, south of Lon Lon Ranch, was abandoned soon after Aversa was attacked, though there are two bearing the heraldry on their arms. Lord Pattin’s people of Lathrop Fortress in the south east were murdered by the Phantom of Ganon I first encountered there cycles ago, though defectors of the Usurper King’s army have begun to resettle the area now that the Phantom has become trapped in the maze of the Lost Woods. Of those few, only one could be spared, and he is no warrior or leader, but rather a scribe, unremarkable but for his neat penmanship
and pronounced limp from a badly healed broken leg. It will take him nearly a full turn to make the journey home.

By joining them and allowing Zelda to take prominence in my body, we complete the Loyalist military order in representing Derinkuyu, whose borders have swollen once more with refugees. No more than a family or two at a time, the numbers still have steadily increased to the point where the town is now home to nearly five hundred. Still more have continued their flight beyond the borders and into the Federation, resulting in increased patrols to assist as best we can in resettling those that choose to make the journey. My brother is leading the party responsible instead of continuing under Taoh’s leadership or Enzo’s guidance, for the route the 93rd weaves.

For all I am proud of him, I miss him. Keiko and Insu have chosen to remain in Sahila, though this spring a care package of spices and dried fruits and vegetables eased some of my longings, and Zelda keeps me busy and cared for through both constant mental contact and paid companionship when possible and she herself is unavailable. I need to be touched, as much as I need food or water, though not as frequently. The warmth of another person is crucial to my sanity, and I am better able to serve because of it.

With the series of long days and longer nights that I have been working, it is no wonder that, safe in Impa’s care, warmed by the mid-summer heat, surrounded by beneficent spirits, I fall into a light doze as the leaders of the Loyalist army discuss recent events and the movements of the Usurper King’s servants, minions, and slaves. The type of creature speaks to the master controlling them, and their movements help to determine what force we must actively guard against and which we can afford mere caution.

Bubbles, wolfos, Gibdo, Redead, freezards, skulltula, Stalfos, and their kin are the marks of the ice witch Koume Rova. Her sister Kotake is responsible for lizalfos, beamos, like-likes, mimics, anubi, dodongos and their brethren. Together, they hold the west and the north. The east is mainly covered by the air-headed Kabocha, with his keese, guays, moblins and tektites. All other monsters seem to be the domain of Kinoko, aside from area-specific disturbances in the divine power that Hyrule is steeped in. Their malicious magics have even crossed over the boundaries of life and death, and with no Shaekha’ri to right that balance, the Shadow Temple is beyond capacity and unable to receive the dead that most need assistance. Unstable ghosts and Poes manifest and cause mischief if not outright harm, ravenous Dead Hands roam in killing cliques, and what few wallmasters remain outside the Temple grounds are beset to simply survive.

The shiik that the Shadow Temple can muster are exhausted, the priests and attendants worn to uselessness, and I am among them. Were it not for Niakara’s near continual cuddling and Zelda’s constant presence in my head if not my bed, I would not be here to do what is needed in honoring our allies and accepting the gathered knowledge and wisdom shared. As Zelda’s vessel, it is easy for me to relinquish control of my body to her and take up a position at the scribe’s table brought in for exactly this purpose. It requires concerted effort to effect the corporeal realm as little more than a shade, but years of mental focus and working alongside the bearer of the Triforce of Wisdom have made me more than capable.

Ronulu appears a bit wary of what to her appears to be a quill moving of its own volition, but when the others make no mention of it and Konyr turns a gentle chiding of my tardiness into a greeting of sorts, she subsides. I write, map, tally, chart, and on two occasions sketch appropriate notes that will be copied and sent with those that both request them and can keep them safe. My internal sense of time tells me it is past moonrise when Valyarie herself brings in food and drink, and I laugh at Liah’s stunned look at the portion Zelda takes, though only a few present can hear me. She is feeding us both, and explains as much before working methodically through the plate piled high with breads, cheeses, preserves, eggs, and fresh greens.
The ripples in the multitude of mugs and bowls on the table actually provide the first warning, though so close to Death Mountain no one takes the trembling of the ground with any more note than a passing acknowledgement. Tandiga placates some of the plains dwellers with a comment of Big Brother’s gas after eating too much granite after the second set of tremors as the plates and empty service vessels are cleared. I resume my furious note taking, even as Talon gives a detailed account of what we can expect for crops out of the south-eastern portion of Lon Lon’s allotted lands.

:.Aein…something’s…wrong:. Zelda calls mentally, sounding breathless. I finish my sentence and turn my attention to my Queen.

:.Hmm?:.

:.I…can’t breathe:. She whispers through our bond, and I can feel the tightness in her chest, the heaving of lungs that accomplishes nothing. :I can’t breathe Aein!:

:.Hanyana, stay calm:. I instruct, doing my best to keep my own alarm from echoing back to her and making the attack worse even as I go about seizing my lungs in her panic and forcing them at least to return to a normal pace. I, personally, have no trouble. :Use the sunstones, call on Farore’s Winds:. She can leave, and I can join her wherever she goes.

Except her magic is sound, and she cannot breathe, so she cannot speak, let alone sing.

:.…Aein…in….:. Our connection thins.

:.I’m coming:. I assure her, taking control of my body and standing even as the last traces of her mind fades. I refuse to acknowledge the lack even as I lift my whistle to the startled eyes of the Loyalist military command. “Derinkuyu.” I gasp out, and play the Lament faster than I ever have before.

The crystalline grotto is silent and nearly dark but for the inherent magic present, barely enough for me to make out the boundaries of the space with no specific details leading me to stumble more than once on the way to the stairs leading to the surface. Then running into a wall where a wall should not be.

Din’s temblors must have jarred the ground into collapsing.

Running my hands along the newly formed block I search for any sign of any passage leading to the surface, cutting my hands on the sharp shards of quartz and amethyst and not caring. My Lady, Queen of my soul, is weakening. Unconscious. Suffocating. Even beyond the ability to think, she is in pain. So much pain, burning as her muscles all cramp and seize, spasming even as they fail. Including her heart. I fall to my knees, gagging and choking at the agony, and scent it.

Foul air, like the bottom of an enclosed sinkhole, seeps into the Chamber from above. I cannot breathe the gas itself, but it is a way and I have the will. Standing, breathing deeply of the last of the fouled air, I throw myself into the narrow path of shadow that carries me to the surface and through the untenanted parts of the Forgotten City. Up, then, as high as I can go with even a hope, I emerge clinging to a pennant stand on the Temple of the Three and take a gasping breath. The mortar fails a moment later, too weak to support my weight, and I rush back to the hidden paths even as the metal clangs in otherwise silent surroundings.

There is a mist, thick and cloying, of the quiet killer sitting over the city. I can barely see it, and know that no one here would be able to. Their older eyes either never attaining the acuity I have, or simply unable to perceive it by virtue of their Goddess given limits, not being Shaekha’ri.
No one. Not one.

Terrible grief freezes me in my steps, and only the burning ache as I attempt to draw air sets me in motion again to climb the heights above the noxious cloud and run. There is nothing I can do for so many, but Zelda…our bond is as weak as it has ever been, but there. There is still hope.

I do not question the glow from the heart of the populated areas, but instead push as hard as I can to reach the Temple of Nayru as quickly as possible. It takes me twelve breaths, and the last is nearly useless, barely out of the fog. But I see her, crumpled on the floor before the altar.

She is so small.

Her lips are blue as I leave the Shadow even as my soul cries out to the Goddess for help. She is limp in my arms as I lift her from the stone floor and cover her in my magic. Cold, as my whistle is warm on my lips and the last of my breath leaves me in a Nocturne of desperation. Spots dance in my vision and I stumble on the warp pad just outside of the Shadow Temple and I fall, curling about my Lady to try and cushion the blow, my own muscles failing, taxed beyond their strength.

“Sheik!” Impa calls as I cough, convulse, and cough again. I think I hit my head on the stone, but I am not sure. All I know is she is too still. Oh, Nayru.

Please.

Mokara, not yet.

Strong arms take the body of the exiled queen from me and I hear shouting, see more feet than I can count, gag and choke on air, gasping. The Sage of Shadow kneels to keep my head from knocking against the stone and my coughing productive. The spots fade as I suck in clean air, though my vision is swimming still in tears when I can see Zelda again. Treesha and Marc’s second are alternating breaths through her lips while Torisu and Lian pound on her chest, and even I can hear when her ribs break. She does not cry out, I do in her stead, and scramble to my knees.

“Sheik-hanyana, please, please, no….” I mutter frantically. I came as quickly as I could. I can’t have been too late.

“I’m sorry, Aein-ah.” Impa murmurs into my hair, confirming what I see. “She’s not there.”

No.

“No, no, no, no. No!” I moan, the words rising in volume along with my denial. The four cease their frantic motions about my queen, sitting back, heads bowed or tilted to the heavens.

“NO!”

“Sheik!” Impa hits hard, and the blow does what it was intended to do, though the Sage of Shadow may not like the results. I find my feet before facing her.

“I have been shiik most of my life.” I hiss. “I have been Sheik for a number of years.” I snarl. “But tonight, tonight I am suurin, and I am going to get my Queen.” I inform the Sage, whose red eyes stare back at me.

“I cannot allow you to…” She begins.
“I am not asking your permission.” I interrupt her. The Shadow Temple is steps away, and I pray with all my soul as I pass the entrance and dash through the passages. Illusion is thrown in my way, trying to keep me from my goal, but it is just that. I know the way, could run it blind.

The chimes of the boat echo as it moves beyond my reach as I arrive at the platform, and I curse wordlessly at the Sage who would thwart me in this. Hyrule needs her, to keep resilience alive, just as it needs him, to keep hope alive. The River awaits, and I plunge in.

It is cold. Colder than cold, stealing my breath and my will in the shock of it. It doesn’t stop flowing though, and carries me to my destination. Impa waits at the guard station with a long hook, ready to pull me out when I pass beneath, and I have enough presence of mind to let her. My body is not needed here, and the First Gate lets me pass easily, the silver cord that connects me to my mortal form trailing out behind me. The stunning force of the crossing blinds me, chills me worse than diving naked into the pond with Yoru when we were eight and icy rime coated all but the deepest depth. I shudder, and can see once more.

It is a strange, featureless land here, reminding me of the Chamber of Trials in the Water Temple but with fewer landmarks, and filled with the recently dead that have crossed over. Hahron, Danpe, Kairi, Jeni, Sohna, Innah with Magi and Juel, Taoki, Demi, Alhan holding Elham, Hana with Insa and Enpo, Chiol, Hanya, Juen, Darak, Ifan and Hora, Yaru and Rahla, Impaz, all those I know and dozens that I don’t, hundreds, from Derinkuyu. She is somewhere among them.

The Kokiri that walks ahead of them towards the Second Gate is familiar, but I do not have time to question her before she is consumed by the void that marks the end of this step in the journey. I must find Zelda before she does the same. Between the Su, the Yin, and the Hylian refugees, nearly three quarters of those I see are blonde, all moving forward at the same steady, relentless pace. Slightly more than half of those are female, and half of those are shorter than I and slim.

I have never called on my Sight without eyes, but I know what it feels like, know what I seek. There are twelve points of Light that fit the blonde, female, short, and slim criteria. Only one of those bears the Mark of a Child of Destiny, though the Triforce is not embedded in her hand. Instead, it flares around her, strong and steady and smooth, as much a part of her as anything else but beyond any mortal vessel. If this doesn’t work, I know that she shall be reborn with nearly identical features, her personality changed, but her essence whole.

It would be too late to do any good, but she will be reborn.

.:Zelda-han-yana.: I move to stand in front of her, embrace her as she walks into me without any recognition. Hold tight as she tries to move around me. Bend to kiss her as she twists in my grasp. .:With my life and my death, my body and spirit, my mind and my heart, hear my truth. I trust you.:.

She stops pushing against my hold, and I bend to kneel before her.

.:..Aein?:. Her memories whisper, tenuous and frail.

.:I am an instrument for your playing.: I tell her in return, the words barely a caress, and her fingers tangle in my hair wraps.

“Where is this?” Her voice is jarring in a place where there is no need to breathe.

“Beyond the First Gate.” I nearly choke on the words. Even though I can, does not mean I must…or even that I should. It is a horrible breach of Nayru’s Laws and Mokara’s Domain, and
she knows this perhaps better than I.

“….why?” She asks, torn. The Second Gate calls to her still. The First is repulsive from this side.

“Hyrule needs you.” I tell her the honest truth, if not the whole truth.

“Aein.” She chastises me.

“Hyrule needs you.” I insist. “I need you. Link needs you. The Sages need you.” And because it is the truth, though not immediately. “Nayru is not done with you yet.”

Her fingers tighten in my hair, making me wince. Though I have left my mortal shell behind, I still am attached to the form of it, think of it as being mine. That will disappear beyond the Second Gate, and she takes a step towards it. I cling harder.

“I have to go.” She murmurs, eyes focused ahead.

“No, you don’t. You should, but you don’t need to.” I beg whoever is listening.

“Aein-suurin is right, Zelda-hanyana. You don’t need to.” Impa confirms, putting an etheric hand on my shoulder and the other around Zelda’s waist, turning her towards the First Gate. “Go back. Hyrule needs you.” The Sage of Shadow looms large and purposeful, the fluttering wings of shiik and the sheltering hands of the Guardian Dead that shroud her falling apart at the seams. She cannot stay here long. None of us can. Zelda does not move. “Aein, take her.” Impa orders, and flings a mesh netting of pure Shadow about the both of us.

The silver thread of my weaving is sharp and cool in my hands as I pull us both back towards the First Gate, pushing Zelda through ahead of me and watching the way shrink in response to the abuse of its intended purpose. She needs to go back though. Nayru’s avatar is required to balance the other two. She is needed. I am not. I watch as the silver thread in my hands quivers, pulled taunt, and look at the space that I am supposed to fit through with dismay even as the massive roaring presence behind me shoves, hard.

I am cold, damp, and shuddering on the stone platform that overlooks the final dock of the ferry that travels down the River. Impa, beside me, is already sitting up and giving orders as her teeth chatter. Within moments both of us are lifted and carried to chambers within the Temple proper, wrapped in blankets and deposited on soft beds heated with bricks straight from the fireplace. Not long after a bowl of soup and mug of tea are brought, the soup thick with vegetables and rich in fat while the tea is pungent enough to make me sneeze. The sneeze starts a coughing fit that leaves me gasping and sore, but the priest that is my attendant will not allow me to refuse the meal.

I do feel better afterward, though I am more tired than I thought possible to remain awake through. I don’t, and wake hours later to more of the same broth and tea, the same priest, the same bed, and the addition of Captain Treesha copying my notes from the abruptly interrupted meeting.

“The Sage of Shadow has ascended.” She says, and even though I am no longer tired, I must close my eyes. So that is the cost of violating Nayru’s Laws and Mokara’s Lands, and all of it my fault. All of it. I just expected that I would be the one to pay the price. I am whole, and though my hands sting as though I’ve been collecting nettles blindfolded. Healthy. Rested. My bladder’s weight the only jarring note in all the aspects that make up who I am. Even Zelda’s touch, our bond, is there.
The tears that stream from my eyes alarm Treesha, and though they are tears of relief there is no joy present. She is shattered, broken, and that too is my fault. I do not need a guide through the Shadow Temple, or help finding where they keep her corpse, though both the trail I collect and the gathering of the dead in silent vigil are a clear indicator. I stare. It breathes. Its heart beats. It even swallows when fed and eliminates when pressed…but Zelda is not there. Her silver cord is badly damaged, the ragged ends flailing, unable to meet in their agitation, unable to restore the bond between body and spirit with the finest of threads that remain. Her ghost sits next to where I slump before the bed she has been placed on, the cool touch of an ethereal hand resting lightly on my head.

:.This is all very disconcerting.: She says once I’ve quietly cried myself out, and I sniff and chuckle at the rueful note in her voice. The action makes me cough, and that turns in to a small fit that I cannot suppress. :Lingering effects of the poison gas, I’d imagine.: She muses. :Though that Kabocha figured out where Derinkuyu was impresses me. I would never have suspected him of having enough brains to lace his trousers in the morning.:.

:.You know for certain it was him?:. I ask, drying my face by rubbing it on the blanket covering the body of my queen. I don’t move more than that. There is no reason to. If I were faster, she wouldn’t be like this. If I were smarter, I would have kept her spirit from crossing in the first place. If I were more decisive, I could have just plucked her from behind the First Gate and shoved her back through without trying to reason with her first. She’s so cold, and it’s my fault. If I were stronger, I could have protected her from the foul magics spun by Ganondorf’s minion. She needed me, and I failed.

:.Not alone, but yes. A great pit of lava opened in the western caldera faster than naturally possible, and those that could ran for the passage. It stopped flowing though, so Sohna ordered a proper evacuation to take place in the morning with everything we could carry for the journey. I was simply going to go to one of the sanctuaries, and gathered my things from Nayru’s Temple. They were in bags when the meeting started.:.

:.Kinoko then, as well.: I confirm.

:.Most likely.:.

:.Alright.: I shudder, shaking myself from the near stupor I’ve assumed on Zelda’s bed that may as well be a bier. Her nearly broken bond, barely breathing body, and essentially severed spirit are my fault. Her death is not. Nor does the weight of the deaths of hundreds of others in Derinkuyu belong on my shoulders. Kinoko’s face and location are things I do not know, the meeting hadn’t gotten that far…but Kabocha’s unwelcome gift will be reciprocated tonight. I will deliver it myself.

As a spirit, Zelda can see the change in my energy patterns as clearly as if she had been born Shaekha’ri. My intent and my will have never been weak, and my purpose is singular. I stand, my body passing through the incorporeal form of my Mistresses’ spirit even as I move away from her chilled flesh. If there is time, after, I will begin the work of restoring the two. If not, there are a dozen others who can. I hope. That must be enough.

:.Aein, no. Don’t do this!: Her ghost pleads. As a spirit, she cannot stop me. As my Lady, she deserves my honesty.

:.I have been your secure vessel, your reliable messenger, the instrument that sings beneath your hand.: I tell her, smiling. It is not a pleasant expression. :Tonight, I will be your bright dagger, and excise the foul putrescence that stands against all that you are.:.

:.I will not make you a murderer in my name!: She shouts back.
I will be a murderer of my own volition, then. You are free of my truth... I say, and step into the shadows where she, still so very much of the light, cannot follow. Touching the appropriate moonstone, I am to Elydis.

It is a journey that I have no illusions of coming back from.

The desperation of my last voyage in the dim light of the shadow carried me quickly and directly, emotions running high and my surroundings a blur. Now, I am strangely calm, and though I move quickly, it is not with a concise destination in mind. A general direction, a purpose on arrival, I see my surroundings as I move from the sanctuary, across the last of the field, one with the shadows that verge on the dark. I See the ghosts of the prematurely dead. See the ache of the spirits of the land and sky. See the suffering wrought by a greedy and arrogant man’s unending ambition.

The memory of a Kokiri girl’s fairy guides me, the whispers of the dead and murmuring spirits of the Woods singing an elated elegy for the return of one of their own. The unlucky, lingering Lost that serve as both warning and doom gather about my destination, and my estimation of Kabocha’s ability rises exponentially. He has hidden an entire encampment within the Woods itself, albeit the very far edge of it, and managed to ward it sufficiently to keep the ancient magics of the place from swallowing it whole. I take my time and examine what I can see of the casting, and know that we’ve been complacent in our assessments of the wind wizard’s skill. No magic, no spirit, no supernatural element can pass through those barriers, though such strength on one front has left glaring weakness in others.

It is not protected from the mundane, corporeal threats that a normal camp would face. Perhaps he is confident in the location to protect him and those who follow. Perhaps he is simply not trained in such things. He has left no guard, no patrols, and the residue of blood-magic reek fills the air as the wind changes direction and I see the remains of what was once a Kokiri child and fairy. He has not even cleaned his blades after flaying them...alive, as far as I can tell. The spatter is too chaotic to be anything less. That would certainly raise enough power to shift the winds for a fifth of a mark, more than enough time for every breathing creature in Derinkuyu to suffocate.

Perhaps he is just as stupid as all the Loyalist’s intelligence depicts him being, despite formulaic skill. The leavings would horrify me were I not here to enact as brutal of a vengeance.

Twelve others sleep deeply in their tents as I walk into their camp, keeping my footsteps as silent as the ghosts that goad me on, the spirits of the space urging me to return their lands to them. There are two to a tent but for the wind mage’s own. I watch them all dream, wondering if that one is smiling because of a job well done or simply in murdering hundreds of innocents, if that one is aroused by participating in the death of a helpless child.

I am no Hero, to cleanse the taint of the land, to awaken Sages and rescue royalty. I am simply a servant to all that dwell in the Goddesses' Light. Everyone deserves to have a sanctuary. A place where they feel safe. I can create such places, it is Nayru’s gift borne through hard work and dedication. I will create such things again. Restore them, if I can.

Here, such a restoration is simple. The wards tie themselves through all present, but, like the magic that snuffed the souls of Derinkuyu, originate in one man. One man, sleeping alone in his opulent tent, silk lined sheets on a proper mattress, wine bottles empty, shielded oil lanterns and soft pillows, blood on his hands and on his face.

As I watch, he licks at the drying crimson turned brown by age and darkness, and smiles.

It is so very, very tempting to use my needles, my dagger, and show him some of the suffering he has wrought on others. Tempting enough that they are in my hands and all but against
his flesh before I stop myself. It would be wrong, to cause pain. To make him die in agony. I will not become the monster he is. Bad enough I am to become a killer.

It is cleaner, swifter, next to painless even, to simply take the silver cord tying him to life and sever it, then shove his spirit through to the First Gate before it even knows what has happened.

I forget to breathe at how easy it was.

I regret that when I remember, and the scent of his bowels loosening wafts in the confined space. I blame the vomit on that…and my shaking on recently being ill. I drop my whistle three times before getting it to my lips, and by then the eerie howling of the uncanny creatures too long denied their rightful prey has drown out all but the most piercing of screams.

Closing my eyes against the play of shadow on darker shadow, the wet splattering, faint gurgles, I take a deep, steadying breath and play. The Nocturne is too close to the spirit that I have just sent on his way for my comfort, the wretched filth of it cloying and clinging to my senses. Oily, and rank. The Minuet is easiest, and would allow me the solitude I crave, but the Lament echoes beneath the sounds the Woods’ creatures make. They are the only things that do, now. I cannot bring myself to care.

The crystal cavern is as dark as it can be, filled with the noxious fumes spewed forth from the bowels of the earth and carried on the back of ill intent. I step into the slight shadows the dimming glow of the amethyst and quartz stones and seek the small passageway to the surface. With no citizens to keep the City alive, the magic of the chamber will be gone with the first light of false dawn.

The bell tower of the empty Temple of the Three howls with the natural winds sweeping down the mountainside, further cooling the pool of lava that sits where the last of the forgotten lived their final moments. I watch, perched well within the ringing chamber, as sister sun crests the eastern edge, and as she sinks beneath the western lip, silent and still. It is long enough, and my descent matches the rise of brother moon as his gentle light guides my steps to water and, after, shelter. I do not know if I sleep.

Dawn finds me wandering through the silent streets, eyes open and alert for any movement and finding none. Even the last traces of the gases have dispersed. It is difficult to tell without opening doors which homes are empty and which hold the remains of their occupants. The smell, almost sweet with undertones of bitter, rotting, sour and metallic, is my only warning. Their spirits have all moved on.

I am lucky, to have found Zelda among them.

I am unlucky, to have found Zelda among them.

She comes to me, her energy fluctuating as Grace’s did, mid-afternoon and after I have begun my work in earnest, though before I have much to show for it. The coal took the most time to gather, to place in the closest homes, the ones made mostly of wood. Sohna’s evacuation, though interrupted and incomplete, has made the rest of it easier.

The residents of the Forgotten City are crammed into houses, laid out on the bedding they fell asleep on, never to wake. By simply loosening the linens, I can drag their limp forms to the prepared locations, stack their mortal remains like so much firewood. A hundred, more, to a house. Zelda presses, and I stop consciously counting. The chill presence of her spectre at my side keeps me moving, I rest only when I cannot move another step, eat only when she insists on it. It still takes me three days. She never leaves me, though it costs her terribly.
When it is done, I bathe. Change clothing soiled by clotted blood and rotting flesh. Pray. There is no one to hear my songs, for even the birds have fled, and so I do not sing them, though my lips move of their own accord.

Farore grants me the courage to continue, Nayru the wisdom to contain the conflagration, and Din the power to ensure it done. Eight buildings go up in flames faster than naturally possible, fueled by magic and pain and the last of my rage, leaving nothing in the dirt but the grey ashes of all the citizens and all my joy. I watch in solitary vigil until the last flicker of light, the last mote of flame leaves the massive pyres, and give in to overwhelming grief.

Overwhelming, but not unending. It is twilight, though I cannot judge early dawn or late evening, and Zelda has absconded with my body. I follow the only direction I have left, and find myself sleeping in the Shadow Temple, an empty bowl on an empty plate next to an empty mug with just enough crumbs and residue to tell me they have been used. Zelda’s spirit is firmly in my form, resting alongside it, and I am loathe to disturb her. Instead, I go to her body, and contemplate the dilemma it presents.

Anything is better than remembering what I have done.

There is a difference between death at the severing of bond between spirit and flesh, and crossing the Gates. One is temporary, the other permanent. The silver cord that connects the two is malleable, receptive, after the first. The freezing cold of the Second seals the ends and blocks all contact with any spirit, after. The warping and twisting of a Stalfos or Redead is due to the deformations that occur at that bond.

Zelda’s bonds’ ends have been sealed, but are still malleable.

I have never seen the like.

I doubt any Shaekha’ri has.

There is no one to ask.

There is also no one to look after Link, and when my frustration with the seemingly impossible puzzle before me grows into a headache, I do so. It has been nearly a quarter turn since my last visit, the longest absence in over a cycle, but both he and his fairy companion remember who I am, though Navi must remind him of my name.

I spend longer than I intend with the two of them, returning to find that Zelda is once again asleep in my cell in the Shadow Temple’s recesses. She looks better, stronger than before, and I am pleased that our bond seems to be capable of allowing my body to fuel us both. It gives me time to try and find a solution to the dilemma of her division, though maintaining her body will soon become an issue as well. Bedsores are not a comfortable thing, the loss of muscle mass and mobility a further concern.

The dead that inhabit the Temple have no such issues, and the living cannot see me without strenuous effort on my part and luck. All but one. The Sage of Shadow has ascended, but even without her command of the Shadow Impa is Shaekha’ri, my elder, and learned in the ways of the warrior. It is only when I go to look for her that I realize I do not know the location of her quarters within the Temple, or even is she has any. Kakariko first, then.

I am thwarted by the multitude of wards she has set, hidden in the walls, the roof, the floor, against spectral intrusion on her home, though I can see her awake and moving within. Treesha, Lian, and one of the Zora are with her, though that may simply be because of the large basin of water
for the last. I think Torisu is sleeping. Lian’s head is drooped, and Treesha posture says she’s ready to do the same. Frustrated, I raise my fist to the thick glass of the window and pound as hard as I can, the fading wards sending shocks of metaphysical pain through my limbs.

It works though, and Impa turns to look. Shock is the most immediate emotion visible in her red eyes, followed quickly by something that I must call elation. Why, though, I have no idea, and it goes as quickly as it came. Within moments she has Treesha taking the bed and has pulled out a bedroll, seeming to insist on rest. I know better, but the Captain of the Kakariko militia cannot see the truth. I wait, and my patience is rewarded within the mark.

Impa, bereft of the ever-present shield of Guardian-dead about her, only as powerful as her muscles, climbs onto her roof to gaze at brother moon’s nightly journey. I clamber up much less gracefully despite my lack of corporeal limbs, and sit next to her with my arms wrapped about my knees and my gaze focused inward.

“You’re an idiot, Aein-ah.” She murmurs, so softly I almost miss it, the affectionate diminutive disquieting. I do not reply. She is right. Her red eyes glitter in the silvery light from the sky and the warm glow from the lanterns in the streets, and to my surprise I realize she is crying.

I have no comfort in me to give, my own wounds too fresh and aching fiercely.

“When…” She chokes, clears her throat. “…when Zelda returned to the Temple in your body, I thought you dead.” She gasps. “Is…there anything that can be done? With her…or you?”

“…I don’t know.” I admit, watching the night guard’s patrols to avoid glancing at the Sage of Shadow reduced to nothing more than a woman approaching middle age, alone in her grief but for a ghost of the only man left sharing her blood. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“We have to try.” She whispers, though I am not sure if it is something I am meant to hear. I nod anyways. She is right. We have to try.

The next mark is spent talking, most of which directed towards a means of preserving the disparate parts of resusangeul bi hundeou until a remedy can be found and applied. That she can no longer work even the most basic Shadow magic of our people complicates matters, but she has not lost the knowledge of it. Exhaustion draws her to sleep mid-sentence, and as ether-dead as she is now I cannot wake her, dare not jostle her into falling off the roof. It is a nice night, she won’t catch a chill, and our discussion has alleviated the worst of my fears of rejection by both mortal and divine associates.

“Grief is the price we pay for love.” I say to the light of false dawn as it turns the sky deepest indigo. “Book of Hylia, Chapter four, verse seventeen.” That I am drowning in the first is a consequence of the second, and little comfort, but is assurance that I am not a monster and I have not been forsaken by my Goddess. I still feel. It hurts, but who better than a shiik to understand grief? To know loss? I smile, for though a shade can wail it cannot cry. “Grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of joy you must share it with someone else.’ The Book of Farore, Chapter eight, verse nine.” I will feel something aside from the mire of sorrow that enfolds me now. Eventually.

While I honor the memories I carry, there is still work to do. The Shadow Temple sings to me, and I follow its beckoning call to return to the body of my Mistress. The first of the severed bonds that comes to my hand is that of her guardian, and even muted through cold flesh and the drastically different experiences that have shaped Zelda into the woman she has become, I recognize and welcome Nayru’s Love. It thrums about me, crystalline and pure, sheltering me from outside distractions and harm. Safe in my Goddess’s hold, I bend to the task before me with renewed intent.
The spirits roaming the Temple halls stop and watch, sometimes in groups, sometimes alone, some for a long while, others briefly. I can feel their gazes on me, but it does nothing to alarm or relax me, never distracting me from the faint fibers that make up this precious silver thread. Seven total, corresponding to both her actual body and her perceptions of herself, and my prodding and poking draws her to the source as surely as a winch on a well draws water.

“Aein-ah, what are you doing? It feels weird.” She says from the doorway, wearing my body and speaking with my voice. I hold up the portion I am currently cradling, that of her kinesthetic correlative sense telling her where one body part is in relation to the others, and shrug. Smoothing the whole, keeping the strands twined about each other, I let go and sigh.

:I need to fix it. It’s my fault it broke, so I must do everything I can to repair it, for it cannot be replaced.:.

“Not at the expense of your own.” She huffs, and grabs at my spirit inelegantly, tugging me towards my mortal form. Surprisingly, it works. Breathing is distinctly odd, as is the sensation of blinking, feeling skin slide across the drying dampness of my eyes, watching the single eyelash fall. :It’s been three days.: The words are a gentle scold, and I wobble from the door to her bier.

“Thank you for caring for me.” My words are paltry, but she knows better than anyone else ever could exactly what I mean by them.

:You’re welcome. Now, stop hovering, get something to eat, and have a bath.: She instructs. As always, I obey. The halls of the Temple bustle with both the dead and their living counterparts, though the Temple itself is sealed off from the monastery by thick walls and thicker wards. A precaution, with the current upheavals, that I thoroughly approve of. One of the larger kitchens is a focal point of that shuffling energy, and Ezter-shiik requires no conversation in exchange for a bowl of squash stew and bun stuffed with nutmeats, nor does she push. Half-human, she still understands, and her gentle touch on my shoulder is comfort enough.

Any more, and I might start crying again, and never stop. The thought alone is enough to give me pause, and I do not stifle the ragged inhalation that I need to take before I can finish my portion and clear my space. The first of my tasks accomplished, I keep to the edges of the pathways and head to the baths for those quartered in the same section Zelda has been using since…since. I have not had a proper bath…since. Hanyana’s attempts at shaving, too, leave something to be desired.

Water comes from mountain streams, either meltwater or, now, rainfall. Neither are anything resembling warm, but are pure and clear and clean. There is no trace of the malignant malice of the imprisoned spectre in the well of Kakariko, and I have to wonder if the same source is the base, or if the well is a subterranean cistern separate from that of the Shadow Temple. As I wait for the basin to fill and light the brazier beneath with the faintest traces of my magic, I have time to ponder. Given the rate at which water pours from the spigot, I have time to pursue. It gives me something to do aside from think, and I need that desperately.

Nayru’s element is water, Mokara’s shadow…and the piping from the cistern to the baths is filled with both. I needn’t leave my physical shell to trace the source, and after Zelda’s subtle admonishment I have little desire to do so and a pressing reason to stay. It has been a long time since I have gone hunting a water source, and I may as well take the time to recall the process and practise that particular aspect of mage craft. If I am to live up to the reputation of what few suurin are mentioned in the histories that I can recall, I must grow accustomed once more to listening to the spirits of more than the living and the dead.

Water is changeable and capricious, joyous and healing one moment turning to torrential
rage and destruction. The pipe water is only mildly tamed, and soon opens on to a large chamber feeding not only the Shadow Temple’s many lines but a handful of natural springs as well. The springs burble a greeting to me even as the underground river that feeds it sweeps me up and away with purposeful intent. The cistern hums a farewell, and the spirit of the river pulls me with it to crash against a stone barrier unlike anything else it knows along the entire length of its path. It is merely an edge, but the water on the other side, poisonous and foul, calls a siren song to the roaring growl the river sings, wanting to join once again and reign destruction upon all it touches.

.:Yes.: The fen in the base of the well, the bottom of the Temple, hisses.

.:Soon.: The river insists, wearing away at the earth that keeps it from meeting.

Wearing away at the seal for greed and hatred given flesh.

.:Bongo-bongo-bongo-bongo-bongo.: Thrums across my senses, and I withdraw as quickly as the river rushes. At least now I have a name for the malevolent horror that fuels occasional nightmares and a healthy dose of wary respect. Were it not for the insanity, the urge to kill in the most painful way possible, the spirit’s power and control are impressive. Definitely enough to sway me like an annoying insect. Fortunately, the river’s idea of soon and mine are relative to our age. I am a mere twenty-one cycles of the seasons, where the river is twenty times that in its current bed, and twenty times again since it first gathered into a runnel.

Surely resusangeul bi koya will awaken and cleanse the Temples, awakening the Sages, and defeat Ganondorf before then.

My bath filled, I cease pumping the handle to draw water and turn to the meagre flame sparking merrily near the base. It is a familiar friend, provider of warmth and light, the first element any mage learns to work with. Success is essential for safety, and any youth unable to control their fire has the talent burned from them.

My people learned our lessons with the Ascension, then the Sundering, had it reinforced in the wastelands surrounding the Arbiter’s Grounds. Lush grassland turned to sand at the hand of a powerfully gifted child, the area so barren even the Geru’do dare not venture far beyond the bordering dessert.

My control has always been steady, and by my second cycle of training my father had me heating the family’s water in his stead. For most of my manhood journey, it was my task when our party stayed at a way station. Alone in Hyrule Field, in the Water Temple, the Forest, the Keeps and Forts and Holds, I have simply been able to raise my hand for direction and focus my intent, and create heat. I know how hot I like it, and put forth the same effort, an equal amount of magic as I normally do, only to have to jump back as the basin boils over in a rush of heat and steam and scalding liquid.

I stare at my hands in surprise, noting the deep golden hue and faint pulse of light from the back of the right in Nayru’s place. My left still tingles with the familiar spidery sensation that remains from the spiritual burns I received in freeing Aversa’s ghosts, but my right is throbbing in renewed pain centering on the mark of the Goddess. Not wanting to deal with that, either, or spur another impromptu visit from the creator of said mark, I turn to the pump once more and top up the bathwater with cold.

Taking down my hair I soak the lot by simply dunking my head beneath the waterline, and spend the next few minutes scrubbing up a good lather from root to tip. There is a soft bristle brush I then furiously rub across my skin, leaving the shade a rosy gold and my nerves sensitized. My patchy beard is disposed of with familiar motion, and I use the same blade to trim my nails before
vacating the tub. A set of shiik’s robes wait for me next to woven grass sandals, and the bathing room attendant begins to empty my bathwater a bucket at a time as I dress and comb my fingers through my hair.

I should be on my way to visit Link, but haven’t the courage to even try. Speaking with a Temple Poe for their lantern light takes almost all of it, with less than what it takes to speak to a stranger left once I reach the main prayer room, and there are strangers there. Human, if the lit standing torches are any indication, the blazing flame making my eyes water after the soft, gentle spectral light of dedication the Poe carried. I turn away, deeper into the Temple, clinging to the shadows and seeking solitude to nurse my hurts.

Everywhere I go, there is some manner of being, corporeal or not, acknowledging me or even seeking me out. While their regard is comforting in its own way, it is not what I want, not what I need. Even the storage chamber for the wall master’s feed is occupied, though the stench is remarkable. The halls teem with ghosts, Poes, spirits and memories. I need to find my own balance before I can stabilize any of them, and flee the Temple entirely in seeking it.

The Graveyard, once falling into disrepair, is once again being maintained. The paths are straight, the grasses trimmed, the headstones free of debris…but it is still occupied, and the new caretaker stares at me as I move past to the village. From pathway to the stairs, by Anju’s cucco pen and Valyarie’s signs offering prices of baths and a bed, past the strangely dry well that somehow still waters the populace, and beyond the thin guardian yew protecting the gate. It waves as I pass, giving an unlooked for benediction, and then I am on the steps outside the bordering palisade and guards.

Their eyes follow me until a patrol of men in Ganondorf’s colors take their attention, and I use the opportunity to leave the path entirely. A moment of effort and I can pull myself up over the walled walkway, and breathe a sigh of relief. Still too close to the bustle of life, but far enough that I can pretend, I take the time to listen to the insistent call that I only am vaguely aware of following.

“What do you want of me?” I ask the open air, first in Hyrulean, then in Shaekha’ri, and feel foolish enough that I can almost hear the laughter that is the only response I receive. Obviously, it is the wrong question. Sharu would be disappointed in me. My first teacher of the way taught me much better than that. I shudder, and let go of the near panic from too many spirits being too close, the disbelief from the last few days, the fear, the anger, the sorrow, the grief, the rage. No wonder the water boiled over the bath, to work with my mage craft and have so much excessive suppressed energy I’m lucky all the water did was boil. Another breath, and my hold on calm is tenuous at best, but in finding it I can center myself and begin again.

“How can I serve?” The question is better, grounding me once more in my life’s calling. I will answer it, always. My answer is song. Not so formal as a recitation, or even a recognizable melody, sounding more like a groan at first and changing ever so subtly as it keeps coming from my gut and my heart, vibrating out my throat to ring into the air. It is only when I recognize the repeating pattern of notes that I know where I must go to find that which I seek.

Dampe’s hut is ramshackle, run down and dilapidated. It, of all the space in the graveyard, has remained untouched since his death, but remains weather tight for all my disparaging examination. The people of Kakariko avoid it, the spirits of the Shadow Temple have better places to be, the ghosts in the graveyard honor it as the sanctuary their caretaker left behind. It is, out of everywhere I have been, a bastion of calm solitude. Dust covers every surface, and mice have been at the bedding for their own nests, but it is everything I need for now.

Sitting in silence, I let the brunt of the destruction of Derinkuyu and all it represented to me flow through me, calling up moisture that the mouse-nibbled blanket absorbs easily if not neatly.
Exhausted by the place, I move on to the people. That takes longer, and afterward I find the bottle for the lantern on the small crate that served the old man as a table still has viable oil. I am hungry, in addition to the thirst brought on by excessive crying, but have no desire to return to civilization quite yet.

I still have the loss of my innocence to mourn. There is blood on my hands now as surely as there was blood on Kabocha’s face. Our reasoning for spilling it, the physical presence of it, doesn’t change that. Even when killing for food, I mourned. Honored the animal and thanked its spirit for the sacrifice of mortal flesh that I may live. How can I even begin to recognize murder as a relationship, let alone honor Kabocha’s memory, and still retain my sense of self?

I suddenly yearn for my mother, more than I have for years, and that final ache triggers the pent up landslide of grief that I have been clinging to. It hurts, and yet giving in to it fully allows the festering wound in my spirit to finally drain. Weak limbed, chilled, sore in body, mind, and soul afterward, I reach out and extinguish the light, letting brother moon’s pale face fill the window. A warm bundle of purr inserts herself against my chest, pleased in having found me, and I curl about Niakara beneath the tattered blankets of Kakariko’s dead gravekeeper, and sleep.

What comes in the morning will come, and I will be ready then to face it once more.

Chapter End Notes

Grief is the price we pay for love. - Dr Colin Murray Parkes
Grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of joy you must have somebody to divide it with. - Mark Twain
The Ascending Doom

Chapter Summary

Flying may be falling for those with clip’ed wings.

Chapter Notes

Tags pertinent to this chapter: Cultural Differences, Magic, minor sexual assault, public drunkenness, prostitution, sexual references, subterfuge.

There are certain signs that speak of Kakariko once being a Shaekha’ri settlement, from the way the older houses are built, the close proximity of the graveyard, and the prevalent colors, all the way through to the emphasis placed on seasonal celebrations. While the rest of Hyrule seems to shout in joy at the solstices, here, though the original people are long gone, the equinoxes are the true holidays. My preference has always been for the Harvest Moon equinox, though the Sprout Moon’s marks the start of a new cycle of growth. While I count among the living, the celebration of the joy of life’s beginning will always hold a special place to me...but the Harvest Moon means the harvest itself is well underway and there are always many good things to eat and brightly colored things to see.

I will give my body to Zelda tonight, for she too should celebrate with her people, but for the morning I am free to roam. She watches with my eyes as I go about admiring the squash and turnip carvings, finger the tight weave of a knitted blanket in indigo and crimson yarn, listen to the songs of praise to the Goddesses for their bounty and provision, Farore in particular. My skin, tanned by Zelda’s presence, causes no second looks as not one but three units of Gerudo are present, and four trader’s caravans, making Kakariko a gathering of cultures as well as people. I must be careful because of the first, but cannot resist going out, however briefly, because of the second.

That, and pie. Sweet and savory, fruit and vegetable and egg and meat…all held together with crusts light and flakey as only finely milled flour and meticulously sifted dough can be, and that well laden with butter. Perhaps lunch, or a late morning snack if my will power fails me. Much of that is taken with maintaining illusions about myself, to help hide what I am from a cursory glance. Amber shields the intense rouge of my eyes, copper touching the sheen of my hair gone blond once more under my Lady’s intense proximity.

I have taken other precautions as well, borrowing one of Lady Impa’s rarely used frocks and an old corset of Zelda’s resized to my larger ribcage, letting my hair flow freely as I have seen the unmarried women of Hyrule do, applying subtle cosmetics that disguise the line of my jaw, making it appear softer. My sparse facial hair for once has been a boon, and the entire disguise made Zelda laugh until she would have been crying had she been in control of my form at the time.

She needs to laugh more.

We both do.
It works well enough that Impa was the only one present capable of identifying me this morning, though Valyarie looks as though she swallowed something unpleasant when the former Sage of Shadow won the betting pot that the mistress of The Lost Cucco started. As Impa then promptly gave me half of the take, I am not inclined to complain, very inclined to shop, and not just for pie.

There is a leatherworker I’ve not seen before with one of the caravans, and I cannot even haggle effectively for the gold plated belt designed to hold up not only trousers or a skirt but an apron as well, with a solar wheel in the center front surrounded by flowers and simple pendants. Zelda would love it, and my purse is much lighter after because of it, but given Impa’s generosity I have yet to even touch my own savings. A bag of lemon drop candies that I know our General enjoys but will not allow herself the luxury of, and I consider that debt repaid. Ezter will have two skeins of indigo thread smooth and even enough to use in embroidery, and I get another one for myself should I ever become frightfully bored. If nothing else, Zelda can use it for her projects.

While she is in control, she keeps close to the bier that holds her body, and those that still call the Shadow Temple home have many areas of their lives where embroidery would be welcome. I spend more and more time in the small hut behind Jabu-Jabu’s grotto when I am in charge. The spirits there will be receiving some of the strong, clear liquor that will be a large portion of my purchases today, for I have yet to find a spirit that disliked spirits as an offering. I would even get the spirited Valyarie some, for the Lost Cucco has seen much activity that she need not allow within her walls, but she is just pregnant and nauseous for it, and the alcohol she enjoys spoils quickly.

A bouquet then, of off-season lilies, and a sack of nails to help restore Dampe’s hut that has served as my sanctuary more than once in the last turn. My obligation to his ghost has increased in altering his diary to include a passage for the future Hero to find in order to spur him to discover the hook-shot, never mind that getting Link there was a promise I made to the gravekeeper years ago. I have changed the way his history will be seen, and that deserves recompense. Special purchases made, I return them to our permanent cell in the Temple, and venture out once more for the mundane market exchanges that I must attend to.

I’ve just bargained down the price for a dozen apples with the rest of my groceries when Zelda’s voice becomes rich with intent instead of the soft musing commentary that I’ve grown accustomed to.

:.Aein, there's a man coming:. She warns me, and I feel hands on my hips and a solid heat pressing against my buttocks before the words register. I freeze in shock for a moment before Hahron’s training kicks in and I have my aggressor on the ground and restrained in three movements.

“That was inappropriate and uncalled for.” I tell him calmly, which only causes him to struggle in my hold and spit out foul language that no children should ever be exposed to…and there are a number of them present. I apply more pressure on his arm even as Conrad and Haruld appear to see what is causing such a disturbance.

“What seems to be the problem, miss?” Haruld asks, and Conrad snickers, having been a major player in Valyarie’s betting pool earlier. I am uncertain as to where he got his confidence from, but he too, made double his bet because of it.

“Sexual assault.” I snap. “This man grabbed me and touched me while I was focussed on buying groceries.” I see some of the village women nodding along with my story, and Conrad’s attention shifts behind me and upward.

“Is that true Shan?” He asks.
“She’s a persistent bargainer mister Conrad, I was filling her order when it happened though, so I didn’t see. I can say she was getting groceries.”

“What have you to say for yourself?” Haruld asks the vaguely familiar man I have pressed into the dirt.

“She’s a tease and a fucking bitch!” He shouts. “She should be grateful someone as powerful as me even looked at her twice, and instead she gets my clothes dirty and destroys my wine!” That at least explains the smell.

“And how much have you had to drink today?” The guard says, eyeing the broken glass and mostly dry ground.

“Not a drop! The lot was a present for my mum!”

“Right-o.” Haruld nods. “Then if you’ll both come down to the post, I’ll take your statements and we can settle the matter fully.”

“I want recompense for my wine and clothes.” He whines.

“We’ll see about that at the post.” Conrad nods.

“And then I can poke her? Stupid cow needs a good fu…” The idiot grumbles. I break his arm. It makes my pressure hold on him useless, but the pain incapacitates him long enough for me to stand and for Haruld and Conrad to restrain him and get him on his feet.

“Thanks Sheik.” Conrad grins. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

“SHEIK?” Haruld gapes, staring and shocked.

“Sheikah! Filthy interloper! Bloody eye!” The drunk man roars.

“So much for my disguise.” I wince, and let the illusion of topaz drop from my irises and the red bleach from my hair. I can do nothing about the feminine garb or make-up, but from the way the blood drains from Haruld’s face, letting the illusion go is enough.

With a sigh I turn and take my purchases from Shan, handing over more rupees than we originally agreed upon. “It seems my shopping is finished.” I say both to mollify the spectators and tell Conrad and Haruld enough that they won’t chase after me. Using one of the deku nuts I bought for roasting to increase the available shadow, I slip away in the moment of bright light it allows. I don’t go far, the shadow I travel on disappearing as quickly as it appeared, but I am behind the rows of tents and those shield me from view as I use the Nocturne.

From the stone platform, it is a short journey to stow away my purchases and then attend to Zelda’s body. It breathes still, but aside from the basic functions of life, there is no living. No progress in returning her spirit to her form. I can’t hold back the grimace of frustrated disappointment, but do not let my own feelings on the matter interfere with what I must do. Massage, to keep the blood flowing. Movement one limb at a time, to keep muscle tension and tone. Liquefied purees to nourish her, strategic pressure applied for waste management. Cleansing afterward. It takes the rest of my allotted time, and I go to our cell and lie down as the rightful Queen of the realm takes over.

Having been present, if not embodied, for the altercation in the markets, she heads first to the guard post to give a report. I follow her that far, ensuring that my attacker is being punished appropriately, and leave only once she begins her own shopping. Though she moves in my body,
illusions recast and subtly altered, her own femininity comes through and she can move effortlessly where I worried about my skirts and stumbled over the longer hemline. Her Grace is graceful, elegant, and poised, and while I do not move as a warrior does, I don’t move like that, either. She would tell me I have my own grace, and I’ll not deny her, but I would preface it with purposeful and efficient, if not particularly forceful or determined. Soft, silent, and swift serve me far better than harsh, sharp, and strong ever could. I watch her go, and retreat to the Shadow Temple’s sanctuary for my imminent meditations.

It is time to visit Link, and though I had thought to continue his lessoning in literacy, the altercation has left me spoiling for a sparring session that would leave me covered in bruises if I were more than a spirit. The young hero is now old enough that among the Shaekha’ri he could take his manhood journey. Something of the adult he will become shows clearly in his stance and his eyes, knowledgeable beyond his years and captivity. His movements hold the iron-willed determination born of pure courage that mine lack, though his latest growth spurt has left him lanky and awkward for it.

At least he fights well, if not matching then surpassing my brother’s skill at the same age. Even now, I am barely a match for him, and I cannot maintain that level of performance at all. It does help work out some of my irritation, and a good deal of his attention is focussed both on meeting my skill level and caution in not actually doing me permanent damage. Fi helps him restrain his blows, Navi shouting encouragement and directing his efforts. Between the three of them, I am heartened. His prowess only increases as time goes by, the effects of Between placing movement and action directly into his muscle memory rather than conscious recall, making his technique nearly flawless. I am impressed, and tell him so.

Though old enough to take his journey, he hasn’t, and in many ways is still a child needing reassurance and direction. Afterward, as we lay panting on the grey grass that is all that grows Between, he rolls onto his stomach and rests his head on his arms.

“Naaa, Aein-shiik? Can I ask you a question?”

“May I. And yes you may. You may even ask another.” I tease, and he snorts.

“Thanks. Seriously though.”

“Yes, resusangeul bi koya, you may.” I assure him, curious as to what would prompt such a concerned expression. He nods, and purses his lips, obviously trying to phrase his query as clearly as he can. I wait for him. I will always wait for him. He is worth waiting for.

“Can I…” He starts, then frowns. “May I touch you?”

“Didn’t touch me enough beating me up?” I ask, feigning dismay.

“Not like that. I…it’s just…I’m curious, and Navi’s too small and Fi’s a sword. I want to, but Navi says I have to ask if it’s okay first and you have to be okay with it too and tell me it’s okay.” He says in a rush, so quickly I’m not sure he paused between syllables. I do, however, know exactly what type of touching he means, if Navi is concerned about consent. I am also certain that I can stop it at any time, should he get too intimate or involved. After this morning’s adventure, he has already learned more about appropriate interaction than the drunk man knew, and it takes effort for me to maintain a form here. Should I release that intent, the nature of this place will see to it that I appear as no more than I am…a restless shade. Still, he deserves the courage it takes me to let him try.

“I will stop you if I feel uncomfortable.” I inform him, and Navi breathes out a huff of
relief and flutters to perch on a nearby stone peeking just above the grasses. Hesitantly, but with intent, Link pushes himself up and crawls over to where I lay on my back, and sits next to me. I hold still, letting him decide what he wants first, and am surprised when he moves my arm out from my side. Before I can wonder further at his actions, he has curled up with his back against my ribs, his head on my shoulder, and tugged my arm against his chest.

Then, with a sigh of content, he falls asleep. I curl that arm further about him in a loose embrace, and let him rest.

“He said he wanted to sleep with you.” Navi tinkles, flying to land on his head and talk to me.

“He is sleeping.” I agree, laughing. “But thank you for your concern.”

“He’s getting old enough that sex is something he could be curious about.” She confirms my initial theory. “I don’t know much about it really, and Fi’s too technical about it, to talk to him. It’s not usually needed among the Kokiri.” She admits, and I can see how that would be.

“Do you want me to tell you about it so you can talk to him, or do you want me to include that in my stories?” I ask her, slightly uncomfortable with the second but knowing he has no teachers in that aside from me. Torisu is a Zora…they lay eggs. Aveil hasn’t been seen in years, and consent is not something Geru’do concern themselves with after an initial agreement when it comes to males. As both Link and Navi pointed out, Fi is a sword.

“I can tell him, I think, if you can give me the basics.” She chimes. I am only too happy to do so, and discover that the fairies have very similar practises when it comes to courtship and consent, though their pairings are seasonal and secondary to their charges. A paired fairy will not take a mate. Given what she tells me as I give her my explanations, I have every confidence that Link will have a thorough education on the matter and that I need not involve myself in it aside from one crucial aspect. I also know that I cannot. I haven’t the same ability in the profession of pleasure as even the most junior ye’so-han, for I must have a relationship with those I am intimate with. Even if that relationship is based on debt rather than mutual pleasure…and he is a child, despite being nearly the same physical age as Zelda.

Link forgets, Between. Loses pieces of his recent memory before they can become permanent ones. So does Navi. The physical act is different, but without the understanding of right relationships to engage in that act, I cannot bring myself to perform it. Without enduring memory, his capability of forming relationships is severely handicapped. His fate is exceptionally cruel, and I want nothing more than to help him through it in any way I can. Right now, if that means my arm goes numb beneath his head as he sleeps, using me as a pillow, then so be it. I could use a rest myself, for once free of the constant vigilance required to keep Zelda safe.

I do not sleep, for there is no sleeping without a body needing rest, but I do drift, letting my mind float from one thought to the next without direction or focus. In time comes stillness, and with it, peace. It is not the first time I have tried meditations, nor the first time I have let my thoughts run free since breaking down in Dampe’s hut. It is the first time that I have gained calm and surety however, with the weight of Courage embodied resting on my shoulder, his warmth radiating at my side.

For him, for the hope of Hyrule he holds in his hands, I would kill again, though not without remorse.

:Have you need of me?: I ask my Mistress, once my proscribed time with the boy that will save us all has expired.
.:Not... at the moment.: The breathless tone to Zelda’s mental voice puzzles me until I allow our connection to expand and feel what she is feeling. Or rather, what my body under her control is feeling, underneath him. Whoever him is. I don’t press, and leave her...and him...be. The Master of my Heart is safe and resting, the Mistress of my Soul otherwise engaged, I return to the celebration in Kakariko to watch. There is very little for a disembodied spirit to do effectively in the Mortal Realm, and I find myself wandering about the trader’s caravans and listening to their conversation with the other ghosts. The residents have no new news, not that Impa and the rest of the militia haven’t gone over for every trace of information on the Usurper King’s plans, but the traders will.

I cannot ask questions, which hampers my ability to direct the flow of words, but I can hover and pay attention. No one can see me, though I must be careful about speaking around the full blooded Hylians, watch my placement amid the Human and mongrel populations. The first may hear me, the second might notice a cool spot in the air despite the temperate night and bright bonfires taking this season’s offerings to the Sacred Realm. Still, I learn much. Some of it might even be useful. A fraction of that possibly pertinent to the actions taken by the Loyalists. Maybe.

If not, I will still have to try the recipe for caramel rhubarb cookies that the group closest to the well described, and see if there is any of the dried deku hornet carapaces left for brewing red potion with those near the base of the stairs leading to Impa’s. I make a mnemonic to remind myself once I have access to a body and the appropriate coin again, and watch couples leap the fire and singles dance about it until Zelda summons me to her side once more.

.:Sleep:. She instructs, her voice warm and gentle and a bit too satisfied for a romp between the sheets to explain. I simply look at her, letting my thoughts show clearly in my expression, but obey. She will go spend the next six hours with her body and her light, trying to join the two where my touch and shadow have failed to make even the slightest progress. I can see the misshapen connections, she can feel them, hear their discordant chimes, but neither of us have been able to modify them into accepting a spirit once again. Yet. Mine have been stretched to accommodate her, and she worries for me, but I would not make a different decision if presented the same situation. Link’s calming courage lets me acknowledge that much at least, and hold on to the peace I found with him. Zelda’s pervasive wisdom comes on the heels of that discovery, and her advice is sound. I should sleep. An interloper in my form, she does not need the same amount of rest as I do, and has had enough in the arms of the man my bed smells like.

At least the linens have been changed, though the pad is still warm and slightly damp in places. I have spent many nights in much worse conditions to be at all bothered by the lingering heat and odor of my Lady’s pleasure. There is a wet warmth within me as well, the leavings of arousal coiling thick and heavy in my belly as I bed myself down. My body has been satisfied, the euphoric sensitivity of my skin and encroaching exhaustion tells me that. It lingers through to my dreams, disjointed and pervasive, only to dissipate in the face of my nightmares.

“Aein-ah, there you are!” Vidkun’s voice calls, warm and gentle, and I turn to see him walking towards me with his arms wide open. His dark skin, the color of steeped black tea laden with cream, is on display as it is only when he has been working, and his green eyes glimmer in the afternoon light. Thick hair as dark as blackened oak is unbound and falls about his shoulders in full waves, well-tended and glossy. The small jewel in his ear sparkles as he moves, swaying with each step. The churning desire in the base of my stomach roars to life and I step into the light touch on my shoulder, the firm kiss on my lips.

His hands come up to cup my face even as he presses against me, his own lust evident and insistent against my belly. I enjoy it for what it is, knowing now why Zelda was so smug and who she dallied with in my form, the scent of my sometimes lover filling my nostrils as no dream ever
could.

She could have at least told me.

His grip on me grows harsh, and I smell something beneath his normal musk. Something metallic, salty. I step away from the figure in my dream as I have yet to knowingly do while still asleep, the pain of this small betrayal hurting more than it should, more than I know it should. Even as I come abruptly to wakefulness, I do not miss the faint traces of blood beneath his nails, or the way the world shakes beneath my feet.

Lucid once more, the utter darkness of my cell in the Shadow Temple is deep and soothing in a way that none outside of the Shaekha’ri could hope to understand. I breathe it in, calming my racing heart and relaxing tensed muscles. My cooling sweat is unpleasant to lie in, and due to Zelda’s activities earlier I have no linens to replace what currently cover my mat. Quickly, with some sort of resigned hope, I strip the soaked cloth and run my hands over the padding. It is damp, but not as wet as the sodden sheets on my floor. My sleep shirt is sticking to my skin and smells with the foul scent of fear sweat, and I toss it to join the pile of laundry I will need to do, later.

The Han clan’s battlesuit gifted me by the Sage and the simple under robe of a shiik in the Temple are my options, with a light cloak to curl up in, and I take the latter by the expediency of donning it. The suit, while protective against heat and cold, flame and arrows, knives and small daggers, takes too long to get into. I am cold and tired now. Wrapping myself in both the under robe and the cloak, tucking the ends about my feet, I once more drift into an uneasy sleep plagued by visions of a dark man with bright red hair, poisonously yellow eyes, and a grin of pure malice. The scent of fresh blood follows me through it all.

..:Aein-ah, wake up! Rise and shine! Out of bed, sleepyhead!:. Zelda calls, the whisper of cool air and light pressure on my cheek and tone of her mental voice telling me she is not only up and chipper for it, but that she’s taken the time and effort to fortify her presence enough to kiss me awake.

..:Do I have to?:. I ask her, my tone belaying the smile on my lips. I am grateful to her, for waking me from my less than peaceful dreams. Being Hylian, she still pays more attention to sound than sight, and I bury my face in the folds of the cloak further to avoid rising for just a few more moments.

..:Only if you expect to be able to give a certain someone an answer like I said you would. Well, like he thinks you said you would. I said it, but I was you, so technically you said it:. She babbles, grinning as I blink at her. Morning always comes too early, and today it seems to have decided to be hours earlier than it was yesterday despite the shortening days. I blame that more than my restless sleep for my failure to comprehend what she is saying.

..:What are you talking about?:. I ask even as a yawn splits my face in two.

..:I went to the market square yesterday while you were with Link:. She begins. ..:And while I was shopping I heard a voice that was familiar, so I followed it and ran into the Human that you seem so fond of, the trader man with the silky smooth skin:. .

..:Vidkun:. I supply.

..:Vidkun. He’s quite expensive, but worth every rupee:. The lasciviousness of her commentary has me blushing in embarrassment and calls up a faint throb from between my legs as reminder of what, exactly, gave her such insight.
Zelda-hanyana!: I protest to her chuckling.

He seemed pleased to see you at least, and I remembered enough about him and your feelings to pretend for a bit.: She assures me, which is really no assurance at all. He wants you to come winter with him.:.

I can’t.: I deny the very thought instantly. There are too many things I am responsible for, too much I have to do, to go off wandering for an entire season.

Why not?: She asks, and I can only stare at her for long moments before my head can formulate what my heart already knows and put it into words.

Your bonds.: I begin.

Are still there, the same as they were the dawn it happened. I think I’ve found something that will help, but I need more time to experiment before I try it directly. Your Shadow keeps my shade whole and healthy, but I think my Light is needed to return my body to life.: She is solemn, her outward mood mercurial, but I can see the gleam in her eye and the joy in her posture. She knows, Wisdom’s avatar, and wishes to spare me the anxiety. I frown.

Your body.: It needs to be moved, fed, and cleaned at least three times a day.

There are five Temple attendants that can easily trade off on that task, though I appreciate the care you take with it.: She dips her head in a small bow of acknowledgement and thanks, and she is right. They have volunteered to attend to her more than once a day while I sleep, but I feel that her care is my responsibility and refused them. That refusal was polite, and easily recanted under the appropriate circumstances.

Link needs someone to maintain the levees about his mind, to keep them from being worn away.:.

Which you can do from anywhere, in deep meditation, correct?: My Lady pushes.

Yes, but…: I can’t…

No excuses Aein-ah. They are unbecoming of a Shaekha’ri man. Tell the truth.:.

I am afraid.: I tell her, locking her spirit in place with my gaze. If she is going to demand the truth from me, then she must have it all. I am guilty. I am unsure. I don’t want to abandon you or Link directly or indirectly or even be thought of as doing so, especially in regards to the pursuit of my own hedonism. You…Zelda-hanyana…you are all I have left, and I let you die.: I admit.

She is silent for long moments, and I bow my head, ready to receive her judgement. When she speaks, it is with the weight of authority she has as Queen of the land, Mistress of my Soul, and Avatar of One of the Three.

You must go.: The three words are both command and precognisant foretelling. There are tasks you need to do, that only you can do.: The vacant gaze of one with a foot in each realm vanishes from her face and she crouches to embrace me. I would spare you that, if I could.:.

Hanyana?: I ask, wondering what her dreams portend that has her clutching at me, the tingle of her spirit a chill mist against my skin.

Know that, though you call yourself my tool, you can refuse any task I set before you.:.
She sinks partially into me, sending a gasping cold through my core, in an effort to emphasize her words.

:Know that I will never refuse you:. I reassure her. :Though I may refuse a task, I will not forsake you:.

:You must go. The caravan is leaving today, for Elydis Duchy, where they will winter. If there is need, play the Nocturne. Use the sanctuary. Stay...safe:. She insists, and the first smile of the day returns to my face.

:You as well:. I demand, and she laughs.

:I am safer now, here, than I have been since Ganondorf first set foot outside the desert:. She tells me, her hand brightening with holy radiance. :Link knows not why he feels bereft, but the Black King knows it is because Wisdom’s bearer died. He searches for the next to hold my portion, or, failing that, tries to divine where it rests:.

:Where does it rest, if not in you?: Surely, with her spirit so vibrant and adaptable, the Triforce of Wisdom has stayed with her? What do I see, if not the Holy Relic’s creative light emanating from her hand?

:It is beyond the First, and will return once I have been restored. Failing that, another has been chosen should I fall:.

:Are you certain?: One piece of divine providence is enough in the hands of mandrag Ganondorf.

:As certain as the sun will rise:. She nods. :You’d best pack:.

Ever obedient to her will, I do. Not that I have much. My needles, three changes of clothing that all need cleaning, my whistle, a comb, scissors, my coin purse, an eating knife, a razor. Niakara winds about my feet, making her presence known and insistent for it. I pack a small bedroll on top of the lot, making a type of nest for her to lie on, and fill my canteen with water. Everything else belongs either to the Temple or Zelda, and I discharge my duties regarding the second to the first before I shoulder my pack and leave the Temple for Kakariko. Two green rupees to Erys for a breakfast that can be eaten on the road, and it is a simple task to join the caravans moving out.

It does not take me long to find Vidkun.

“Aein!” He calls out when he sees me approach, turning from the harness he had been buckling to one of the oxen his troupe uses to pull their wagons and running to meet me. Instead of the greeting I am expecting, his hands go about my waist and he lifts me into his embrace. I go with the motion, fearing doing him harm or causing him to lose his balance, and he spins us both before putting me back on my feet and kissing me breathless. I squeak in surprise, and respond, but not before I have to wonder what exactly transpired between him and Zelda. He is affectionate, but not this affectionate. Not in public at least. He withdraws from my mouth and rests his forehead against mine, green eyes closed. “You’re coming?”

“Not yet.” I quip, startling him into a laugh.

“I’ll have to fix that.” The heat in his voice warms me through to the core.

“Later.” I remind him, and he chuckles, but allows for duty to take precedence once more. Within the mark, the caravan is slowly making its way down the tracks next to the stairs and I find myself drowsing in the back of the one wagon carrying fabrics in the form of clothing and
bedding for the traders for their journey. Selah is driving and keeps a steady, even pace. I am grateful, though I quickly grow bored. With nothing better to occupy my time, Vidkun driving his own wagon and the others similarly engaged, I stuff myself in a corner and go Between.

The Hero who is to be is waiting for me, primed and ready to continue yesterday’s lesson where we left off. Though only he has a physical form, I am dripping sweat by the end of it, and return to my body slowly to find a salty rime left where it has dried on my skin. This is the first time that my body has moved any great distance with no one in it to help direct my path, and I find it takes me longer to figure out where I am supposed to go because of it. Resolving to not repeat the experience, I take my time stretching and wish for a bath.

The oxen move slowly, more slowly than a casually strolling Human, and I ride near the front of the caravan. At this pace, we will reach the foot of Death Mountain and the beginning of the Field in time to set camp and make the evening meal tomorrow night. I cannot wait that long to be clean, and know that there are wells and springs close by. Their spirits babble to me faintly, welcoming and pleased to greet someone who sees. They are a major factor in why Kakariko could accept so many refugees from Castle Town so many years ago. One can survive a while without food. Water is needed daily, every second day at least, and going three without is risking much.

.:Where are you?:. I call out with the part of me that is suurin, trying to mimic the dance and action of springs rather than wells, and address my query to one who holds the heat of the Fire Temple rather than the cold of the Shadow. The reply is varied, multitudes echoing in concert, to a one laughing. Mostly at me. The springs are where they have always been, I am the one who moves. I have to laugh at myself as well. Of course I move. Time passes, people move. Rivers flow. Springs, hot springs especially, slowly carve places for themselves at weaker points in the rock, taking up minerals from the very places they erase.

Stress has caused a small fissure in the great body of the active volcano that is Death Mountain, and that small fissure lets water from the large cisterns beneath emerge into the air. There is a hot spring not a mark and a half distant at my normal pace, four marks away at the pace of the caravan. In one, I should be able to scout ahead, bathe, and have my hair at least mostly dry by the time the oxen catch up. One mark is more than enough time for me to jog between carts and ask preferences, then return to the second wagon under Mukesh’s guidance and make a hearty lunch for everyone.

The harvest has been no more plentiful this year than it has since the rightful King was murdered, but there are fewer people and animals to feed, so it seems as though there is a bounty. In the caravans, there truly is, for they carry not only enough to see their own people through most of the spring, but goods in trade. Fully three of the wagons carry foodstuffs, and even though there was feasting in Kakariko, both my Mistress and myself did not indulge. We did not skimp, either, but over eating now with the risk of starvation later is unappealing to us both by virtue of the Goddess we hold dear.

Eat fresh, eat light, eat often, and slowly. Cabbages have done well, and I slice and salt to gently wilt, making a dressing of egg, oil, and lemon that I learned from the cook in Krisid Keep. Thick slices of yesterday’s bread toast well with a small flame, and the soft, pungent cheese of Kakariko’s mountainous goats spreads evenly over the top. Spicy stewed pork, torn into bite sized chunks, rests easily on top of the cheese, giving me a base to rest the cabbage salad on. A final slice of toasted bread lets me stack the portable meals and take them to those that guide the wagons and their drivers to eat without needing to stop. Canteens of water give drink to all, and I enjoy my own portion as the caravan moseys by.

Selah gives permission for me to move ahead, already treating me as another member of
their troupe to Vidkun’s amusement, as long as I take some of the cleaning with me. The few dishes I used to prepare the noon meal go into a small canvas bag, and I am given another, slightly larger, filled with the garments worn yesterday that need cleansing, and a brick of lye soap scented with some sweet spice that I do not know. With a wave, I trot ahead, and once out of sight of the easily aggravated beasts of burden, start the loping pace that can carry me from one end of the country to the other in less than a full turn.

It means that not only do I have time to clean, but I can introduce myself to the spring properly, and clean up around the banks where previous travelers’ refuse liters the ground. There are no trees nearby, or hedges full enough to bear the weight without damage, but there are a number of large rocks that I can lay the laundry and bags upon to dry while I take care of the dishes and then myself. The soap is harsh on my skin, leaving it pink-tinged beneath the lingering gold of Zelda’s extended possession, which ignites a fire in Vidkun’s eyes. That heat lasts through to the night camp, after the evening meal, and into the wagon of fabrics where I welcome his indulgent touch with muffled cries and physical demands of pleasure.

I am sore the next morning, content to remain in the warm cocoon that smells faintly of us. Twice in as many days, and longer than I care to think of before has left certain muscles unaccustomed to the vigor with which a professional applies his trade. I emerge much later than my sometimes lover with a slight limp and huge grin which causes Mukesh to laugh, whereas Selah smirks, Soal snickers, and Kili slips a vial of oil into my hand that she says will make tomorrow morning easier. I take it, and make sure she gets the best portion of ham at breakfast in thanks.

She is right, the oil helps me adjust to the length of him within my bowels, the width of him stretching me open, the warmth of his weight on my back. I am circumspect with the fluid, and it lasts a full quarter turn of almost daily use rather than the anticipated three days. Unaccustomed to such frequent coupling, I find it an adaptation I am willing to make. It leaves me tired, afterward, and I take to sleeping much later than the rest of the caravan to make up for it. Sleeping in is a luxury that I haven’t had in so very long, and I revel in it. My days become monotonous quickly, for a caravan on the move is fortunate to avoid excitement, and Chuki’s Traders seem to have avoided nearly all the excitement of the years since Ganondorf’s murderous coup.

Though Fyer and Bhon have both lost distant relatives in the fighting, Vidkun and Soal have family in trouble because of it, their routes haven’t had to change much, and no one else has seen even the violence that most of the major settlements have. The guards; Mukesh, Pergie, and Gengle, haven’t had any trouble keeping either their comrades or caravans safe. The only animal they have lost was to old age. When entire towns have been wiped clean off the map, including the capital city, that is highly irregular.

It cannot all have been good fortune. With the way Chuki himself interacted with the Geru’d warriors at Lon Lon Ranch, the possibility that their master has paid for their safety is high. Ganondorf’s plot of terror works only as long as the people can be terrified, and it is not a sustainable emotion. Fear is. Protection money lining illicit coffers would explain how some of the others to whom power was unappealing came to his banner. I say nothing of it though, the book of Nayru explicit enough as to what happens to fools who open their mouths to stir up trouble, and retreat to the cloth-wagon after the noon meal for my daily meditations.

It takes longer, but I take the time to actually meditate before going to Link. Not only does it make my return afterward simpler, but my calm transfers to him. Today, my explanations of Zelda’s perception of the magic of the light is less successful than I had anticipated. He can call a few basic protections to hand, some enhancements, and stabilize himself, but that is all. Nothing so strong as to deserve to be called a spell. I let him watch and listen as I invoke Nayru’s Love upon myself repeatedly in the hopes that he can discern the magic of the Shadow as I cannot explain that
of the Light. Fi is the only one that seems to benefit from any of my instruction, though she cannot help him learn to wield his.

“Hylia’s Guardian Impa used magic she called Din’s Anger to assist in the Maiden’s escape from the enemy. It was 98% successful in destroying her target.” The girl who is also a sword offers after another failure. “I cannot detect any significant portion of her genetic material in you, yet your mage craft is 86% identical to hers.”

“The Great Impa was the first of my people, her wisdom is taught to all who would learn.” I explain, my heart in my throat at the implications.

Fi knew Impa. Not my Impa, fearsome General and preeminent Sage, but the first and progenitor of my people.

“My Master encountered beings during my forging that correspond to the remaining 14% of your craft. The probability that your bloodlines have crossed with the Watchers of the Silent Realm is 99.99%. Your ability to remain here as a spirit is a result of this deliberate breeding, correct?”

“Yes, Fi.” My confirmation is whispered, but none of the people I am with have trouble hearing it.

“You have kept records of Impa’s descendants?” The ringing quality of the blade’s voice is more pronounced with proximity, and the metallic sheen of her pupil-less eyes reminds me both of the twilight sky over an ocean and, rather poignantly, of tears.

“The Council of Hierarchs in Aerilon, the capital city of the Shaekha’ri Federation, has birth and death records for every child born to my people who lives past their first turn. I would assume that the direct descendants of the Great Impa could be traced from there. If not, the university or great library in Kansadi would hold such things.” I know, from my memorized histories, Impa, her twelve children, and their children, but no further than that down any familial line but my own…and even that, I only know six generations from Impa, and the eight before mine. Technically there is one following in Insu, who I must assume is safe over a thousand malms distant in the town of my birth.

“How many years have passed?” Fi asks me, close enough that had she breath, I would be able to taste it. “How long have I been asleep?”

“It is the 22nd day of the Harvest moon, 1209 cycles since the descent.” I inform the spirit of the sword, never mortal, yet made for mortal hands to wield, and she stills. Then she smiles.

“Not so long as I had thought, but long enough. My thanks, Tor Aein, for your truth.” In a flash of azure and silver, she is a sword once more, and nothing more than that. Link assures me that his blade feels no different, that it still welcomes his hold on it, and promises to practice what we have done today. I take my leave of him, Navi, Fi, and the colorless nothing of Between to return to my body and the caravan that is carefully creaking towards a well-deserved winter’s rest.

Five days of travel for me alone means a fortnight with the caravan, half a turn of rest, recovery, and amorous attention. There is ample selection of food stuffs, and once I prove myself capable, spend much of my time with Kili drying, salting, smoking, and preserving the harvest that the caravan takes as trade for other goods and services. It restores me in ways I hadn’t known I was depleted, though I still sleep overmuch and fret over Zelda’s predicament in my spare time. I see the signs of life in the occasional Elydis style farmhouse for the last three of those days, and by the time we reach Lord Throri’s holdings much of the initial butchering of the Blood Moon has taken place.
I can wield a knife, but the butchers are better suited to their task than I, and so I join those making medicines and preserving the meats rather than the more pungent hide tanning and sinew slicing. The making of glue and carving of horn, bone, and hoof I am glad to avoid, though it does mean I am set to smoking strips of leaner meats and salting those with more in the way of fat. The sausage storage shed is full by the 18th, and the first frost descends on the 21st. I do not reveal knowing Throri, nor do I mention the safehouse my Lady and I have on his lands. In his turn, he gives me the same space allotment that the rest of the caravan members receive in exchange for the better portion of the goods they carry.

In return, each person is given a bed in a small house, food, space and fodder for the animals, and soap, candles and firewood to last the season. Given Vidkun’s secondary profession, the house I am to share with him and Mukesh is actually meant for four, or five if most of them are children. In the days of butchering, we have turned it into something resembling a home. Mukesh handles the laundry and tends the furnace, I cook and sew, and Vidkun cleans and helps with the irregular chores that do not damage his skin.

It is not vanity, but rather keeping merchandise in pristine condition, and he has had at least one customer every two days. I try to time my meditations for the duration, Zelda’s spirit inhabiting but not moving me beyond the occasional shifting, whilst I seek Link Between. I can no longer help him with his bladework, Fi’s teachings surpassing Hahron’s and making me marvel at his skill. A sentient, ancient blade forged at the behest of the Three makes for a fantastic swordmaster. My teachings lie in the realm of mathematics, natural observation, posture assessment, and song. Navi soaks up the last two, while Link learns so quickly the words scarcely leave my lips before he understands them.

Of course, most of what he learns is gone by the next day, but not all of it, and none of it is fundamental in who he is or must become. He is relentless, determined, adaptable, and always hungry. With regular meals, shared in intimacy or in public, I am hard pressed to keep him fed, and often resort to spending some of the rupees I’ve secreted to supplement my portion of the noon meal. I am not growing, nor am I exerting myself in ways that require increased intake. That small skimping on my part is the only reason I do not gain weight under Vidkun’s attentions.

He is always trying to feed me, concerned, he says, by how much I am sleeping. I am concerned as well, but can ease his worry by keeping my posture open and relaxed, looking him in the eye, and steadying my voice as I tell him things that are half-truths, suppositions, and evasions. I cannot bring myself to lie, the words clog my throat and make me choke on them before they can become sound. So he worries, and I cannot stop it, just as I cannot stop him from closing the curtains when one of his lady-callers comes with a purple rupee every three days. He gives no change, and takes a mark of time and no more, but I find it best to be with my young Master or out of the house entirely rather than watch the play of shadows on the curtains.

She is late, today, and so I abandon the four walls and venture out of doors. Yesterday’s frost is slick beneath my feet as I walk about the village. Having already seen to Link’s lessoning and Zelda’s sanctity, there is little else for me to do that lets me free of the house, and Throri has been increasingly blatant in his wishing to speak with me. He has yet to order it, and I would like to attend to him before he does and increases Selah’s suspicions. Bad enough that some of the citizens have called out to me by the name they know, my guilt at ignoring their pleas unrelieved, but it is necessary to keep those I travel with from knowing with any certainty that I am Sheik.

If some are not paid for information they gather on their travels by Ganondorf’s women, then I will eat my boots raw and without sauce. Selah, Ryon, Kili, and even Vidkun I am certain of. What I do not know is how firmly they are the Dark King’s. Mukesh does not speak enough for me to see his truth. Fyer is an idiot, having trouble counting his balls and coming up with the same
number twice, and any type of subterfuge is beyond his capabilities. The only one I can trust entirely in the whole caravan is following me three paces behind and jumping from footprint to footprint to avoid getting the dirty snow on her paws.

I wait for Niakara to catch up, and lift her to ride on my shoulders as I go to seek audience with the region’s hereditary lord. The manor of the Elydis lands, Kondor Keep, is built as the rest of the structures, within and a part of the earth itself. Still, there is only so much that can be done for so large a building, and my presence is challenged twice and constantly observed as I seek to petition the Lord. My watchers are good, hidden from casual sight so thoroughly I only know of them from their heat, two on the east side and one to the south of the hall I am left to await Throri’s attention in.

The history of the ruling family is displayed on the walls for all to see, four generations in evidence, though the last appears to be just that. The painting of a small family consisting of the Lord, Lady and Heir, is followed by a portrait of Throri already a man. The silence of the space lends an air of sorrow to the visual reminder of a bloodline lost to the same violence that caused my entire race to flee the borders and never return. The trials of those that stayed is not taught in our histories, and I find myself curious. I would hear the stories of the survivors, if they would tell me, and add their voices to the ones passed down.

The infant looks as most infants do, small, pale, with soft, thin hair and a head of overly large proportions. It is swathed in crocheted lace and cotton bleached what I must assume to be white, though the painter’s inks render it a pale ecru instead. Too small to determine sex, I wonder if it survived to be named, or like too many infants returned to the Goddesses’ arms before its first cycle of life. It is held tenderly in the arms of the Lady, cradled and supported with obvious affection. She herself is beautiful in the same manor that Zelda is beautiful. Blonde hair trails from minimal restraints holding it from her face, large eyes the azure of the sky on a clear spring day, slight proportions belying strength of body and character. Like my Queen, she has her ears pierced, but unlike Zelda a matching stud sits both in the center of her lower lip and the right side of her delicate nose. Like the Lord, she wears a grey and green cloak over her clothing, leaving much of the details of it obscured.

The Lord, only slightly larger than his Lady, looks like Link.

“Aein-shiik, your timing is horrendous.” Throri growls as I turn, startled, and he stalks across the hall’s carpet with intent. “Trine preserve us. Here, hide yourself, and quickly!” His hands are large on my arms, but I obey without protest. The brief glimpse I had was enough. Veteran of war as much as General Impa, Throri is flustered, frightened, and bears the flush, tracks, and reddened eyes of recent weeping. His spirit is bright yellow of panicked fear. His composure broken, it costs me nothing to give him what he needs to restore it…though I doubt that will be any time soon.

There are few places to conceal a fully grown man that are obvious, fewer still hidden, though two guards linger in compartments behind paintings. I cannot join them easily even if the small cupboards were large enough, and instead take the one recourse that is a part of my people’s magic. The shadow slides over my skin like spider’s silk, welcoming me into the realm of shades and spirits born of light but condemned to never touch it. He sees me do it, takes a step towards where I have vanished, and the door at the far end of the hall flies open with a crash that does not bode well for the enameled plaster-work on the frame.

“Throri, darling, we need to talk.” Vidkun snarls, flanked by Mukesh and Ryon, green eyes alight with an unholy flame.

“I will tell you nothing, Kinoko.” Throri snaps back. “I’d rather die.”
“That can be arranged.” The earth wizard, general of Ganondorf’s army, the individual responsible for hundreds if not thousands of deaths, smiles. It is not a pleasant expression, and I feel my heart shatter as it plummets to the floor.
The Inexorable Tribulation

Chapter Summary

For solace, shadows scream. Silence answers.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS - bad stuff happens this chapter, pay attention to the tags.
Tags : Dark, Minor Character Death, Original Character Death, Ghosts, Drugs, Homosexual Sex, Anal Sex, Self-Harm, Blood and Injury, Mental Anguish, Oblique Rape, Rape Aftermath, Pain, Explicit Sexual Content, Torture, Trauma, Violence, Blood and Gore, Magic, Reader Beware.

There is a scent to fresh spilled blood. A sound. A taste. I have seen, have spilled, enough of it to know.

Not like this.

Never like this.

Butchering a hog in the square for meat to smoke, bones to boil, skin to tan, my father helped catch the thick runnels of it to make sausage. I learned then all the different shades of red that blood could be, from the water-lightened pink after washing up to a deep ochre nearly black in the form of sausages later that day. Quick. Neat. Quiet.

Not like this.

“How, Throri?” Vidkun…no, Kinoko…asks lightly, as though he isn’t soaked in spatter from the mangled mess that used to be a woman, a guard. Used to be in one piece, one place. At least her spirit has moved on, as quickly as I could manage.

Not fast enough.

I can’t look away. I’ve tried. I don’t think I can blink. I’m not sure how I can still breathe.

Lord Throri is silent as the dead. Quieter, for the wizard who was my lover plays with the still steaming meat. Mukesh holds the young man, perhaps my age, perhaps younger, who was behind the painting of a map of the territory of this duchy.

We are to bear witness. The Lord has bade us to do so, in the heart of his power.

If I could close my eyes, hanyana would not see.

“Bring the boy.” Kinoko instructs, and Mukesh and Ryon obey. Easily. Quickly. It is not the first time they have done this for him, their motions smooth and practiced. Even when the
time of harvest is in full swing, those animals slaughtered for food are honored. Cleaned. Pampered even. They do not see the knife.

It is impossible to miss in the one Kinoko’s hands. Were it not glowing with malevolent magic, the size and the presentation of it make it the focal point of all those present. The faint motion of the young man’s throat tells me that he is still screaming, though both a gag and the rawness of his throat keep me from hearing it as anything but raspy panting. My own harsh breaths are muffled by the Shadow I stand in, and aided by Zelda’s ephemeral control.

We know what Kinoko looks like. What he sounds like. What he presents himself as. What Zelda knows, Impa will shortly. What I know has all been a lie.

“Tell me how, and I will spare him.” Kinoko demands. Again, but with a different pronoun.

“Stir’kha, Oren-han.” Throri’s voice is soft, resigned, and the boy closes his eyes. Just as Iza before him. Vidkun…Kinoko…gives the Lord a glare filled with frustration and anger, but having been given a translation previously, does not demand a second. I cannot see his face as he turns to Oren, but I can see the sudden tensing of muscles. Hear the wet squelching. Smell it. The scent of mortality. There is a stillness, before the body spasms. A moment of release, before the knife digs into the very essence of who and what he was, and begins to feed.

Unhindered by mortal sense organs, Oren sees me. No longer burdened by a throat swollen and raw from screaming, he makes to speak, but I have been waiting. I send his spirit down the river in that moment he releases his hold on his body, far sooner than it would be if he were not willing to take the escape for what it is. Not only is his death faster, easier than hers, it keeps the dark wizard from gaining as much power from his life-blood. Kinoko does make sure to send spatter onto Throri’s face, though it takes more effort on his part to make sure the viscous fluid, still hot, finds its target.

Throri is weeping, unaware of how I can see his agony, though his face remains passive and still. I cannot get close enough to help without revealing myself, and know that another death will break him. I will not doom us all in the vain hope of saving him some pain. I would not do it before, could not during. There is no point, now. Throri is strong, has seen the loss of his family and those to look to him before. He is also weaker for it, faced with not only the knowledge of their deaths, but the visceral reality of them. His spirit wavers between the light and life and joy of his Hylian ancestry and the crazed fractal darkness that I have seen in those who are wholly Ganondorf’s.

I pray, a wordless plea to those who would listen, and watch. It is all I can do.

Thwarted, Vidkun…Kinoko…snarls at the loss of easy power reaped from his sacrifice to the Dark King. Iza, despite being much older, supplied him with more. The flare of sickly yellow in his eyes fades as the bodies cool, and he takes in Throri, catatonic, and spits. Though Oren’s death did not prove its potential, it was still more than enough for him to clear the hall of visible evidence in a burst of blackest flame. Ashes, dust lifts into the sunbeams like miniature fairies as the three traitors leave. He lets the vacant eyed Lord keep the stain across his right cheek as a reminder.

The scent lingers.

:Aein:. Zelda’s mind is hushed, muffled as though she is speaking through the layers of cotton that make up my mask. I slide the fabric up to cover my face, hide my horror, withdraw my heart, and step back into the light.
My footsteps are loud in the silence, and were it not for the trembling of the man kneeling before me, I would think I am the only living creature left. Even the mice have fled in the face of the evil committed here.

“Sheik.” Throri gasps. It doesn’t matter though, the damage is done. I don’t quicken my pace, but do kneel to unbind him, hand and foot and arm. I remember Hahron’s lessons in this well, though we are far from a battlefield. Survive. Take care of the wounded. Everything else can wait.

Dead or alive, everything else can wait.

I cannot move the older Hylian man without doing him damage, and he is in no condition to move himself. Like my Lady, his lungs breathe, his heart beats, but the strain of holding against Kinoko’s magics have made him withdraw into his own mind by the time I can bring myself to look. The thread of his weaving, the pattern of his life, remains strong, and so I let him hide.

It is up to me alone, then.

Tearing a strip of fabric from my cloak, I carefully brush away the last traces of Oren’s blood from Throri’s face, wary of every sound, every motion in my peripheral vision, every pulse pushing more of the same through the Lord’s veins in the skin beneath my hand. My own heart beats fast, furious, and slightly irregular, making me momentarily dizzy when I stand.

By the time I have him on one of the benches that line the hall, it is faster still, and hard, as though it is about to burst from my chest without the aid of Kinoko’s knife.

I break another bench apart, pulling pins and heating glue with the raw agitation of my own magic and the strength of my hands, to barricade the doors. It will not keep someone determined to get in from doing so, but they will have to find either a ram or an ax first.

Or step into the shadows that fall beneath the frame, and out the other side.

From the hall is it no great distance to the herbal, which is as empty as I feel. Flame to light a shielded lantern comes at the touch of a finger, and I tell myself I’ll appreciate Ulf’s neat writing and orderly shelves later. Now, I seek out a clean, empty bottle, and fill it halfway with clear water. Pale, thick honey dissolves with some heat and stirring, followed by a touch of cider turned to vinegar to help emulsify.

Then I must break two locks and a seal for a pinch of powdered Din’s Bellflower. The tiny ground granules leave the tip of the spoon stained red as blood, and I must simply breathe for a moment before checking my proportion against my memory and Zelda’s intuition. Then, careful not to breathe and accidentally inhale any, I make sure it dissolves completely in the bottle with the rest. Any more than that and the dose could kill…any less and Throri may never come back to himself. I hesitate over taking a dose for myself, but the protective shield about my mind and heart keeping me from thinking too much or feeling anything is useful right now.

I can always return afterwards.

I put the jar of Din’s Bellflower back, sealing it, but cannot restore the locks. Ulf will need to petition Throri to have them repaired or replaced. I can, however, make it appear as though they are still intact, and do so. Tincture secured, herbal deserted, I ease into the element of my people once again.

Removing the bar in anticipation of moving the lord, I must steel myself before turning to the room that is such a large part of my nightmares, past, present, and future.
Throri hasn’t moved. Doesn’t, until I have half the tincture in his belly, and then it’s all I can do to get out of the way so as not to take damage. He flails, coughs, sputters, and seizes in the space of a second. It doesn’t last long, it isn’t supposed to, but it seems like an eternity. Then he is still.

Not dead, just mind-locked in the processing of what his body is telling him. Senses heightened, there is no better way to call someone to the here and now than to overwhelm them with sensation. When he sits up, clutching his head, eyes watering from the heat of the spice, and looks at me, I know he will be alright.

“It wasn’t your fault.” I tell him.

“I know.” He returns, and gets to his feet as slowly as if he had aged a lifetime in the last hour. It probably feels as though he has. My cocoon holds me tight. “It wasn’t yours, either.” He assures.

“I know.” I agree. Iza and Oren’s deaths are not on either of us.

Kinoko’s continued life is on me, along with the rest of it. Throri would argue, Zelda does. I thicken the protective barrier around me and she grows quieter yet. Kinoko…Vidkun…is my fault.

Seasons, cycles have I trusted him, believed the story of his life presented to me by both his own hand and the mouths of all his servants. How many are there, to keep such a thing hidden from me? To what purpose?

.:You are my voice to the people.: Zelda reminds me, subdued and shaky, but strong enough to push through my blockages despite that. She is right. Perhaps that is all. Perhaps not. Still, I cannot maintain such a masquerade, will not be able to pretend for even a moment that I am as naïve as I was this morning.

How many have died at his hands? How much as he destroyed in the name of power, and Power? How…

The cocoon thickens, tightens its grasp about me, and I let it. There are questions that I do not want the answers to.

“Sheik?” Throri asks, his voice as unsteady as his feet.

“Here, sit.” I urge, and help him to do so as the painted visage I was admiring earlier gazes down on me in soulless contemplation.

“Aein-ah, there you are!” Kinoko calls, his mask of Vidkun up and firmly in place. I freeze in place, knowing now why his hair glistens damply, his shirt is unbuttoned, his skin so fresh. He would have had to bathe, to get rid of all the remains of two murdered guards.

His lips meet mine, his tongue seeking, his body, hot and hard and ready, presses against me.

It is all I can do not to vomit.

“I was wondering where you’d gotten off to.” He murmurs, his hands petting my hair. “I miss the feeling of you beneath me.” His manhood, tight to my hip, emphasizes his words.
“Liar.” I whisper, lungs frozen.

“Mmm.” He hums against my throat, his hands sliding beneath the waistband of my trousers. “I want you.”

“Liar.” Clearer then second time, louder. I push him away, though he clings.

“Aein?” Puzzled. Petulant. I can see the want in his face and his body easily.

“No.” For the first time I refuse him utterly. He does not take it well.

:No, no, no, no, no, no, no:. Zelda’s voice is a litany in my mind.

“Not here? We can go back to our house, chase Mukesh out.” He pushes, verbally and against me, engorged on the life-blood of innocents.

“No, stop it.” I push him away again, and his grip turns bruising.

“You are mine.” He snarls.

“No, mandrag keti Kinoko!” I deny him again, stepping back enough to grab at his grasping hands, remove them from my body.

“Mine to hold, mine to kiss, mine to fuck!” He tries to touch me again, but I have his hands in a firm grip.

“Liar!” I shout in his face, raising my voice for the first time in his presence, naming him and damning him with four little letters. I shove the back of his hand in his face, so he can see the blood he missed still under his fingernails. I am vaguely aware of Throri moving away from us both, of Mukesh blocking the door with his bulk. None of it matters. None of it, but the smile on his face as he shoves in return, sending me staggering back.

“Oops.” He grins... “You caught me.” ...and draws the bespelled knife so recently quenched in the heart blood of not one, but two of the people who belong here. Male and female, old and young.

It is only when the ground moves beneath my feet that I realize how very, very bad that is. I haven’t even time to realize I am falling before the earth itself swallows me from the neck down.

“Now I’ve caught you, Tor Aein.” Kinoko gloats. He doesn’t get that honor. Not anymore.

“My name is Sheik.” I grow back, and his boot meets the side of my head.

The darkness does not have me for long, I can feel the warm trickle of a split lip as it begins to soak into the wrapping about my hair, but it has been long enough. Face down, splayed over the bench I sat Throri on, I am expecting what happens next.

I am naked, and I am afraid. Kinoko is on my back.

It doesn’t make it easier, knowing what is to come. Or who.

Zelda’s voice in my head is mute, sunk in silence beyond screaming. It is almost as though I am alone. Almost.

Together, we endure.
Bloody, sticky, sore and raw, I still feel it when Kinoko draws power from me. No longer subtle about it, waiting until I am safely sleeping and content, it shreds past my personal wards like a rope against wet skin. I don’t know what his purpose is, specifically, but I know enough.

Enough.

The bonds encasing my limbs are gone, they are leaden still. Bleeding from a dozen abrasions and more, bruised and battered and broken, I have no strength. The world spins, a hexagram of kaleidoscopes before my eyes as I tremble. Fall before I can even begin to straighten. Someone laughs, pleased with my suffering. It doesn’t matter. Shaking, core chilled beneath the insistent pull, I haven’t the ability to reach for the lines I can no longer see. He will drain me dry… drain me dead. I reach, and find, the three lines of my geas stretching out into infinity.


As Soal stills within me and Fyer finds his pleasure once more, Kinoko leeches at my very essence. I tug on the three chords that entangle each other within me. Zelda, thickest, closest, and most aware, gives of herself freely. Link, straightest, smoothest, and most open, gives of himself wholly. Ganondorf, thin and sharp and scalding, holds a pittance of his Power close enough to be felt, but will not release even that.

Virtue, Love, Measure.

None of them are enough to save me now. I must free myself, and atone for my mistakes.

I did not see Kinoko hide the Truth with truths. I believed my devotion and dedication to a vision of my own choosing. I hoped, and in hoping, built an illusion as steadfast as it was naïve. I hesitated when that illusion shattered.

I will not make the same mistake again.

Mukesh makes an excellent handhold, going so far as to help me to my feet as the tatters of my dignity expose my wounds, my weakness, in flashes and flutters, even as blood and other fluids trail down the inside of my thighs. His large fingers dip inside to feel the moisture he left there. Kinoko’s hand remains on my back, siphoning every last drop of magic he can grasp and sending seizing spasms along my spine. My toes felt like this before I was rescued at Aversa.

I survived.

Ryon and Pergie, nude and sated, linger close by. I aim my next staggering step towards them. It is also closer to the door.

“Aw, lookit ‘im trying to get away.” Soal coos, even as I draw the Triforce on my chest with my own blood, mingled with the semen of all seven of the men here, disguising the motion as more trembling, more frailty. Shuddering, dipping my fingers in open wounds, I cover my left eye with the symbol of my people, all of the clans, banished or not, in three swift motions. Let them see their own illusions, I will not be blinded by desire again. Mukesh tightens his grip on my groin in anticipation of another round, and I smile.

“Mokara’s Flight.” I whisper, using my agony as incentive, the sacrifice of two of those chosen by destiny as fuel, my body as the conduit, and my will as the guide.

The stone beneath the oak floors at my feet shatters like an apple in the fist of an angry Moblin.
Nayru’s Kindness flares azure and gold to my compromised Sight, like the brief glimpse of Throri’s eyes and hair before white is all I can perceive. I do not know more than that.

There is stillness. Calm. Acceptance. Forgiveness.

Peace though, is distinctly lacking. There are things I must yet accomplish before Mokara will welcome me in Her domain.

“Hylia’s Ascension!” A deep chiming like the toll of the Temple bells rings in my ears, renewing the white light into fresh scalding anguish that somehow burns my torment to ash. Purifying the worst, cauterizing the rest. The swirling vision of a fairy fading as the majority of his magic is expended leads to a glimpse of the fractured foundation a full nine paces around me in a perfect circle.

Piles of greasy, grey ash where those responsible stood.

There has been so much white that giving myself to the black seems right.

The curious gauze I dare not question lest it be taken from me holds everything at a distance. Where Din’s Bellflower brings things closer, more immediate, whatever I am in the grasp of swathes me in a protective embrace that feels like Zelda’s arms, Link’s head against my shoulder. I can almost see the misty cloud of magic shrouding my shadowed core.

Impa’s Guardian Dead moved in much the same manner, though their presence was chill and dark. I would reach to touch, but haven’t the courage, the power, and am not sure if doing so would be wise.

Touching hurts. Everything I touch, save those Chosen by Destiny, causes me pain. Betrayal, loss, anguish of mind, heart, body and soul. Everything.

I…can’t. Not right now, when so many wounds are still bleeding raw and unchecked. Later, maybe. Not now. There is too much of me spread out and aching to disrupt whatever it is that binds me, holds me together, wrapping me in a thick gauze that tilts my equilibrium towards coherency.

I let it, and am grateful.

Faces come and go, one of them familiar, one only vaguely so, and I am cocooned in physical bandaging as extensively as the mental barrier feels. Food, water, and rest if not sleep brings me back to the Hall where the familiar face waits. I cannot recall if I have been summoned, but it seems safe to assume so.

“Aein-shiik, how…how are you?” The man asks, and I take too long to respond, trying to find a way to answer him that will not cause upset that I haven’t the ability to cope with. “That good, huh?” His second question is rhetorical, and, relieved of having to make commentary, I hold my silence.

“You should be in bed…” The vaguely familiar one nags. “…both of you. Throri, sir, Din’s Bellflower is exhausting at the best of times. And Aein, you…” The familiar man is Throri. Lord Throri. Master of Kondor Keep, in the heart of the Elydis holdings of the duchy bearing the same name. “…shouldn’t even be awake, let alone up and about.”

“Sheik.” I murmur, and the one whose name I cannot recall frowns.

“Aein-shiik.” The Shaekha’ri title is stressed enough for even my hearing. “As the healer
of this town, I strongly recommend you go back to bed and allow yourself to recover.”

“No.” My tone doesn’t change, but from the surprise in two sets of blue eyes and three postures, my refusal is as emphatic as I could wish. I allow the Lord, healer, and guard hidden couldn’t save them so much blood oh Three make it stop make it stop makeitstop a moment to recover from my insistence before repeating it. “Sheik.”

Aein is as dead as the others standing in the circumference of Mokara’s Flight.

Throri is the first to relax, the first to understand, the first to adjust. The guard is no more alert than before the conversation, what there is of it, began. The healer turns his upset to worry, which is just as useful as if I were to suddenly grow another toe on the back of my head. Not at all.

“You will be in danger, now.” I inform Lord Throri. “You and your people. Mandrag Ganondorf would know both where his generals were to spend the winter and that Kinoko is dead.”

“We are evacuating already.” Throri assures me.

:Good. There should be space enough in the outlying villages, and the weather will hold for a fortnight.: Zelda informs me, her knowledge coming from that place beyond the gauze I can no longer touch.

“Zelda says the weather will hold for a fortnight, and you should disperse to the outlying villages.”

“Zelda says?” The healer snorts. “Zelda is dead.” He is right, for all intents and purposes. I do not dignify his interjection with rebuttal. The Lord knows, and that is what is important.

“Zelda lives.” Throri believes enough to say it, and mean it. He has hope, still.

“…and the Hero is coming.” I finish the phrase those initiated into the Loyalists have been instructed to repeat as often as possible for them both. Hope is good. It keeps everyone working towards a future instead of toiling for today.

I miss my family. Suddenly. It stabs through the swirling mists about me and I gasp at the pain.

“By all the crows in Kakariko, Sheik, at least sit down!” The healer insists, his hand closing about my wrist yeah like that to physically maneuver me so good towards a bench. My shuddering has nothing to do with the temperature, but a cloak is draped over my shoulders regardless.

“I’ll have someone go through the traders’ traitors’ belongings later, but I think we’ve learned all we’re going to from them already.” Throri looks old, weary, and yet he perseveres. “Not that I object to their fate, but the women they left behind are no more than what they appear to be, and I would like to know as much of my enemy as I can.”

“My eyes are here to serve your need.” I bow. It is awkward, seated, and painful, but serves its purpose.

“Your assistance is appreciated, but I agree with Ulf. You should rest. You’ve done enough, freeing us from the earth wizard’s hold.”

“I hesitated.” I blurt out. If I hadn’t, Oren and Iza may still be alive.
“He didn’t!” Throri snaps back, but settles calm over himself immediately after. I, however, am stunned. The Lord sighs. “That hesitation is the mark of someone who still values the lives of others, Sheik. Someone who has compassion. Don’t lose it.”

**:Don’t make me lose you:** Zelda’s input whispers across my mind. I let it go.

“Sir.” I nod my head in acknowledgement. He levels a gaze on me to rival Impa at her best, or worst, and I want, desperately, to go home. The only home that I have left.

“Go, rest. When you are ready, please inform me of your departure. Ulf, make sure he’s as comfortable as we can make him.”

“Yes, my lord.” The healer bows, and knowing a dismissal when I see one, I do the same and leave the way I came. Ulf follows until we reach the herbal, and then has me lie down while he makes a potion or three. He means for me to sleep, says as much, but I can’t.

I am not surprised by the blue potion, or the chamomile and mint tea that follows. That he would have such a large cask of Din’s tears-of-heart does. A small vial is pressed into my hand, filled to the brim.

“When you feel safe enough for a few days, drain the bottle.” He tells me, then deliberately turns away. “I won’t ask where you plan to go, but please do tell Lord Throri when you do. He worries, you know.”

“I will be leaving within the hour. Please convey my regrets to the Lord that I cannot specify my destination.” I agree, and lift my hands for Farore’s wind to carry me to the safe house.

Niakara waits, and the moment I am solid is rubbing her face against me and purring loud enough to be clearly audible over my ragged breaths. I kneel, half collapsing, to lower my face to hers, allowing her to mark me clearly with her scent. Letting her comfort me as best she can. I need all the stability I can get.

The Nocturne sounds like home. The Shadow calls to me. Dampe’s hut is tempting, but too exposed, too open, for my nerves to stand. Instead, after checking on Zelda’s form and absently greeting what spirits I cross on the way, I move deep into the Temple proper. The storage rooms to the west of the entrance are nearly full this time of year, and mostly ignored in favor of fresher foods and perishable goods. I take the furthest, filled with bedding and summer weight linen and canvas, and lock the door behind me. There is no way for him to reach me here, even if his ghost could escape from the grasp of Mokara’s Flight.

Water, food, bedding, and a sense of stability secured, I give in to Zelda’s urging and follow Ulf’s advice. He’s sweetened the tears-of-heart with something, making it much more palatable than the blue potion, and I know I don’t have long before the powerful narcotic takes hold. Lying down on a palate near the floor, I curl about Niakara, keeping off the worst of the bruises, and close my eyes.

“Bind his hands, idiot, unless you want him using his magic.”

“I thought magic needed to be sung.”

“Hylian magic does. Does he look like a Hylian?”

“I think I need to see more, to make sure.”

“Cut along the seam, maybe a knife that close to the dainty bits will be enough incentive
for him to stop squirming.”

“I’ve been fucking him daily for more than a month, it’ll fit.”

“Sweet Farore, he’s tight.”

“You’re just a monster, Mukesh.”

“Fucking bitch.”

There is no possible way my hiding place will remain hidden if I keep screaming, and already the ghosts and Poes are gathering. The skittering of wallmasters tells me that Impa, at least, will know within the mark where I am, and the faint not-shadows that flit across my vision says that Zelda already does. No helping it then, and I may as well be comfortable in my nightmares. Not that sleep is easy, even in the sanctity of my cell in the Shadow Temple’s priory. Niakara tries, but it takes Zelda’s ephemeral hand on my head and a strict mental command backed by the power of an avatar and the lingering effects of the tears-of-heart to get me to rest.

The moment I am truly asleep, Zelda takes over. It rouses me from the darkness of sleep beyond dreaming, and I am glad for it even though it causes her pain. “Pain shared is pain halved.” According to the Book of Farore, and I know that I must have courage to face my hurts and learn from them if I am to uphold my honor by maintaining my sworn promises. She is simply giving me the space to decide how I am to continue.

I will continue.

I will. By my own will. Farore help me.

Link. He will be missing a lesson, two, by now. I have no lesson to give, not even a story to recall for his amusement. With my spirit as battered as my form, I am not sure I could even make the journey.

“There you are.” You are mine. The words are exasperation itself, tinted with wry humor and ill-concealed worry. They pull me from my contemplation and cause me to focus instead on the red eyes of the ascended Sage of Shadow, unintentionally raising memories and bile. Mine to hold, mine to kiss. I swallow, hard, and meet her gaze. Even without the gifts of Sagehood, she is still powerful, still assured, still canny and capable. Mine to fuck.

“General Impa.” I bow, and she shakes her head.

“I cannot hear you, that is beyond my ability as I am now. Zelda-hanyana, however, will be returning momentarily once your body has eaten and drunk again.” Trust in the practical nature of the last of my people makes me smile softly in amusement. Zelda herself acts under Impa’s direction, a lifetime of obedience is not overcome with hardship or age alone. Perhaps the redoubtable warrior knows some of the care of a warrior’s heart as well as the body.

I am not so foolish to refuse help, and I refuse to be foolish enough to not ask.

Zelda, though she tries, has not learned the art of moving silently. It may be that she has had to adjust to doing so in two bodies, or perhaps simply that she is an exiled-Queen and the life of a prominent Princess is one where you are to be noticed. Still, she is quiet, audible only six footsteps from the door.

“Fed, watered, and clean.” Zelda pronounces, my voice rough. Perhaps there is damage there as well, though only swallow it Kinoko himself thought that was satisfactory.
I resist the urge to vomit as I take control of my form once more. I can taste the cabbage based soup Zelda ate. I cannot hide my trembling.

“Poor lad.” Impa sighs, and sits on my palate. She does not drape an arm about me, or restrain me in any way, and I am profoundly grateful. I have a feeling that I am not the first she has seen to suffer so.

“Report.” She orders, carefully not looking at me and the covert glances I steal of her. She does not move, waiting. I swallow to make sure that the soup stays where it will do me the most good, and start with the day of our arrival in Elydis Hold. Our welcome at Kondor Keep. The arrangement specifications of the deal that let the trader’s winter in the heart of the Duchy. Cold, hard facts, accompanied by detached observation seems to work, and I rely on it to get through the murder of the two guards. I find I can recall small details I was too frightened to process at the time, as long as I simply describe events as an uninterested third party.

I cannot maintain that distance once I get to the part after waking up from the kick to the head. At least cabbage soup tastes much the same the second time around, though bile is an unpleasant after thought once the last of the soup is gone. Weak kneed, revolted, I hunch over the chamber pot Impa quickly pulled from under the bed and wish desperately to not be physical right now. The injuries ache in recollection, and the cold sweat leaves me chilled.

“So hot. You like my dick?”

“Permission to touch?” Impa asks after my breathing has calmed. I cannot bring myself to speak, and so simply nod. Her warm, callused hands hold a damp rag that cleans the mess from my face and blots most of the signs of tears in the process. A comb is found from somewhere, and she lifts me to sit again on my bedding before slowly working it through the snarls, tangles, and fluids that are in my hair.

By the time it is braided and clean, bound up in fresh wrappings, I am leaning on her shoulder, finding comfort in the warmth and solid muscle beneath my cheek. Together, the muffled song of the Temple whispering, we breathe.

“It is easy to forget how young you are.” She murmurs when I withdraw to keep my face from going numb. I had intended to return to the safety she represents, but hesitate at her words.

“I have seen twenty one cycles and completed my Journey.” I huff. “I am a man, in every sense of the word.”

“A young man, who has suffered greatly.” She chides. “Whereas I am older, and have seen much. Will you see the truth I have learned for myself, or shall I let you flail about blindfolded by inexperience?”

“Enlighten me, elder.” I plead, resting my weight against her once more. I need to know if she has any wisdom for me now, and if I needn’t find the courage to ask for it, there are other tasks that energy can go to. Like healing. Like rest.

“Know this. It was not your fault.” Vehemence, forceful and strong, startles me.

“But…” I begin, and am hushed with a finger over my lips.

“It was not your fault. Yes, there are always things you could have done differently, there is always a different path that hindsight illuminates clearly. But you are not responsible for the actions of others. You, Aein-ah, are only responsible for you. Kinoko chose to manipulate and use you. The others chose to hurt you. You survived. You are a survivor, not a victim, for you are
smart enough to see the mistakes that made it easier for you to be hurt, and learn. You will not make them again. You will learn, you will heal, and you will become a better man for it.” Impa smiles. “Authentic compassion comes from understanding suffering. You just got upgraded.”

“Doesn’t feel like an upgrade.” I grumble. “Feels like bruises, strains, and probably a concussion.” You feel so good on my cock.

“When you are whole and hale and at capacity once more, then tell me that.”

“I should sleep.” I am so tired.

“Yes. Drink some water, too, and eat if you can.”

“Is there anything I can do about the other wounds? The…less physical ones?” I need to know. No. That’s not right. I know, but I need someone else to say it. I am too shaken and off balance to find or believe anything in my head.

“When there is a choice between injustice and violence, you must select either perpetual violence against the less fortunate or abrupt violence against your personal truth. The rest is just precipitation of that choice.” Impa standing means I need to either support my own weight or lie down. Since I should sleep, I choose the later.

“Meaning?” I ask. I do not recognize the quote, but it sounds like something from the Book of Hylia. Or the Fierce Deity, Karatura. Cold, Ordered logic to balance Majora’s Chaos. I yawn.

“Stop using your magic for murder. It may kill faster than any tool, cleaner than any weapon, but it destroys you to do it. I will not see you broken for expediency.” The General steps out of the woman, and gives me a direct order.

“I had to.” I explain. There were too many in Kondor Keep’s hall for me to deal with in any other manner, and I thought I would die with them. I couldn’t keep it quiet in the woods with Kabocha otherwise, not and keep myself from becoming what I fight.

“We’ll fix that once you recover.” The General says, and closes my door. Alone, for even Zelda’s spirit is gone, I drain the last of the Din’s tears-of-heart Ulf gave me, and close my eyes.

It is a long, long time before I sleep.
The Price of Absolution

Chapter Summary

The past, it haunts us, our ghosts live on.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the shortest of them, and an easier read, especially after the last. That said, there are still things to be wary of, such as: Metaphysics, Magic, Rape Aftermath, Aftermath of Torture, Panic, Ghosts, Long Term Illness, past Harm to Children, Historical Trauma, Expansion of Canon, minor Self-harm, Disassociation.

“Again.” Implacable calm combined with brutal authority and the knowledge that we must succeed before we are allowed rest drives us to ignore the sweat, the weariness, the hunger, and perform. Again. Beyond muscle memory, beyond recall, the General of the Loyalist army does not take private students for her own sake and thus, we are learning to use Zelda’s visions and my sight to anticipate and act before our opponent knows what he is doing.

Nine out of ten falls, it is still he who disarms and defeats us.

We are getting better.

The ice and snow of the practise circle in the cedar-shaded yarrow plot between Temple and town is thick and coarse, but provides no more traction for its cutting and abrasive texture. Ean shows no signs of flagging, though Zelda is having trouble holding our bond and I am struggling to breathe with our body. The odd doubling and flaring of what I see still disconcerts me enough that he has gotten in a number of bone-bruising blows, in turn disrupting my Lady’s concentration.

He waits for us to recoup. Impa says nothing. We all know that a true enemy will allow no such courtesy. A real enemy means that I am already dead, and Zelda must needs reveal herself before we are ready. No longer a fatal error, but one of lesser benefit. She could survive. Hyrule would not. She must be able to return to herself for longer than a candle mark, and control her actions entirely, before anything greater than survival is an option.

At least I no longer have to feed her unresponsive body, though moving her limbs and keeping her clean continues to be my responsibility. Our responsibility. She is with me now, all the time, holding my mind safe as I hold her form. We take turns resting, she leaves me only for the most private moments of body function, and otherwise, we are one.

Ean moves, right, down. I guard, Zelda strikes, but he has adjusted to our action and dodges before our needles can score a hit. My sight doubles, and doubles again as the possibilities unfold. Leap over the swung blade, duck beneath, block with a dagger…jump back and turn, keeping our hand close to our hip lest we lose it as he chooses and another set of possibilities arise. His form, vibrant with life, steadies as Zelda’s concentration wavers. I press inward, making him move, and clearing away some of the dissonance. Only three options, the most likely standing out as
a glowing blue beacon of motion, and we mark him with stinging force instead of a puncture wound, disabling that hand for a moment, weakening it longer.

“Hand!” Impa calls, her own eyes focussed on nothing but our movements. Ean, smiling, calm, careful Ean, Ean of the surprising strength, waits. We could push our attack, try to capitalize on the previous blow, but he has already centered himself and is anticipating all of our strikes, prioritizing the most likely from our stature, body language, and energy levels. Human, or at least so much so that any other blood is negligible at best, he uses his whole body to read us. I rely on my eyes. Zelda still attempts listening first.

Observing him, we learn as well, no doubt as Impa intended. At least that kind of constant vigilance is easier with two minds than one. We just must perfect it.

Circling slowly, careful to never tangle ourselves, never slip, never lose focus, it is still the young soldier who makes the first move and, eventually, lays his sword across my unguarded belly. Messy, painful death, if that had been his intent. He would be slowly bleeding out, however, so the match is a tie. We take great satisfaction in that achievement, our first of the day, and are dismissed. Ean cleans his sword quickly, a more thorough job awaiting him back in his bachelor’s apartment in Kakariko, and we check my dagger and needles until he is well and truly gone.

Then Zelda, ever my superior in mage craft due in no small part to the portion of the Triforce she holds, pulls us along the path I have opened and into the Chamber of Sages.

It is a lonely, cold place without the Temple guardians present. Nabooru, Saria and Impa are missing, though their voices can still be heard echoing. Ruto, Darunia, Rauru, and Zelda remain capable of being present under their own power. Only Zelda is.

“You did well today.” I tell her, and am rewarded with a chuckle.

“I only got us killed six times.” She agrees, moving into my arms as though we haven’t spent the last two turns living in the same skin.

“Yesterday it was eight, and no tie.” I murmur into her hair, scenting the lavender that is in the soap I clean her with.

“Tomorrow it will be five.” She is so certain I cannot help but believe.

“Tomorrow.” I agree, and hold her close, letting the balance of this place restore both stamina and equilibrium, the gentle song of muted divinity a balm more pleasant than a heart container, and much more palatable than potion. When I am filled, she is too, and we part ways.

Our body is to the reclusive cloisters of the hermitage inclined priests beneath Kakariko, her spirit traces along the single solid silver thread that joins body and soul. I am to my young Master, his fairy guide, and the ensouled blade he bears to smite the evil that would have us all.

Today we are sewing. I conjure an image of a small needle with an even smaller eye and he makes it be in the space where nothing is and everything can be. I salvage thread from a tunic worn to rags, and then dismantle it entirely. My stomach growls by the time he has a running stitch and hemming stitch perfected, though his slip stitch is uneven and tends towards snarling. Fi has been quiet, but Navi hovers intently, making me wonder what use fairies have for needlework. It’s not as though they wear clothing or require linens.

“Dinner time?” The blue ball of light inquires as the grumbling of my belly reminds me the thin soup of lunch has long since worn away. Better to eat lightly though, before intense physical
labour, than to be reminded forcibly later why a heavy meal is a bad idea. I nod, and Link sighs.

“I wish we could go with you.” He says, his voice cracking with the transition from boy to man and making him frown. “It gets lonely here, even with Navi to keep me company.”

“What of Fi?” I ask even as I stand and hand him the cap I have made from the old tunic whilst he stitched odd ends.

“Who?” He asks, looking puzzled. At least I know what has been lost between yesterday and today.

“The Lady in your sword.” I clarify, and he brightens.

“Her name is Fi? Maybe she’ll talk to me more if I use her name.”

“Perhaps.” I agree, pleased that despite everything, his curiosity has remained. That quiet form of courage will serve him well both in his destined tasks and marks him as the correct bearer of Farore’s portion. Indomitable spirit and the desire to know without the inclination for judgement or preconceived ideologies will sustain him as surely as they broke me.

But I am Nayru’s, by inclination and achievement, even so. Morality, order, hierarchy and law all require judgement and investment. He flourishes where I balk, and perhaps I should learn that flexibility from him as I am learning the skills of an assassin from Ean. A different set of rules, really. Those of survival and adaptation rather than insistence and manipulation. That…would be wise, I think, to learn the wonder and discovery of childhood again.

Perhaps then I could learn to smile once more, and possibly be touched.

My aversion to physical contact is compounded by my yearning for it. I remember it being a good, desirable thing. Now, I panic, remembering the feeling of them on top of me, using me, inside, without regard or concern for even the most basic comforts. Before my memories can overwhelm me, I bid the Kokiri raised Hylian farewell and drop out of the space between realities and into my body, which has broken out in a cold sweat.

Physical nausea makes me disinclined to seek a meal, but Zelda will no longer allow my discomfort to affect my health, and seizes control before I can actually make the decision to forgo the evening repast. She does concede to my desire to conceal as much of my skin as possible, and thus we go to the table both armored and armed.

It makes Charin glare at me, but as Sahar says nothing and Charin has taken a vow of silence, I ignore her upset and line up for my plate and portion.

Beans, baked in clay pots with onion, ham, molasses, and preserved tomatoes make up the majority of the meal, though turnips and carrots mashed with butter and cinnamon and a small portion of stewed cabbage accompany it, as well as a quarter loaf of coarse barley bread. Misha only needs to make ten loaves now, though the final quarter will go to whomever wishes after everyone has been served. Soon, it will be Zelda’s.

As shiik, I could claim it now. As suurin, I know that if no one seeks it, the Picori will have it with their plate of cream and slice of jelly. Zelda ensures that every bean and bit of mash makes it into my stomach while I muse, and I in turn clear my place, handing the plate and cutlery to the priest whose duty to the Temple includes dishwashing today, and take up the covered tray that holds her allotment.

Where my carrots and turnip were mashed, hers are pureed, as are the beans. There is no
bread or barley, no cabbage, but a small bit of nut butter and a spoonful of honey mixed in with her tea. When I am on my way, her spirit leaves my form for her proper one, and I make my descent alone.

With so few attendants, despite the flourishing of the nearby settlements, the lower levels are abandoned by all but ourselves and the few Poes that care to visit. One of them lights my way, another waits on the exiled queen, a third guards the hallway to her chamber. I will need to restock the brazier that keeps it a decent temperature before seeking my bed, but that is all.

Blue eyes are open and occupied by the time I have set the tray on the table I keep by her bedside for this very reason, and she manages a faint smile for me as I sit her up. Resting against my chest, there is not much difference in our heights, making her forehead list against my cheek. It exhausts her to swallow the meal, one spoonful at a time, but she manages all of the beans and vegetables along with three quarters of her tea. Lowering her to rest carefully, I return the tray, clean it, and make the journey to the lower levels once again with a bucket full of coal. One more trip upwards after her chamber pot has been filled, another down with a bucket of hot water, soap, and rag.

She takes over her washing by taking over our form. I absent myself from the room entirely to allow her that privacy, and then we return to my own cell on the same level once she has exercised and been made comfortable. Early to bed means early to rise, and first light means we are to be in the clearing with Ean, ready for the day’s work. I only notice the absence of the guiding lanterns of the Poes when Zelda runs into the foot of the bed, jarring us and sliding control of our body to me in the same motion.

When she drops all contact a second later, I freeze in surprise. The bond is intact, so I do not panic, but sit and wait for her return.

:Up, Kakariko:. The cryptic words float through my mind, but it is enough. The urgency has me lifting my whistle rather than my feet, and in moments we are on the platform and racing towards the village. Through the graveyard, past Sharp and Flat who are singing audibly from across the grounds, and into a mass of darkness blacker than the night and colder than the winter itself.

It takes my breath away, a shadow within the Shadow, and so strong as to overtake the natural shade of twilight. Fast, too, bare flickers of deeper dark beneath the sliver of a waxing moon, it disappears. Where, it is not hard to tell, even my ears can hear the sounds of screaming. Zelda is still better at determining direction, and so while I provide the strength, she guides the way. Most of the noise comes from the west side of town, centering around the house of the Cursed Family.

I have never been inside, or met any of the members, but townspeople gossip, and one would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind to spend any time in Kakariko and not hear the tale. I’d thought it little more than a story told to children to encourage them to share and not take more than they need. No light comes from the windows, but then, no light ever comes from the windows. What is unusual is the open doorway and the movement of the umbral edge in the darkness within.

The door closes behind us, making me jump and Zelda squeak, and I do my best to avoid the cobwebs as we move deeper inside. It is a remarkably large house, and echoingly empty. The scratching skitters of skulltulas and my own breathing and rapid heartbeat fill the air. Fortunately, by virtue of my Lady’s companionship, I have a simple solution.

Magic’s first child is fire, and both Zelda and I are masters of our art. She sets the cobwebs alight, and I take the shadows in hand and condense them until they have nowhere left to go. An old chest, empty, provides kindling for the fireplace, and dust and ash from years of neglect
and the recently removed skulltula spinnings make a perfectly good medium for me to write out my spellwork.

The dark mass hovers within, tries the walls of my prison, and snarls.

“Who are you?” I ask, calling on my training as shaik, and receive no answer.

.:Whatever it is, or was, it no longer recognizes the bonds of life and death.: Zelda observes quietly. .:. What does that mean?:

.:Either that it was never alive to begin with, is the imprisoned remains of a particularly malevolent spirit, or has deliberately done this to itself.: I explain, frowning. This type of manifestation should never have been spawned, if the Shadow Temple was performing its duties properly. Of course, there are so few now, and the land has been ravaged, but…still. This bodes ill. Time for a bit more force, then. I move the walls of the spirit’s prison inward, increasing both density and confinement.

“Name yourself.” I demand, and am rewarded.

“Bongo-bongo-bongo-bongo.” The thing murmurs the same set of syllables over and over, going so far as to form hands and beat at itself where a head would be, had it such definitions amid the nearly solid black mass that makes up its being. “Bongo-bongo-bongo.” I know that name.

The night no longer echoes with the screaming of villagers, but the despondent wailing of profound loss and faint flickers of flame. The spirit’s self-harm times itself to the flare and fall of the fire outside, and even held by my magic with Zelda’s support, I cannot send it through the First Gate. I haven’t the strength, and it is in no part willing. Even with the full backing of all the shaik of the Shadow Temple, the best I could hope for is a better containment.

It hasn’t tried my wards, the binding holding it still more of an embrace than true deterrent to escape. The makeshift scribbling in the dust and ash will not incarcerate it long enough for me to find help, and for the first time since I helped structure and key the moonstones that allow Zelda access to her sanctuaries I fall back on a tried and true, if extreme, methodology of my people’s magic.

No prepared, sanctified ink, and no consecrated quill or brush leaves me the one recourse so many Hylians found foul, yet is so very hallowed for the same reasons. Blood. It carries life, requires surety and sacrifice, and is so very, very closely tied with the caster. Even Kinoko’s debased usage, blasphemous and violating to all the Three hold dear, relied on the power of its spilling. Before I can panic as the memories of his touch swell towards overwhelming me, Zelda jolts me from my form and then lets me back in. I shudder, but stay present.

My needles are as sharp as ever. I kneel, and begin to draw the glyphs and sigils of restraint and suppression. Three triangles to call upon the Golden Goddesses, two circles to contain and reinforce, the runes of each clan to represent the descendants of the twelve children of Impa and all the magic our bloodlines contain. The spirit roars, knocking me back but not smearing or interrupting the lines of my spellwork. My finger has clotted closed and will not open with pressure by the time I return to my task, so I move to the next. The lines are thicker, my speed in their drawing lessened by a lack of practice, but it serves.

The four guardians on the Mortal Realm, great spirits of light, placed in their cardinal directions, encased in the spirals of their dragon ancestors. I am halfway finished with the arc of script between South and East when that finger runs dry, and I switch hands. The spirit is not pleased, but it can no longer simply dissipate or leave. It will have to fight, and I have
reinforcements in the form of the ascended Sage of Shadow, two priests, a shiik, three mages, and one assassin.

“Can you continue?” Impa asks, direct and to the point. I nod, and turn back to my task even as Sahar bows her head opposite me between the North and West. Charin takes my right, starting a flawless seam, while Ean falls to my left and Impa directs. The shiik in turn opens herself so that the mages can feed her their power, and protects us all. The moment the last glyph of my arc is finished I fall back and rest, accepting Zelda’s support, and watch as the others finish the spell I have begun. I started it, I must finish it, and I need to be conscious for that.

Sahar seals her portion of the final whorl first, having the most experience with such things by virtue of leading the Shadow Temple’s attendants as a whole. Charin is next, knowing the runes. Ean is willing and young and healthy, and Impa an apt instructor, but two minds on one task takes more time to ensure accuracy and stability. He staggers to the edge of the room once his portion is complete, and I rise, steadier for the rest and support.

Touching the compass point I had the most hand in creating, I lift the spell into the air about the mad spirit and begin to enfold it entirely. It is slow going, requiring a level of concentration and total focus beyond many, for I must maintain equilibrium of each angle at every step of the motion from all directions and carry the weight of the casting alone. Even Zelda cannot help me now, and I am sweating and shaking by the time the orb is complete.

The mages have collapsed, and Sahar remains in the house of the Cursed Family to care for them and Charin. Impa leads Ean, who carries me after her like a page carries an offering. It is perhaps more apt a description than I would wish, for there is an enforced intimacy in being carried that makes my breath come faster and panic take hold in my gut. Having sparred with him daily is the only thing that allows me to keep my tenuous grasp on composure, and his careful handling may keep my nightmares manageable.

The well is horrifying, and my hopes for a restful night flee the moment he sets foot in the base of it. Impa immediately grabs a torch and lights it for him to see, and I am thankful in that it lets me see that the room is part of a larger chamber that used to be blocked off. Now, all that is left is an illusory wall and old bones that turn to dust even as we pass. A faint stream circles the perimeter, and I understand why the spirit I hold was contained here. From the fresh quality of the broken brick, it may even be the reason the first wall was destroyed.

:I hear water:.: Zelda whispers across my mind, and once my attention is draw to it I can hear it as well. I must hold the binding on Bongo-bongo though, and cannot spare the energy to investigate or ask.

Serpents, the unnamed lesser brethren of the dragons who were once our allies, purify the water that circles the bottom of the well, guarding the precious liquid from contaminants and tampering. Impa leads us counter-clockwise around the entirety of the space four times, murmuring prayers to the Three and asking Mokara’s aid on the last, before stopping at the doorway to a room on our right, looking startled.

“Someone has awoken the imprisoned dead.” She growls, and stalks forward, lighting all the torches on the walls as she goes. Ean follows, and once in the room I can see immediately what she means. There are six tombs, crumbling with age and decay, all disturbed within the last decade. It is no trial for me to figure out where the one I hold goes, for there is only one empty. Whoever disturbed the dead here at least had the courtesy to make certain that most of them stayed where they should be. The desiccated corpses spill from their burial chambers, all flesh long since festered away in the damp air. The dismemberment is more recent in the white bone shards littering the floor, the
putrefied leavings of cloth caught on fragmented limbs.

I place the bound spirit in the empty tomb, but it takes all three of us to lift the lid back in place, confining the creature once more. The dust shifts with the disruption, leaving the inscription bare and legible. I am unsurprised at the sight, have anticipated it even, though the confirmation is unsettling.

Jo Bongo. An unfortunate child, undeveloped in every way but for mage craft and molded by a madman. Of all the crimes Yiga Shuar committed in his quest for the Triforce, the corruption of Jo Bongo is a pittance, but the boy should not have to suffer for his master’s cruelty. He may not even realize he is dead, and the thought of leaving a ghost with no more understanding than a toddler alone beneath the well for as long as the seal holds saddens me, even as I can see the practicality of it. What else can we do, if we cannot send him to the Silent Realm?

:"Clean this place up. Give him toys. Visitors. Stories. Don’t leave him here alone.: Zelda says, and I bow to her wisdom. I will find the means, somehow.

Now, I can take the time to replace remains and, with help, reseal the tombs. Once Ean understands what I am doing, he lends his strength and vitality to the task, and Impa leaves only long enough to summon more hands bearing tools. The physical bits that remain of Ghirahim, Mazaal, Gouen, Vaati, and Kokabu Rova are returned to their boxes, the lids covering set to rights, and the entire subterranean structure cleaned out.

It is just over a mark past dawn when we emerge once more into the village itself, and a guard of both mages and militia stationed around the well to watch until Sahar and I have rested and recovered enough to seal it all once more. Impa marches off to her home, showing no weakness or weariness, where she will gather the reference material she used the first time Jo Bongo was sealed. Ean, freed from our morning session by virtue of a sleepless night and understanding, somewhat, the difficulty we have been performing under by having two minds in one form, continues the pattern he has been in for the last day and lifts me off my feet.

_Yeah, like that._

Rather than panic and flail about and possibly cause him to drop me and do us both injury, I simply panic and tense in his arms. He snorts softly into my hair.

“Relax, Sheik. I know you don’t have a house here, and I have a spare room and cot. You can even lock the door if you want to keep me out, though for politeness’ sake I won’t intrude on your privacy anyway. I’m too tired to do anything about it even if you stripped naked and set the place on…” His voice trails off, and I crane my head to see the damage wrought by a misguided spirit.

The entire eastern side of the village has been damaged by fire. The orphanage, three houses, and the tailor’s shop are nothing but charred beams and crumbled brick. A dozen buildings more are in need of serious repair, three times that damaged. I haven’t the courage or the strength to see to the survivors, and my stunned paralysis lasts until Ean’s door is closed behind us.

“Let me just grab the cot, then I’ll be out of your hair.” He murmurs, putting me on my feet and moving to rummage through a small storage closet. “It’s not much, but it’s home.” He is successful, and sets the cot up in front of the stove before retrieving a basin and pitcher from behind the only door and what I assume must be his bedroom.

“I can’t put you out of your bed.” I argue, though it is weak and sounds twice as weary as I feel.
“There’s no privacy in the main room though, and only the bedroom has a lock on it.” He tells me, cocking his head and frowning. “I understand that you need to keep your face hidden, and that’s the only place I have that is secure.”

He’s never seen me without my mask.

“Earlier…” I begin, toying with the hemline of the thin fabric that covers my face and need to swallow before I can bring myself to continue. “Earlier, you said that you were too tired to do anything even if I…st…stripped…stripped naked.” I close my eyes in an effort to keep my mouth open and sound coming out. Fucking bitch. Nausea would threaten even more than that, but my stomach is as empty as my courage. “Does that mean you…” I have to breathe to talk. “…you would…” Or at least gasp. “…do…something…otherwise?”

“If I thought I had a chance, I’d have asked you the day we started your training. Din’s tits, if you hadn’t been so hurt, I’d have asked the day after we found the survivors from Aversa Keep!” He grumbles, and I feel his heat as he moves closer. I cannot bring myself to look, though.

“Why?” I choke out. Why tell me this? Why would he possibly want to…? Why now? Why now? Why now?!

“Why what? Why do I want you? You’re so kind, and even beneath that outfit I can tell you’re fit. I’ve had my hands all over you, with just that fabric in the way, and enjoyed almost every minute of it.” He tells me, and I can feel my face heat and my stomach churn. “Why didn’t I say anything? I wasn’t sure you were real, at first. Then Treeshia told me you and that merchant were together.” He swallows, hard. “Then Impa told me he…hurt you. The way I want to have you. I couldn’t…” He stops, and it’s only when I feel his hand on my cheek that I realize I’ve pulled my mask down in my fretting.

“You couldn’t…?” I prompt.

“I couldn’t hurt you, too. I’m still not certain you’re real.”

“I…” I start, and then see a way to test the waters. “I’m not putting you out of your bed.” I tell him, and open my eyes to see if he understands what I cannot bring myself to say. Not yet.

His mouth opens just enough to inhale before he stoops and presses his lips against mine in a dry, relatively chaste kiss. I smile through a surge of fear and remembered pain, and feel his lips curve against mine before he pulls away.

“Join me?” He asks.

“I can do that.” I agree. I hope I’m not lying.

While he has the space, he has no extra bedclothes, which is a relief. That relief is what I feel at the news tells me that I’m probably pushing too hard, too fast, for a return to what I feel to be proper relationships. I am a young man. I should be making alliances and finding a partner or two to share my life with. Perhaps starting a family of my own.

I am a reclusive spy for a displaced monarch in a country that has literally destroyed all but the smallest traces of my entire race, bound body, heart, mind, and soul to a young woman whose comatose body lies dormant so far beneath the surface of the earth that a graveyard is a distinct improvement, frightened of touch and absolutely terrified of anything more physically intimate. Even Ean’s kiss, as chaste as I would give a friend’s grandmother, has my nerves singing and my stomach cramping.
That anxiety only grows exponentially as he dons his own night shirt and, perhaps sensing my disquiet, a pair of loose, well-worn linen trousers that do nothing to hide his erection and give only a suggestion of a barrier between us. *I've been fucking him daily for more than a month, it'll fit.* I manage to remove my cloak, coat, and the bandolier beneath my tabard, putting aside most of my knives and needles, and unlace my boots before agitation has me fumbling with the cords instead of loosening them entirely.

“I can use the cot.” He murmurs softly, turning to do just that.

“No.” I won’t put him out of his bed, not when I have one so close. Not when he is unaware of that fact, and is being so kind. He deserves that I at least try. I deserve to try.

“Sheik?” He asks, his voice as steady and soothing as ever. It has been too long since my denial. I breathe deeply to stimulate my middle, the heart, the center, the source of Courage.

“Just…give me a moment. I’ll be…just a moment.”

“Alright.” He is clearly skeptical, but takes me at my word. I can see the exhaustion in his every movement, the weakness that comes from giving too much of himself without immediate return to bolster his resources. I probably look worse. He folds the cover back and over, placing the one that had been for the cot on the edge away from the wall and crawling to the far side.

We have been training with him in the fields, in the physical skills required for what used to be his secondary job, but now takes up all of his time. Assassination. He could not have chosen a less defensible or more vulnerable pose, and he knows that I know that, and would have done so deliberately. I still have three needles and a knife on me.

They join the bandolier alongside my boots, belt, and wallet. The hempen tunic and thick woven pants are loose enough to sleep in without incident, though I extinguish the lantern before removing my mask from about my neck. I must fight with myself each step of the way, from standing next to the bed, sitting on it, lying down, drawing up the coverings, uncurling from the knot of apprehension I’ve wound myself into, closing my eyes, slowing my breathing. It has been a long day, and a much longer night.

He is asleep by the time I’ve relaxed enough to check, which calms me further still. Not enough to sleep. I give up at noon, sliding from the bed as gently as I can so I do not disturb him, tucking the blanket he holds around him, and fully garbing myself in the main room. The Nocture allows me to bypass every living soul in Kakariko, the sounds of salvage and demolition loud even in the graveyard to my non-Hylian senses, and slip through the Shadow Temple as silently as the ghosts.

The two Poes guarding Zelda’s chamber cast enough of their eerie light to show me the way to my own cell, and the guest I have in my bed purrs welcome. Niakara’s warmth against my side sends me to a dreamless sleep in heartbeats, and remains there until my nightmares tear me from rest with a mostly strangled scream. Sitting up so quickly has displaced her, and I can see faint traces of her movement towards the stairs. The Poes guarding Zelda do not leave their station, but their light tracks her movement until she is identified as acceptable. Knowing I will not be able to sleep again soon, though I cannot recall what sent me bolting upwards, I summon a simple orb of my own to see by and slide into my sandals to follow.

Kaki-shiik’s bid for my attention halfway down the rise of stairs lower than the platform my cell is on keeps me from my pursuit.

“Tor Aein-shiik, there’s something I think you should see.” He calls upward, and I
descend the seven paces to draw even with his eyes. Despite having died over thirteen cycles ago, his ghost is coherent, composed, and usually the very model of calm. He looks frightened, as much as someone without a body can appear so. He is also of the last generation of Shaekha’ri to actually live in Hyrule, not simply exist as a cautionary horror story for children to get them to behave.

“What do you require of me?” I ask, lowering my gaze in deference to his senior status.

“There’s something wrong in the training grounds, on the lowest level.” He twirls in place, his tension palpable. Mine doubles, and at this rate I’ll have ulcers by the time I’ve seen twenty-two cycles.

There are six places where the Temple meets the dormitory, at the training grounds is one of the most direct access points at the very lowest levels of both. There is simply a wooden door connecting the two, and I cannot get anywhere near it. Though Kaki can float through the noxious cloud without ill effect, my eyes water and I start sneezing long before I can see the difference in air quality. It makes me choke and cough to stand in it, and the number of paces from the foot of the stairs to the door is more than I can make without having to draw breath. Not as deadly as the gasses that flooded Derinkuyu, but deadly enough.

As I watch, the green hued mist moves half a step upwards, and that is enough. I hadn’t been asleep long enough that it will be far into the night, and the Nocturne takes me upward as fast as I could wish. Zelda is deeply dreaming, and I daren’t disturb her, but Sahar is just bedding down when I knock on her door.

“Sheik, you should be sleeping at…” She begins, and I shake my head.

“The Temple is in danger, poison seeps from the lowest level upward.” I tell her, and while we rarely see eye to eye on any number of issues, the safety of the people we have charge of is something that drives us both, and she knows it. Disagreements do not mean distrust, though she does insist on taking two other living inhabitants and an adult wallmaster for each to see for herself. While they gather, I dress properly, donning armor and mask once again, hiding myself from the rest of the world. More light, from proper lanterns, turns the viscous gas a churning turquoise interspersed with streaks of olive and ripples of brilliant lime where it crests. It has reached the first landing of the stairs, leaving only five more interchanges before it will reach the inhabited areas, three before Zelda will be endangered.

This far into the winter, there are only three sanctuaries that are both larger enough and stocked enough for me to transfer her to, and the best of them is near Elydis Keep. My ulcers may appear by morning.

It does not matter, as long as she is safe.

Where the members of the Temple are to go, with so much of the town above damaged in the spirit of the well’s escape, I haven’t the ability to imagine. It could be exhaustion, or stress, or any number of factors that keep me from truly thinking, but I can act.

The wallmasters obligingly take the less agile members of our little group to the entrance of the Temple, where Sahar begins directing all denizens, both the living and dead that cannot abide on their own, for a thorough evacuation. The mistakes of Derinkuyu will not be made again. I take the time to reward the wallmasters with a bucket of putrefying fish and return to find the Temple devotees up and moving quickly and more effectively than I had anticipated. Sahar has her charges well in hand.

“Konyr, wake Impa and bring at least four more soldiers as quickly as possible.” She
orders the guard on Temple duty, who takes off at a run. “Charin, get Misha and as much of the special herbs to Germana’s as quickly as possible. Kelsie, here’s the key to the chest in my chamber. Take everything in it and as much as you can carry of your own belongings. Sheik, retrieve your burden and go. I don’t care where, I don’t care how, just go. Dawn! Make sure to…” As she continues to organize the abrupt chaos, I obey.

The two Poes haven’t abandoned their posts, but are swaying and dipping in place by the time I reach Zelda’s cell. The faintly cerulean light emanating from the embedded timeshift stone fragments about the restoration chamber’s basin casts her visage in unnatural pallor. She...has not made as much progress as it appeared. Her body is cold, still, and barely breathing. Not sleeping, but clinging to life by the barest of threads. One thread. My instruction and interference has simply made her able to take possession of what should be her form easily and effectively. It is not a true connection, nor is it a long term solution. Her mind is quiet when I call for her, and I cannot say where she has gone. No matter. She will return, the strings tangling our lives are too tight for any other possibility. She will need her body, though, for when the Hero returns.

She is so very light in my arms that holding on to her body, Niakara on her goods chest and both cat and carton on my back-sack is an equal burden both to my muscles and my magic. With said magic gathered in my palm I dismiss the guards to aid in the evacuation, and do not stay to watch them go. They will attend to Sahar, and follow her instruction in lieu of their previous orders being obsolete. They cannot guard the Queen, for they cannot follow me. There is no song for them even had they breath to sing, and there are only twelve matched sunstones and as many moonstones that aid me in calling forth Farore’s Joy, attuned to Zelda and I alone.

Having gutted and refurbished the entirety of the sanctuary, I know exactly where the brackets for the stone meet the ceramic plates that in turn support the wooden planks making up the floor. There is no light, but I do not need it. There is no fire, but I can call one. There is no bedding on the cords, but my cloak and the cloth from her bier are enough to support her tiny frame. I wrap the edges about her to keep her already cool body from getting colder, and shuffle my way to the fire pit.

A blast of icy air waits when I remove the guard, but the set coals remain and I have enough magic left for three attempts at lighting them. It only takes two for the flame to catch, and I sit back and watch the warmth as it grows and spreads slowly to fill the single chambered room. The earth above insulates far better than the wood and plaster of Kakariko, or the wood and brick of Sahila, and the subterranean channels spread the heat better than the best of stoves or furnaces. I replace the guard with the cooking rack and set what will eventually become breakfast atop it, and lie next to my queen in an attempt to keep her from becoming overly chilled.

The next thing I know, I am waking stiff and sore to the rough tug of Niakara’s tongue on my forehead. There is a fair amount of grit built up to scrub free from my eyes, and the temperature doesn’t make rising a pleasure. With no one around to hear, I would groan my dissatisfaction with my current state of affairs, but years of training have repressed all but the impulse itself. Instead, I lever myself upward to my knees and check on Zelda’s body.

The warmth seems to have done her some good, though it is enough to make me sweat lightly, and her breathing is deep and regular. The faint movement of her eyes behind her lids tells me that she is deeply dreaming, though not of what it is she dreams. Satisfied that she will live for the next mark, I rise fully and check on the thick rice gruel that will be breakfast in another half a mark, and test the water pump. As expected, it is dry, and I brave the chill of the outdoors long enough to scoop a bucket full of snow. It is not as late as I thought, mid-morning at best, and I stretch while I wait for the snow to melt.
Adding more coal to the pit, I prime the pump and am pleased when clear water pours forth within the first ten pumps. The thicker, dirty water will settle out and be suitable for sprouting beans, and so I let it sit and use a bucket of the clear to wash myself. I forego my hair for the time being, unsure of how my day will play itself out, and toss a handful of dried offal onto a shallow plate for Niakara. She will need water because of it, and once the tidbits are gone I pour enough of the cool liquid into the same plate for it to brush the rim but not overflow.

Then, it is time to move my Queen. The motions come easily, the same responses occur throughout as yesterday, and by the time I have finished washing her face and throat breakfast is ready and she is awake.

She cannot control her form enough to speak, is too weak to sit up herself, and cannot close her hand about the spoon.

.:Aein-ah, I’m sorry:.  

.:Whatever for?!:. I cannot hide my shock, not from her, not with our bond as intimate as it is.

.:I thought I had found a way to restore myself, that I was as secure in my self as I am in you. I was wrong, overconfident, and it has caused you to worry:. Though she is too frail physically to manage the task on her own, I know her desire, and draw her hand from her bedding to rest it against my freshly shaved cheek. There is a faint change of pressure, but that is all she can manage. It is enough.

.:Hanyana, where were you?:. I ask, the very worry she is apologizing for still present and nagging.

.:In dreams:. She tells me, and I can feel the soft warmth of her regard cushioning a hard refusal to tell me more. I haven’t the will to press, and bow to her wordless entreaty. She can keep her secrets, they are all she has left to call her own. I see the weak connection of her spirit to her form, watch as she tries to regain the flailing ends, and despair of her success.

.:Is there no hope for my sins to be absolved?: The question is rhetorical, the answer something I know, and I must bow my head to the will of the Goddesses. The boundary of life and death is not something mortals may freely cross. I only wish the repercussions of my flagrant breaking of Nayru’s Laws, Mokara’s Boundaries, and my own vows belonged solely to me, and not the victim of my crimes.

.:There is always hope:. Her smile, brilliant as the sun in her apex, bursts forth. :.The Hero is coming, and He will cleave the evil Ganondorf has wrought from the world:.  

.:I should attend to him:. I should. I don’t want to leave her. 

.:You will, and he will be stronger because of your care. As I am:.  

.:I can barely keep your body alive, let alone restore the threads that connect you to it:. I scoff. :.It took the energy of a life in their severing, and….:.

That’s it. It took the energy of a young, vibrant life to warp the end points into the misshapen pieces they are…and so it will take the energy of a young, vibrant life to restore them. All the knowledge, all the perseverance in the world will not matter if there is not the power to complete the task. The life energy of one as like to her as her twin, as close to her as her own self, given over in one single moment, for a single purpose.
She knows.

She’s always known…and now I know, too.

: I’m sorry.: I whisper into her mind.

: Aein-ah.: She protests.

: There are things I must yet accomplish.: I know this, I know it, but it is so long, still.

: Nayru has plans for you yet.: She agrees, her breath hitching, form shuddering in my arms. I cannot tell if she is laughing or crying. I’m not sure it matters. I can fix this. I can.

Link will awaken in two cycles and two turns, and then must cleanse the Temples and awaken the Sages before taking Power from Ganondorf’s hand. Just over three more cycles of the seasons at most until she will be as needed as he. She dreams it, I trust those dreams. She must in turn trust that I will fulfill my debts as well when the time comes.

Just…not yet.

Not yet.

May the Goddesses have mercy on us all.
The Vaticinated Augur

Chapter Summary

Our choices are the mortar, our actions the stone.

Chapter Notes

The end draws nigh...
Warnings for this chapter include: magic, metaphysics, thaumaturgy, long term illness, minor character death, pain, injury, minor blood, racism, heterosexual sex, oral sex, disassociation.

Sitting back on my haunches with a sigh, I do one final check on the runes and spell-work embedded in the once tertiary, now primary, entrance to the Temple. The curvature of the lines in the northern quadrant are of a weight with the rest now, and the scent of dust, ash, and earth fills my nose from where the three have intermingled with the fabric of my trousers to the point that washing them will result in mud. Already there is a musty quality to the air, an anticipatory stillness that drives me to distraction like an unreachable itch, and I force my hands to still. I have been casting this particular series of runes and glyphs since mid-morning, and they flare with the dull pain of an old burn that I doubt will ever truly leave me be.

Sahar glares at me, as though by leaning back to assure myself of the turn’s labor I am shirking my duties in some way. It is not my hand that has flooded the lowest level with poisonous gasses, nor is it my fault the Temple itself has been so drastically altered. I admit to some of the resultant design, but that is simply to ensure that Link can make his way through to face the Beast in the basement and cleanse the evil that has corrupted it without allowing the citizens of Kakariko access. The illusion and misdirection of the Shadow Temple’s natural state would endanger him otherwise, and for one not blessed by the Three…if they enter the Temple in its corrupted state they will die, and horribly at that. Even I do not feel safe here in the entryway, and the seal is strong and secure. So many cascading wards and blocks, bound to one particular action, set to such a simple key…and it is all I can do to trust in Impa and Sahar’s knowledge that it will work as intended.

Twenty-four torches made of the same bone that paints the triggers for the spell are spaced evenly about the floor, reinforcing the painstaking binding on the door. Heavier than even a Goron warrior could hope to raise on his own, the Weeping Eye of the remains of the Shaekha’ri people gazes down in judgement of any who would trespass in our sacred halls. The gears and levers required to move it are concealed within the slanting brick pillars on either side, as the sacrilegious depravity Jo Bongo suffered has been hidden from the history of Hyrule. The unadorned cavern walls have been cleared and smoothed, but no other effort has been made to beautify or enhance them. Bone ceramic fills the meticulously carved grooves in the stone beneath the softer dirt of the cavern floor, the ossuary of the Temple’s servants depleted for that purpose. There isn’t even a statue of Mokara present, and that seems to condemn this place as lost more than any other sign of industry or lack thereof.
As unsettling as I find the chamber though, what lies beyond the doorway is truly frightening. The Shadow Temple is overrun with a darkness that feeds on the very pain and loss the Temple was intended to purify. Rather than allowing those left behind to grieve, to comfort the living and encourage the dead to their rest in the Silent Realm, everything within does its best to cause more of the same. Pain. Suffering. Madness. It calls to me, begging me to help, and I know that were I to answer the siren song of the spirits within it would only be a matter of time before I became one of them. Through me, Zelda would be lost. It keeps me from acting on the impulsive need to ease the bone deep agony I can feel emanating through the stone itself.

I wonder how the young man trapped Between will fare, exposed to the desolation within. I pray for him to not encounter the wretched gloom inside without having some success with the other Temples first. To gain entry, he will need to have the courage of Farore, the wisdom of Nayru, kneel before Mokara, and summon Din’s flame. To persevere he will need to believe in himself and hold a glimmer of hope through the bleak, crushing grief that steals your breath as effectively as any poison. To succeed, he must needs become the light to banish that darkness, and make the shadows dance.

::There is a certain elegance to it, yes?:. Zelda murmurs, bemused at my thoughts of her counterpart.

::I tried to keep it simple for him, straightforward and honest in its challenges.:. I frown at the first challenge he will meet on gaining entry, and hope that he has Dampe’s hookshot for it. I don’t think Hylians can jump that far, but it was necessary. ::And the dead do still need to be able to pass in peace::.

::Those that linger in these desecrated halls seek not the peace of the Silent Realm::. She reminds me, deepening my scowl.

::They are my responsibility though. The innocent dead must have access to the river, and if they travel further into the Temple they will be corrupted as well. As suurin, as shiik, as Shaekha’ri, this place has become an abomination::.

::As it is, the dead pass freely, the living are preserved, the corruption is restrained, and the Temple itself still stands. You’ve even managed to seal most of it up, you and Sahar and the other priests. There is no shame in that, only regret, and attachment to the past::.

::Let go of regret, take hold of hope?:. I snort, misquoting the Book of Nayru at her in an attempt to drop the subject. I have been still too long, and Sahar is already suffering the loss of everything and everyone she has worked her life for.

“Holding down the floor, Sheik?” She snaps. I should be more compassionate and understanding towards someone who has suffered so much, so recently. “You could become one with it.” She suggests. It’s not an order, I do not have to obey. I should let it go. Really. I grit my teeth, biting back a retort that will do no one any good aside from momentarily satisfying the petty part of my soul. Enough servants of the Temple have given their physical remains already, she is just venting her upsets. I need to hold my calm close.

“Merely reviewing the runes, Sahar-yana, before closing the seal.” I manage to keep my voice cool and collected, which after more than three turns of working in close proximity to the former Priress of the Shadow Temple is something I view as a genuine accomplishment. The stories being told about me have become ones of sudden and unexpected death in the dark of the night, and if I can maintain utter indifference whenever I am in public, those stories will gain credence. Ean’s work has helped with that, though I am worried. He hasn’t been seen in four days.
“Close it then.” She demands, and I turn my focus once more to the last of the lettering spilling across the floor. No one will disturb it until the Hero comes to cleanse the Temple, but I still prefer to be certain. The weight of sacrifice is heavy in my hands as I score the final whorl into the stone, tap the bone dust into the depression, and seal it with heat, creating what is essentially a porcelain tile in the form of the magic of my people. It will hold until the Shadow Temple is either completely cleansed or utterly destroyed.

.:Well done.: Zelda commends, and I bask in the praise. She is the only one to say such things to me, though Navi and Link still listen to my stories with rapt attention, and Fi seems to approve through lack of protestation or clarification of the histories I tell them. No matter. I do not do this for adulations or commendations. I do this for Link, that his passage may be easier. For Zelda, that she may one day take her rightful throne. For myself, seeking exoneration. For the Sages, that they may reclaim their lives. For the people of Hyrule, that they may know peace. For the dead, that they find their rest. For Sahar, that she may find her pride and let go of her anger.

She has left a shielded lantern burning for me to find my way up the stairs to the warp platform. It is now the only means of gaining access to the Temple, which means that someone must teach Link the Nocturne before he will be able to set foot here. The lack of light from the top of the stairway tells me I have been here all day, and haven’t eaten the entire time. That thought is enough to set my stomach rumbling, and though there was a lantern left, the ladder to access the platform has been turned into kindling for a small fire that the Poes of the Temple have gathered around. I’ll have to thank Sahar for her kindness.

Frustrated, hungry, and tired are no way to spend an evening with someone, and jumping may cause me to sprain an ankle or worse. Thinking of it makes it seem more acute, and if I were as inclined to sounding my displeasure as I was before entering this Goddess forsaken land I would growl. Tension ricochets through my jaw and sends the beginning sparks of a headache through the muscle there. It is a waste of energy, and I will the anger out with a soft exhalation. There is nothing I can do about most of my emotional turmoil but continue on despite it. Relieving some of that tension in activity is possible, but inappropriate. I sigh. Ean’s most recent vanishing act will wait until the morning, and I should be getting the next sanctuary I will take Zelda to ready for her presence.

Farore’s Wind brings me back to the small hut in Jabu-Jabu’s domain where she is engaged in cleaning lentils. The small legumes have a number of tiny twigs and hulls mixed in, and sorting through them is a good task for her fine motor control. If some of the lentils end up on the floor, they are no worse off than when she started, and for each bit of detritus she removes, it is one I do not have to.

The chore is as tiring for her as my day’s work, and the beef and preserved tomato stew I set to simmering this morning is tender enough that it falls apart at the touch. She is eating better, managing solid and fibrous foods in small quantities, with the expected results. There are multiple layers of filtering sands for such things, as I do not wish to offend the patron deity of the Zora in His own territory. When she is done, I help clean her up, and then put us both to bed. True night has fallen by the time she drifts off beside me, and I am not long in joining her. If we dream, they do not wake me or draw her from her form, for when I rouse she is warm and breathing deeply. There is a faint blush to her skin, and so I do not push for information, but rather rise and set about making something to break our fasts.

As I stand I find Niakara has brought a small pickerel to the table, probably to feed the inept hunters of her clutter, and I offer her praises and the innards and head in thanks, with a promise of a thorough petting later. Fresh fish does not need much to make it palatable, which is good as there is not much left in the tiny hut. Dried ginger root and young onion from the small and scattered
herb patch, enough of the clear, fresh water so abundant in this place to cover the lot, and I leave the whole to simmer for a quarter mark. The scent of it wakes my Queen, and she manages nearly two thirds of the flesh before she has to stop. We learned her limits early on, and she has grown adept at judging when she is full, overfull, and nauseous.

If I can keep her at overfull, I will be satisfied, for she is still dangerously thin. I finish the remains of the fish, chewing through what bones I can, and leave Niakara the rest to do what she will. The cleaned lentils go to soak, and as Zelda begins sorting again while she has energy I decide I could use the same. I smell of the dust and ash that obscure the Shadow Temple’s entrance, and my activity yesterday has some of it obviously caked on my skin. A dunk in the night-cool waters of Jabu-Jabu’s domain wakes me fully and cleanses my form, refreshing my mind for the day’s tasks.

Impa has stocked three of the sanctuaries full of goods that will hold through the summer months, and with the fruits of field and herd I should be capable of feeding us both with a little bit of labor. I let a handful of grasses in the wind determine which location I will move us to, and then go about gathering staples from the stock and fresh from the sparsely settled fields of the south east. A stupid young rabbit falls for one of my snares, and I dismantle the rest after a prayer of thanks and quick field dressing. The skin is soft and would serve admirably to line a hood or muff in the autumn, but I haven’t the means to tan or preserve it, and so shred it and let the insects and rodents take care of the remains. Leaving them to their task, I return to my foraging, and am pleased with the patch I nearly stumbled on in setting the snare in the first place.

Grateful for the spelled bag I slide the meat into, I am doubly grateful for the cotton bandages that I have a large stock of. Wrapped around my fingers, they protect me from the sting of nettles as I clip the leaves from the tops of non-flowering plants, making sure they are no wider across than my thumb. It is slow going, but the vital spirits they hold are crucial after a long winter, and I am not the only one who scavenges for them. Where so many fields have been left to grow wild, there are plenty of the hearty growths, and by high noon I have three herb pouches filled to the brim.

Despite my precautions, the skin on my fingertips is pink and itches, and I take the time to backtrack far enough that the small patch of broad leafed Farore’s Salve loses some of the larger leaves which, once chewed to a paste, provide relief for my itching skin. It is definitely not enough to keep me from calling on the spelled moonstones and crossing the country in the space of three slow breaths. Concealing the color of my irises with a simple illusion lets me wander into Orville Keep within a mark of travel, my guise of a recluse reinforced by ragged clothing and inexpertly tended hair.

“Nah, Taburi! What’ve you brought this time?” The Geru’do guard greets me, recognizing my swaying gait and, as she gets closer, my scent. I see her nostrils flare. “Rabbit and… nettles?”

“Aye, an’ I’ll be needin’ t’ trade, no rupees.” I grumble in the accent of the wanderers of the immediately surrounding settlements. I still haven’t mastered it according to Hylian ears, but I cannot detect a difference and the Geru’do that use this place as their own have yet to question me beyond my purpose here. There are enough refugees and displaced families that a lone wanderer is only frowned on, not turned away. Any answers I have given have been taken at face value, and I will do my best to maintain that cautious balance.

“Gefuro will set you right then.” She nods, gesturing to the clerk’s stall. While I have many, many misgivings about the Geru’do presence here, their organization and treatment of the remaining locals is not one of them.
Like most of the Hylian settlements I have been to, the roads are straight, the buildings are stone, and everything is built with an eye towards defensibility before beauty or harmony with the surroundings. For the unrest of generations and the scars of recent civil war dotting the landscape, it is understandable. As this place has been claimed by the dessert dwelling people however, banners and swags, curtains and cushions cover the harsh stone and steel, and bright colors designed to stand out make a dizzying display.

Gefuro is one of the few Geru’do who wears her hair down, though it is still held back from her face by a single tie, and her age is reflected in her garb. Loose trousers gathered at the waist and ankle, multiple skirts, a short frock, and an apron in contrasting dyes and textures all serve to conceal her form, but the wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and mouth tell me her age as clearly as though she had it written on her forehead.

“Bright the sun, Taburi!” She calls as I step beneath her draping curtains.

“Bright the sun, Gefuro. I’ve a mess o’ nettles.” I return, putting the two heavier of my scavenging bags on the table for her to examine. I watch as she inhales deeply, careful not to touch, and tastes the air she draws like a snake.

“Fresh cuts of younger plants, nearly no stems. This is a good batch.” She nods to herself, nostrils flaring. “What are you after, for the lot?”

“Equal weight o’ either leever fronds or cassava powder. Quarter weight o’ saffron or cinnamon would work too.” I ask, knowing she won’t take the trade immediately, since the offer is twice what the exchange would be if we were bargaining for rupees. She frowns, leaning back and making me hope I haven’t offended her.

“Your deal stinks, outlander. Not as bad as a week old corpse, but bad enough. Quarter powder for the first bag, tenth weight in spice, equal measure.” Counter-offer set, the haggling begins. I use the time to watch the soldiers’ precise patrols, their movements and patterns, even as Zelda listens to the intonation of voice, cadence, and pitch from the camp stores officer. My request for trade over coin serves its purpose as well, making me appear more desperate for varied foodstuffs, particularly staples, than I actually am. My jittery motion only further obscures my secondary purpose, after keeping Zelda safe, as directed by the General.

Find out how the prisoners are being moved, and, if possible, their destination. They cannot be killing them all, and I have a sickening sense that they are being sent to the same place my people’s sundered kin were banished. Zelda’s dreams only bolster my own unease, though I have worked too long on this particular persona to lose it for anything less that surety. Her dreams do other things to me, too.

“Three quarter powder, eighth in equal measure of spice.” Gefuro offers, giving me a slightly favorable advantage in the cassava powder and a standard rate with the spices. The warriors she is in charge of must be worse off in the way of greens than I anticipated, which also tells me much. I pounce on the deal, shaking hands and downing the last of the harshly bitter tea in one hard swallow, closing the agreement and making my eagerness to have the starch seemingly apparent. Zelda’s knowledge of inter-cultural exchanges has been quite useful, and I am thankful for both it and the fact that I personally did not have to sit through the lessons. Her words fall from my mouth in Simoni’s accent while I watch the regiment of halberd wielding women drill between the gentle billowing of draped fabric.

Cassava powder and spice in hand, I thank both Gefuro and the changed guard for their generosity, mouthing deference to the Great Lord Ganondorf and not letting my gorge rise beyond my stomach as I do, and walk on the worn paths towards the fields lying fallow. The warriors do not
farm, and the women so inclined do not leave the desert stronghold. The complete denial of logic baffles me, until Zelda whispers of the Dark King’s motivation. He does not claim land to expand his territory, to gain fertile fields and abundant food and water, or even to protect his people’s birthright.

Conquest of land, massacre of resistance, control through terror...he does it for Power, and it will never be enough until he has consumed everything the Three created and beyond. That is why his women do not farm or gather, they are too busy fighting. That is why he is so selective in his public executions, his pillaging, and his assent in allowing survivors to find refuge. Fear gives him Power. I know this, know how effective it is, and still participate in Impa’s bid to create the same in the specter of Sheik. I still participate in fearing him, though the Dark One is not the most direct and personal fear I have, the presence of his malevolence is the most prominent.

That menace is what has me leaving the paths, walking for a full mark, every sense on alert to avoid his followers and supporters, before I touch the moonstone that will take me to the sanctuary where my Queen waits, sorting lentils. I change the water in yesterday’s batch, and take all of the foodstuffs to the sanctuary in the north-western quadrant. Shifting the rock that conceals the entrance to let in both fresh air and light, I make another trip for clothing, and a third for bedding. Lighting the fire is quick and barely makes an indent in the remaining stores of my magic. If nothing else, near constant use for the last five years has left my capacity beyond my parent’s most hopeful imaginings. Sharu would be pleased, Yoru proud.

Zelda is satisfied, but then, she has never doubted me. Her divinely inspired confidence in me is both flattering and terrifying, for to be directly touched by the Goddesses is both a blessing and a curse. I wanted neither, though what I want now is a mystery to even myself. I do not regret my service to her, not any of it, though I do have regrets.

The cow that shares the shelter here shares her milk with a firm but gentle hand and my humming distractions, and by the time I am shaping the small balls of cassava bread for baking Zelda joins me in a flare of light and grace. Her lentils sorted, she hands me the cleaned portion in a glass bottle and goes to lie down. The journey has taken all her energy, and none of the food is ready to replace it, though the rabbit stew is close.

It will be better for a longer cooking time, but it will not endanger her to eat it within the mark. The soft snores that echo tell me that I needn’t hurry, and I set the tiny bites of dough close to the small fire and cover them with a large shell from the shores of Lake Hylia. I don’t know what creature made it, but it serves to turn any heat source into a simple oven, and is incredibly useful. Dough sorted, I wash briefly and change into the clothing of the Sheik, leaving the previous outfit to soak out sweat and dirt stains while I am gone. By the time the last of the dough is baked off and cooling, Zelda has drifted into deeper dreams where I cannot follow. Hopefully they will contain some good news.

It will be a mark at least before she awakens, and so I set the fire to let the stew simmer, take up a coil of rope that I used as a ladder before the wooden one was installed, and draw my whistle to let the notes of the Nocturne ring through the cavern turned into a home. Securing the end of the rope to the fence takes only a moment, and then I am scurrying down to jog through the graveyard towards the village. Flat waves a greeting but otherwise ignores my presence, Sharp nowhere to be seen. A family visits their ancestral plot, the mother surreptitiously placing herself between the children and me, the father whispering harsh tones to the son.

Conflicting emotions surge through me; pleasure that Impa’s plan is working so well, sorrow at the snub, understanding and acceptance of the consequences of my actions, satisfaction at a job well done. Anju has two cucco eggs set aside for me in their usual place despite the birds
themselves having escaped their pen yet again. I leave her rupees in exchange and carefully tuck them into my cowl and head back towards the graveyard when shouting catches my attention. There is a large crowd gathered before the guardian tree at the entrance to the town, and four men stand on the makeshift platform next to one of the Geru’do company Captains.

“For the Crime of Treason against the Crown you have been found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. May Din carry you to the Silent Realm.” She announces, and the bench beneath the man’s feet is kicked out of the way. The noose is expertly tied, his neck broken and his spirit fled in the space of two heartbeats. The next follows quickly, Treasonous Magic the charge, and I make certain that his death is as swift as the first despite a less aptly tied cord. The third is Ean.

“For the Crimes of Treason and Murder, you have been found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. May Din carry you to the Silent Realm.” The words are callous, cold, and calculated. She has done this too many times for it to upset her at all. I…can’t watch. There are too many people for me to reach him before he drops, too many Geru’do to take on even if I had the martial talent. I can’t just…watch this happen.

My needles find their way to my hand and are released before I realize I’ve made the decision to act. The first catches the edge of the rope, the second sails by to hit the tree itself, and the third unravels the cord enough that it snaps instead of Ean’s neck as he falls. The forth, unfortunately, hits the Captain in the eye. She drops like a stone, dead faster than the first man. Her lieutenant does not hesitate, her scimitar a flash of light that separates Ean’s head from his shoulders even as she shouts and her women scramble.

The gathered crowd hinders them, though their weapons make short work of anyone who is not fast enough to get out of the way. Stunned, I hesitate a moment too long, and am forced to dodge arrows that sink deep into the wood and brick of the house I stand behind. When the crackle and glint of ice fills my vision I know I have to move, and fast.

Breaking cover is a necessity, as the spelled arrows quickly consume the entire radius of where I stood not a heartbeat before. Over the edge and up the stairs, I make it past the base of Impa’s house and around the corner of Anju’s inexplicably ineffective cucco coup before one of the arrows finds its mark, grazing my ribs on my left side. It burns, adding to the sear of my lungs desperate search for air as I keep going. I need at least three slow heartbeats for either a Song or Farore’s Wind. Burning turns to freezing at the entrance to the graveyard, but I can hear the Composer Brothers singing and the moans of the restless dead.

The flare of the protective magic from the dead and what the Temple can spare is the only thing that saves me, an ice arrow embedding itself in the brittle ward and hovering in the air less than a finger’s width from my ear. The sight freezes me in place as surely as if it had hit, but the spread of ice blocks the gate and Dampe’s spectral presence tugging at my shoulders gets me moving again. The ice will not hold them long, and the magic is already strained as far as it will go, threads of instability flaring and sparking into what must be visible to even the Humans.

I have never climbed the rope ladder faster, and it has never seemed longer. Dragging it up behind me with my heart in my throat means that the Geru’do have breached the barrier and are flooding into the graveyard, but they cannot reach me and even though I have no breath for a Song I can sketch the sigil for Farore’s Wind with my free hand and let the magic take me. Another arrow catches me in the upper arm, piercing straight through, but I have completed my casting and am gone before the spell it bears can be triggered.

It still means that I have an arrow in my arm when I arrive in the sanctuary, but I am not frozen solid. If I were, I wouldn’t be bleeding as heavily. Blood loss combined with shock and pain
has me lightheaded enough that I stagger, stumbling to the doorway and struggling with the latch one
handed to spare the pierced muscle. The shot is clean, for all that it hurts, fresh crimson welling and
dripping with each step I take. Fortunately, there is not so much that the flow has tapered off by the
time I am seen.

Murie, with years of experience lifting boxes and bags, sacks and cases of everything from
fabric and apples to beer and clay, has no discernible difficulty with my weight. Alisaie’s ink stained
hands are sure and steady, and Sosha doesn’t flinch as her mother cuts away the cloth surrounding
the shaft, though she is pale and trembles when her father snaps the head off and a fresh runnel of
blood soaks the towel beneath the wound. I am pale and trembling as well, so I cannot really fault
her.

The world turns white when Alisaie grips the fletching, then black when she pulls, Murie
holding me as still as he can with strong, warm hands. Grey spots dance as the harsh burn of a high
grade alcohol is used to clean the area and making my nose ache with the harsh scent. Color returns
with flowing red being covered in cushioning cotton, and their youngest watches as hands and
needle are cleansed of my blood.

“Sami, bring mama the tea, would you?” Alisaie asks, and he hesitates before obeying, his
eyes wide and frightened. She takes the mug from him and pulls my cowl down to hold it to my
lips. I stretch to catch the two eggs that fall because of it, and feel the stitches pull but not tear. It still
makes me gasp in pain, and Sami yelps and hides behind his mother’s back. The eggs are safe
though, so Zelda and I will have something to break our fasts in the morning. I place them on the
table I am sitting near, and take the tea mug with a whisper of thanks, careful not to further strain the
stitching I can feel shift beneath the bandages.

“Thank you for using the door, this time.” Alisaie jokes, attempting to alleviate the
intensity of Sami’s gaze.

“You’re welcome.” I smile, and he clutches at her blouse.

“Are you going to make us ghosts now?” He asks with the candor only children seem to
possess, and I choke on the lukewarm tea heavily laden with chamomile.

“Sami!” Alisaie scolds, but it is Murie who pulls his son aside to gently explain that the
stories the King’s Guardswomen tell don’t mean everyone, and that I am a good person.

“Remember when the rats stole mama’s biscuit from the ledge, and Seran said you ate it?”
Murie asks the boy, who can’t be more than six cycles old, and waits for him to compare that
personal episode to what he’s been saying about dirty soul-stealing Sheikah.

No one is more surprised than I when he stands up and rushes over to give me a hug,
careful not to touch my injured arm.

“Sorry mister.” He apologizes, though I am not certain he knows exactly what he is
apologizing for. The sentiment however, is honest. He knows he did something wrong, and that I
suffered for it, and the stirrings of compassion move him to make reparations as best he can. That
touch still makes me uncomfortable, though I hide it better than anticipated, and Zelda chooses that
moment to wake from her prophetic dreaming. I tentatively return the embrace, wary of both his
reaction and that of his parents. I don’t want him to become a ghost…but everyone I get close to
dies. Everyone.

:Everyone who lives, dies, Aein-ah. It’s a consequence of being born:. Resusangeul bi
hundeou reminds me, her mental voice still overlaid by the presence of the Goddess who claimed
her.

:Everyone I care for dies sooner, and usually in a more violent or painful way than they otherwise would.: I return. :His entire family could be destroyed for aiding me, giving me shelter.: If word of my presence reaches any agent of Ganondorf’s, they are in danger.

:So why did you go to them, instead of coming here?: She asks, more herself with each word.

:I cannot endanger you. Hanyana, you must live to see the Hero succeed.: I know this, the same way I know I will not. Not if she is to join with him in defeating mandrag Ganondorf, secure in her own form and self.

Less than three cycles left. My candle is burning low, and we both know it.

“Will you be staying for dinner, Sheik?” Murie asks. He hides his unease poorly, though no one but I am paying attention. Sosha and Sami are too intent on my infamy laden presence, and Alisaie my answer. Their other child seems to be missing, though articles of clothing say he is near.

“I will not burden you with my presence, I am already in your debt.” I refuse to further endanger them. “Thank you for your aid.” I say, standing and replacing the eggs in my cowl before straightening it to sit properly once more. “May the Goddesses guide you.” I clasp Murie’s hand firmly, sliding two purple rupees into his palm in the process. The discretionary currency will serve them well, and I feel they deserve it. They did not have to help me, risked much to do so.

“And you. Go in peace.” Murie nods and pockets the jewels. Sosha holds the door for me, and I make sure to travel away from the safe house and the other Elydis holdings until I am as alone as I can be. Sunset touches the horizon as I touch the appropriate moonstone, and three slow breaths later Zelda is tutting over my injury despite being unable to leave her bed. Her visions must have been worse than normal, to weaken her so. I haven’t the courage to ask, and go about salvaging what I can of the rabbit stew. A thick layer of burnt char lies on the edges of the pot, but most of it is only mildly scorched and the middle is just overly thick. I sigh, and portion out what I can, giving the best of it to my Queen.

The cassava bread helps the flavor, and I set the nettles to soaking at the same time as the crud baked onto the pot. Zelda drops into restful dreams instead of the foresight that plagues her soon after eating, and I take the time to greet the stars. The dark of the new moon makes it easier to watch the landscape for the heat of living bodies, all of which travel on four feet instead of two. We should be safe for the night. Ducking back inside, I pull the lever that sets the large stone back over the entrance and bars entry to anyone but the most determined and descend the wooden ladder. My arm aches as I rinse the char crusted pot once, setting it to soak through overnight and send the cow back to Impa’s before curling up next to the cool form of Nayru’s avatar. I’ll need her help to change the bandaging in the morning, though I am grateful that it is my non-dominant hand.

Small mercies. They let me sleep the night through. Zelda is not so fortunate.

I wake to the hesitant touch of hand and mind, both trembling in an effort to not disturb and, at the same time, receive the comfort so desperately needed. A raised arm is all the invitation she needs to slide beneath the thin covers and crowd against my side like a chick under its mother’s wing, and I hold her as she shakes, too frightened to think, let alone speak. The traces of divine inspiration flee with the chill of her skin and the last of the stars, replaced with a very physical and very warm woman.

“Aein-ah…” My name on her lips becomes her breath on my tongue, and as the final
traces of fleeting dreams fade she rolls us both to straddle me. Yeah, like that. Mindful of my injury,
her hands descend to divest us both of cloth and covering. Much as Chia needed the grounding in
her form after we survived Ganondorf’s fracturing of the Triforce, Zelda requires every possible
effort to retain her hold on her form. She touches me, touches herself. Whispers words of affection
and pleasure. Tastes my lips and teeth and tongue, the sweat gathering on skin. A certain scent
precipitates the air, and I watch.

The brief flare of recalled fear and pain stabilizes into a moment of hesitation, and she
stops entirely. Stops reaching, moving, breathing. I watch as her spirit staggers and her body spasms
as she pulls away and retreats, my remembered terror eclipsing even her immediate desperation.

.:No.: I don’t know which one of us thinks it, but it breaks the frost on my limbs and I
reach for her in turn. She needs comfort in the most physical way possible, to banish the last hold of
seemingly inevitable foresight. Not to think, but to lose her connection to the flaring Triforce of
Wisdom, to drown it in sensation. I may not be able to perform myself, but I can still give her that
much.

Already the destabilization from my balking in the face of her need has splintered the
second chord beginning to hold her together, shattered the two fibers that were drawing closer
beyond immediate recovery. My hands spasm, then grip her shoulders as I pull myself upwards,
sitting beneath her and surprised to find that like this, she is of a height with me. It makes it easier
to kiss her, coax her mouth to move against mine once more, tell her that this is okay. That I want her.
Her eyes drift closed as the two parts of her align once more, and I find myself afraid to blink in case
I miss something and Hyrule loses her Queen in the moment I am not paying attention.

I would give anything for her, have promised as much, will finish that vow sooner than I
truly wish to contemplate. Thinking of it means I am not focused on the task at hand however, and I
return my concentration where it belongs. Banishing the whispered memories of monsters disguised
as men takes more effort, but I do it. For her. The skin of her cheek is soft beneath my hand, and if it
is a touch too pale for health, then that is something I will remedy later. Carding my fingers through
her hair, I tilt her head to the side in order to better access the moist heat of her mouth, stale and sour
from a restless night. I kiss her anyway, watching the flush of arousal spread to the extremities of her
skin.

With her mouth occupied, I can use my hands to tantalize. Her ears are my first stop as I
play with the shell and ridge, caressing and brushing will exceeding care the most vulnerable of her
sense organs. I use my breath to tease the sense itself, letting myself sound a script of love and
devotion where passion and desire fall short. The more tender emotion is repeated as I palm the
warm weight of her breasts, thumb pert nipples gone rosy and hard. Already, damp is spreading on
my thighs and the perfume of her excitement is thick enough to taste.

A single finger’s worth to my tongue sends her pulse racing, her breath turning to soft
pants. The loose fibers of the damaged threads in the twined chord that holds her spirit to her form
work their way together and I move on. Gently, slowly, with the care my wounded arm deserves, I
lower her to the straw-filled sack that serves as my mattress here and kneel at her side. I cannot
support my own weight on the damaged flesh and have the stitches hold, nor am I dexterous enough
to perform well with my off-hand.

With my dominant one, I am a masterful player. My entire palm caresses the mound of
her sex so lightly that the coarse curls barely move. Her inner thighs, slick and pale and trembling,
jump at an inadvertent touch. I use the fluid I find there to draw glyphs of warmth, comfort, and
enhancement on her skin. Both the law of sympathetic magic and the law of contagion work in my
favor, compounded by her desire to have what I am offering her, and her willing participation. The
effect of my minor casting is instantaneous and explosive, and I hold her as she shudders and spasms as soon as my fingers return to the delicate skin enfolding her center.

Too much, then. I hesitate as she struggles to regain her breath, watching the ebb and flare of her energies as they peak and then dissipate. Her climax is clearly not the goal she had in mind when instigating, though what it could actually be at this point I haven’t the slightest clue. For the first time in cycles, I don’t know what she wants, or her motivation. Her mind is closed to me. Unsure, still slightly panicked, uncomfortable and more than a little disconcerted, I shift back from her prone form and wait. She will tell me when she has the breath.

The gathering of muscle comes before an advance of motion, and I note the healthy tension in her smooth, clear skin even as I count the tendons as they shift and the bone that protrudes starkly where there should be just a soft indication. The glimmer of moisture is dispersed with a quick brushing of hands, and she sits up only to wrap thin arms around my neck.

“T’m sorry, Aein-ah. I wasn’t thinking. The dreams…” Her words hold a revenant of the anguish that drove her to wake and seek me out, and my hands rise to hold her as she choke on that emotion, releasing it with a storm of sobbing that I can only be present for in order to bear witness. Snagging the coarse wool blanket from the bed, I wrap it about her shoulders and use the corner to blot her tears when they seem to slow of their own accord. She grasps the fabric, twisting it harshly and smoothing it in turns, her self-soothing tying as many knots in my stomach as she creates creases in the warp and weft.

A second outburst is driven from her slender form when I lay us both back down, enfolding her in as much of my presence as I can, steadying her as the stream of weeping works its way from the base of her gut instead of the previous torrent. Having some experience with the outpouring of energy such a violent release can consume, I am not surprised when she drifts into a light doze at its conclusion, though I have no more inkling as to the cause as I did in the first. She has closed herself off from me entirely, and I don’t like it at all.

I also don’t like leaving her side, or the chill of the cavern this sanctuary is built in, or how low the supply of water is getting. Mornings in general are still not on my list of preferred times to be awake and moving. At least the cow is still at Impa’s which means I don’t need to milk it myself, though breakfast needs to be prepared and my stomach says as soon as possible.

The pot of nettle water has turned a warm brown verging on red and the last of the burned stew comes from the larger pot easily, meaning that I can fill them both with half the remaining water in the cistern and start the dried rice to cooking and set the nettles to soak again while they do. Most of the sting is already gone, but I’d rather be sure of it then accidentally feed Zelda something that will harm her in any way. She may not be able to see the discoloration of the second washing, but I can.

Less than half a mark later, I add in dried onion and dried shreds of cucco flesh along with more water, and once they have reconstituted, the cleaned nettles, one handful at a time. Once the soup is cooked enough to eat, I pull the pot to the edge of the coals and let it sit. Zelda sleeps, actually sleeping and not dreaming dreams of harbingers and doom filled prophecy, and I am loathe to wake her from it. Instead, I crack the two eggs I managed to keep safe yesterday into the broth, watching them come to rest on top of the greens, and let them sit.

I couldn’t save Ean.

He wasn’t even prominent enough in Hyrule’s fate to be a footnote in hanyana’s dreaming, never a lover, not even a love. A friend, yes, and I have few enough of those, but still… he was an assassin by trade, taught me most of what I know in that field, and had no family to speak
of. No one to bury his remains. The village will move them, redistribute his wealth and property, will see to it that he is at least cared for, if not remembered.

I should at least shed a tear for the abrupt ending of his life, shouldn’t I?

It’s sad. Lonely. What does it say about someone’s life that they leave no one behind to mourn? Is that not cause enough to cry?

I can’t.

Dry eyed, I check once more that my Queen is both safe and sound, Niakara curled at her feet, and slide the rock barring entrance to the sanctuary aside. Twilight has passed, dawn giving way to day and the chorus of birdsong greets sister sun with a cheery salutation unbefitting of my current mood. The warmth of the light on my skin is welcome as I am certain no lover’s touch will be again. It’s been long enough since that horrible day with Kinoko for me to recover, and yet every amorous advance sends my blood cold with dread rather than inflaming me with passion. Even the interest of a beautiful princess, the literal avatar of a goddess, whose mind matches mine like no other person’s could ever hope to, has me panicking and running away instead of reciprocating.

Slumping against the trunk of the marker tree for the sanctuary, I cradle my wounded arm close and rest my head on the lean flesh of the other, braced across my knees, and fret.

It is mid-morning by the time hanyana brings me a bowl of the broth-logged rice and nettle soup, lukewarm and over-done, and sits next to me to eat her own portion. Her hand on my face reminds me to actually eat it instead of swirl it around, and to shave when her skin catches on my stubble. She needs no words, either verbally or mentally, for me to understand. I need not speak for her to know.

“He was a good man, and deserves to be mourned.” She tells me as she rises, and I bow my head. Rather than leaving my skin, her fingers card through my hair to rest on my scalp. “Mourning doesn’t require tears, sometimes mourning means taking action.” That gentle touch disappears as she brushes dust from her trousers and climbs back down the ladder, leaving me to contemplate her wisdom and, when it hurts to think any more, visit Link.

At least this charge is faring well, all things considered. The ease with which he parries Fi’s blows and the rhythmic nature of their sparring soothes me, putting at least one of my worries to rest. The deceptive strength of his admittedly impressive musculature is belayed by the exuberance of his greeting and the speed with which he sheaths his blade – and thus Fi herself – and bounds over to me.

His eyes are nearly level with mine, and he has at least three more good cycles of growth left. The provisions I bear will help with that potential, and while he eats with the grace of a one winged duck I tell him the story of the birth of our world, the goddesses who made it so, and the results of their labors.

“I already know this one.” He whines at the primary stanzas of my recitation. “The Great Deku Tree told me.” The petulance of his tone is all child, but the timber is that of a man becoming. I am not expecting the sudden tensing of his shoulders, or the way his stuffed bun falls to the ground as he spasms. Navi shrieks and clutches at his hair, then falls eerily silent, her chiming muted beyond my ability to perceive.

Before I can do more than gape at the both of them, heart in my throat paralyzed with shock, Link sits up, groaning. His hands rise to cradle his head, and Farore’s portion blinds me as it flares from the back of his left hand. I flinch away, turning my head, blinking away the dancing
black spots and sepia coronas that impede my vision. The Third of the Triforce is bright enough that I can discern its shape even through my eyelids, and feel tears streaming down my face as my body tries desperately to clear my irises of the irritant.

I am nothing more than a spectre, a perception of myself that gives form to thought.

I cry. The bun lies on the ground.

Neither should be possible Between.

“Sheik…” Link moans, and I am at his side in an instant.

“Hero.” The title falls from my lips instinctively as I reach to support him, give him a solid base to regain his balance and orientation.

“The Great Deku Tree told me about the Goddesses.” He says, wincing as though he has a headache of monumental proportions. “Zelda told me about the Spiritual Stones.” Blue eyes, clear for the first time since I have known him, look me in the eye as Time itself freezes. “You taught me who I am.”

“Who are you?” Mouth dry, the whisper of words is softer than the rasp of paper charms being drawn, but he hears it clearly.

“I am the Chosen of Farore, the awaited one, the rallying cry, bearer of the Triforce of Courage.” He states each name he bears in the songs of my people, laying claim to them and holding their truths. “I am the downfall of Demise, wielder of the Blade of Evil’s Bane, and the Goddess’ champion.” He grasps the prophecies of Hylia’s people and brings them to fruition. “I am Link, for I unite the people and fulfill their dreams.” His voice sounds, and I cannot look away as he whispers. “Even yours.”

The Golden Triangle floods Between with its holy illuminating light once more, banishing all doubt and uncertainty. Every hesitation is gone, and though insecurity remains it is only there to be acknowledged. Each shadow flees before that light. Even me.

Cleansed of my apprehension, fully present in my form, my fears no longer keep me from action, I blink unsteadily at the clear cerulean sky. Those fears, acknowledged and accepted, inform me of the areas of myself that require attention. I spend hours meditating on the potential courses of action I may take from here, weighing their possible outcomes and comparative results, and then instead of running from my problems and avoiding them, go to face them head on. The first is mourning the loss of a friend. The second, the death of a circumstantial enemy. I let the emotions I’ve been holding on to, hoarding like the caches of nuts a squirrel will gather to expose and savor later, be as they are.

From tears to laughter and back again, anger and frustration, humor and confusion, the burden of restraint dissolves with my own torrents, escapes in the hitching breath of both laughter and tears, leaving me exhausted, aching, and relieved. From the place of sister sun overhead, it is time to take up the task of a lifetime once more. I will keep her safe, keep him sound, to my last breath.

The gift of Courage drives me, and I will not hesitate in the face of my fate any longer.

There are tasks for me still. Nayru is not done with me yet. Farore, it seems, agrees.

Virtue, love, measure…it is time to find the last.
The Inevitable

Chapter Summary

A restless vigil blurred by fear. A trap sprung. A bounty found.

Chapter Notes

Things to look forward to!

“She’s not normally so calm around anyone but me,” Malon says, finishing the currying we interrupted almost a mark ago even as I tie off the last braid in the silver mane with a small bell that will chime whenever Epona moves.

“She’s very smart.” Zelda agrees, her words falling from my lips as I focus my attention on the surrounding fields. The raised land the Ranch lies on has a clear perspective of the surrounding area for a good two marks on horseback for me, or a half mark for Zelda. There is motion alerting me to movement from the north-west, but the arrivals are expected for us. Not so much for Miss Malon. “I wonder how long it would take her to get to Fort Heathersage and back, and if I could employ you to do so. There’s a parcel there waiting for me.”

“About five hours, all told.” The redhead muses, and grins at me, her blue eyes twinkling. “Fifty rupees, plus delivery fee. Five rupees for a small package, ten for medium, twenty for large, sixty if I need to take a cart.”

“No cart will be required. It is simply a book, three letters, and a ring.” Zelda explains as I shield our eyes and try to determine the device on the still distant figures’ banner. If it is the Geru’do patrol my Mistress has dreamed of, she should leave as soon as possible to avoid being seen. If it isn’t, then we will need to delay. Lon Lon Ranch has served as Ganondorf’s personal stables since it was gifted to Ingo, but Malon has made sure that it has remained a place of trade and commerce despite that, which necessitates a good deal more comings and goings as the hub of all business in Hyrule. With the addition of the milk that is her father’s legacy, the entirety of Dark King’s army could be paid with the relatively light taxes on the Ranch alone.

“Sixty rupees then.” Malon nods, already reaching out to shake on the deal. My attention is on the Phantom horseman in black on the blood red field of a pike borne banner and the Geru’do symbol for the number eight beneath it. It is the right patrol…or the wrong one, if Malon and Epona are still here when they arrive. Zelda hands over the necessary currency, and I blink to get my eyes to focus on the here and now instead. “Who’s the pick-up from?”

“A woman in the fourth house from the eastern road, about your height, named Cremia.” Zelda tells one of the only young women around her age with any power to change lives that is not fully the Usurper’s thrall. “The book is bound oak stained leather, the ring silver and inset with a small citrine in the shape of a square.”
“Gotcha.” Malon says, counting the coin carefully before swinging up into the saddle. Epona pivots on her hind legs, jumping the inner fence and galloping out the front gates as quickly as either of us could hope. I turn to retrieve Talon’s letters in the cucco coop, Zelda moving towards the main house, and find myself displaced yet again. Fortunately, it only takes three steps for my Mistress to notice I no longer inhabit our physical form alongside her, and her embarrassed apology is accepted before I remind her that the former master of the Ranch had been banished to Kakariko and is currently confined to the outbuildings as what essentially amounts to a slave.

He wants to be near his daughter. I could not refuse him, Impa could not confine him, and Zelda could not reason with him. So he is here, living with the cuccos in a shack, sharing Malon’s rations and what grains the birds themselves are allotted. Like Anju, he cannot be seen with me, I cannot be seen on the Ranch, and he can only distract Ingo for so long before the weasel of a man will insist on checking every corner of every building to ensure it is up to Ganondorf’s standards. Zelda must cede control of us to me for me to move through the Shadow safely, and we can both hear the two men arguing as I press the floorboard and the wall panel in the second stair at the same time to release the thin packet of papers. Folding the lot, I tuck the sheets of palimpsest into my cowl and leave the same way I arrived. Only outside the walls do I feel safe enough to use the moonstone keyed to our current sanctuary, and only once the sanctuary is secure do I feel capable of letting Zelda return to her form and bring herself to join me.

Watching her coalesce into being is always beautiful. The Triforce of Wisdom precedes her arrival, a golden brilliance both warm and remote. Like sister sun blossoming in the dawn, the gentle light bathes the space around her core before radiant beams extend to usher in the silken fall of wheaten hair, the creamy softness of youthful skin, and the brilliant blue of her ancient eyes. Her garb gathers around her, falling in place about her waist and shoulders and turning her from ephemeral to opaque and mundane, if still exquisitely beautiful.

I pass her a small bottle of green potion and am pleased she has enough energy to express her distaste, though she does comply and downs the lot as quickly as possible. She is getting stronger, more certain of herself and her place, becoming more and more active in the world around her.

If that means I am to be thrust from my body by her whims and desires, then so be it. If she is strong enough to take over mine, she is nearly strong enough to reclaim hers as soon as her chords are made malleable once more.

At that point, I will be dead, and won’t have to worry about her accidentally taking over.

Some days, I look forward to it.

Most days, now, if I am honest with myself.

I may have stopped using my magic, so intimately connected to the very essence of who I am, to kill, but that does not mean I have stopped killing. That I can stop killing. I can’t. Not if I want to protect Zelda. Not if I wish for Link to remain free from that taint until the last. Not if I wish to fulfill my oaths and Goddess given geas. If I could, I would perform that task for him as well, but only one of those Chosen by Destiny can hope to equal another. That the land itself hasn’t risen up to consume me or purge me from itself I consider a minor miracle. Only the fact that the blight on Hylia’s Descent has lessened keeps me at all steady. I would not go so far as to say sane.

Zelda doesn’t bother speaking out loud to me anymore. It is a reprieve to not have to act to respond, and she knows it. She knows the silence is my solace, and will not break it for fear of breaking me.

_:My fault:_. Zelda lays claim to the cause of my actions, when they are mine alone.

_:Bad luck:_. I return, though I don’t say whose. Zelda, for dreaming of Malon’s demise and determined to stop it? No. She was performing the duties of her birthright, protecting the people of Hyrule. Enache, for seeing the rightful Queen emerge from hiding? No. She was simply doing her job, intent on reporting to her superiors. Me, for making certain that she told no one, that her body is never found? Yes, though I too, was only doing my job.

Malon still needs to disappear for a while, with Epona, for Epona is necessary in the coming battle for the fate of the land of the Goddesses. Zelda took care of that, and has ensured that the coming Hero’s mount will be there to bear him across the sacred soil of Hyrule. Now she tries her best to take care of me, even as Enache’s vengeful spirit shrieks her impotent rage. I can’t look away from the suffering her ghost is bound in, knowing that it is my fault she has ended this way. It will be my fault if she becomes a Poe, her foul presence further upsetting the natural balance of life and death. Even if I send her to the Shadow Temple by force, for she does not wish to go of her own volition, I would be feeding the malevolence that screams in sadistic pleasure as her agony feeds it, and giving it the ability to act beyond what limits it already has.

Zelda pushes me onto the cot closest to the door in my distraction at Enache’s ghost, a cloud of dust rising to obscure my vision and make me blink. Within moments, Niakara is purring in my lap, the blanket from the second cot is about my shoulders, and water is warming to steep some of the restorative herbs into a thin tea. As I was not planning on moving us for another turn at the end of the harvest, those herbs are all this sanctuary is truly stocked with, and I need to gather supplies both from the last one and the immediate area as soon as possible.

Before I can do more than shift my weight, Zelda’s hand is on my shoulder and pressing down.

“No.” She orders. “You are going to sit until you have a mug of tea in you, and then you are going to lie down and visit Link while I return to receive the package I sent Malon for. You are going to spar with him, feed him, and make sure he bathes and is dry before bed.” Her demands are precise and her voice steady, but she cannot hide from me. Just as I cannot hide from her. We can disappear from a nation of searchers, but not ourselves. I reach out to pull her next to me, jostling Niakara into huffing her displeasure before she settles again, and tuck my Queen against my shoulder.

We sit like that until the tea is over-steeped and as cold as any further comfort would be.

She is the first to rise, ensuring that we both have a portion of the bitter liquid in our respective bellies, and I shift the cover to her before lying down. Niakara takes up residence against my head and throat, and I leave my body voluntarily to chase down the eroding barrier keeping resusangeul bi aiyyu safely Between. As I relinquish control, Zelda takes it up and disappears in a burst of intent and will. The tabby snorts in frustration at having her nap interrupted, and though she can only just perceive me, I run my fingers through her fur as a peace offering. Accustomed to my incorporeal touch, she stalks to curl next to the still form of the exiled queen, and I find the spelled package and reach for the Umbral Lines that will take me to Farore’s Chosen.

He has grown again, and stares into my eyes on a footing so close to equal I find myself standing taller once I have both found him and found my balance.

“Sheik. It’s been a while.” He greets. It has been a while. Half a turn since I last saw
him to bring the beginnings of the harvest. He still has a decent amount of provender, though I should have thought to carry more in the way of proteins with me. His musculature is...astounding. Chiseled divots lay beneath a firm chest and broad shoulders bare to the twilight sky, thick thighs strain the seams and lacings of his trousers. Navi sits easily on the helix of his ear, her weight barely a depression on the skin and cartilage. His eyes are darker than Zelda’s, but shot through with tiny lines of silver and a burst of green around the very edge between iris and pupil. He smells of sweat and, for the first time since I have known him, man.

He’s very attractive, and I can feel myself react to that in alternating waves of heat and chill, yearning and repulsion, the dance of extremes writing on my skin in a cycle of flush and pallor.

“Oh...aye.” I manage to work past the blockage in my throat, taking the time to clear it before attempting more. “How have you been keeping?” That he noticed the passage of time is a second shock my mind stumbles over. I have grown accustomed to him greeting each day with no memory of the previous. That he perceives its passing means it is quickly running out.

“Better than you. Are you alright?” Blunt with childlike honesty, observant with adult responsibility for others. I stare a moment too long before replying, wishing that he was at least wearing a shirt.

“I am managing well.” I tell him, though am careful not to get any more specific and have to tell him something less than the honest truth. I do not mention what it is I am managing, deflecting the question and receiving only a narrowing of his eyes in being evaded. He does not push, nor does Navi, and Fi seems to be resting. Keeping her chosen bearer sane and whole and hale for seven years until his body is mature enough to complete the tasks needed cannot be easy on either her mind or her magic.

“Your face is almost as red as your eyes. Are you sure you’re not sick?” Link attempts to work around my own evasion, leading the conversation unknowingly onto safer ground. I smile at him, lowering the cowl of what has become nearly a uniform this past summer to rest about my neck.

“I am most definitely not ill, Hero. It is simply a reaction of the adult body on perceiving something attractive.” And he is very appealing. Very. It is my own hesitancy that holds my limbs hostage and my mind captive.

“I told you it was normal.” Navi chimes in, the flutters off to the pile of his bedding. Link watches her, and I see the moment of understanding spread across his features.

“Oh. I...uh. OH.” He faces me, his eyes darting to the evidence of my truth and back to my face quickly, but not quickly enough to be ignored, and then it is his turn to blush. “Does it hurt? Sometimes I can ignore it, but sometimes it won’t go away unless I touch it...usually when it hurts instead of just being uncomfortable.” He admits, though my blush seems to be contagious. I certainly have reached a shade of red previously unknown, listening to the Bearer of Courage obliquely referring to his masturbatory habits.

Nayru bless.

“...It...I...It will go away on its own, Hero.” I assure him, though that will not happen any time soon and most certainly return to haunt me at later.

“If you’re sure...” His skepticism is well founded, but I cannot bear to touch myself, let alone have another witness the act. Someone else’s participation is impossible.

Thinking of it has me wilting, both confirming my fears and dampening my blushing.
“I am sure. Was there anything you wanted to do, today?” If he remembers even some of his past, the natural curiosity he seems plagued with will necessitate my lessoning becoming more involved.

“Tell me a story?” His posture is so eager, hopeful and inquisitive, that I can deny him as well as I can deny Zelda. Not at all.

“What kind of story?” I return. I haven’t forgotten the traumatic reaction he had to my recitation of the genesis of the land we stand on, and wish to avoid a repetition of the event if I may.

“How did you meet the Princess?” He asks, and that is a story that I can tell without hesitation. It is not every day, after all, that one meets the living embodiment of the Goddess they hold closest to their heart and discovers their life’s purpose. His questions turn the mark long tale to one that lasts well into the evening, a brilliant scarlet sunset dyeing the sky in flames and fading light leads to the last slivers of the Harvest Moon guiding him to his bed and I to mine.

Fortunately, Zelda has not only returned with my body, but retrieved the letters so nonchalantly mentioned alongside the book of fairy stories and wedding band. A full bottle of Lon Lon milk sits next to them, a stale loaf, thick slice of cheese, and well picked haunch of rabbit illuminated by the same candle encourages me to eat as I read.

It is a simple matter to commit the letters to memory, simpler still to burn them afterwards in the flame and watch the wisps rise to where Enache glares at me from her place against the ceiling of this particular sanctuary. Though their Fortress and Temple are steady, solid and secure, the Geru’do are mostly nomadic, and to be confined as she is makes us both uncomfortable. I stare at her flickering form and make my decision. Sighing deeply, I stand and form the proper symbols in the air with my hands to make her follow. She fights, she is a fighter, always, and proud of it. The faint motion of objects nearest her proves that, and that she will soon become dangerous if I don’t do something to help her find her peace.

It is late. I am tired. The Mistress of my soul sleeps deeply and well. I unwrap my hair and bracers, remove my cowl and tabard, and set the chain of moonstones on top. My boots follow quickly, trousers and chemise exchanged for a long sleep shirt, and I check the short braid to ensure it will last the night. Enache makes disparaging commentary on my form the entire time, mocking the mark of my geas and pierced ears deliberately. Her words inform me that she is paying attention to my body, which amuses me, for it means she is not paying attention to my movements.

Dragging her with me, careful not to wake my Queen, I open the sealed door and release the locks and warding to physically go outside. Snagging my blanket from the cot under Niakara’s watchful gaze, I pull the resistant spirit out from under the roof and into the open sky.

“Kolka ra yakaleeb!” She curses at me, and though I cannot translate the words, the tone and her posture make her intent incredibly clear. I tether the binding to the lintel, well within the boundary of the concealing illusion which is still strong and fully in place, and let her shout until she notices our change of location.

She has not been so still since the moment after her last breath left. I watch as she pauses, starts to move, stops again, and stares at the stars. In time, she ceases even her restless looming over me, and sinks to sit on the grass.

“You’re still a shit-stain not even a mother could love.” She informs me calmly.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” I return, and I am. I don’t enjoy being the cause of someone else’s suffering. “I wish things could have ended differently for you.”
“Ha! I died a warrior’s death! Only childbirth is more honorable!” She brags to the stars and, perhaps, to herself. I listen, too many years spent as a *shiik* for me to not. “When my sisters find my corpse, they will hunt you to the ends of the world where the sun rests and the waters pool.”

“Would you be content to wait there for them? In the Silent Realm?” I ask. If she will not move on until her remains are found, then I face a much longer haunting that even I could have anticipated. Her ashes have been scattered, the fire I can summon taking even the largest bones with it. There is nothing left.

“I will not be content until you join the other filthy deceivers in the bone pit of the Arbiter’s Grounds.” She snarls, and I can’t help it. I laugh. At least she won’t have long to wait, really. I can keep her coherent until then, and once Link has purified the Temples, she will be free to go. She twitches at my unexpected reaction, backing away from me as far as my tether will allow her to. “You’re insane.”

“Only mostly.” I chuckle, wiping the results of my morbidly mirthful outburst from my eyes. “I can’t promise that’s where I will die, but I can promise that I will die.”

“You’re Sheikah, your people are already dead.” She snarls. “We saw to that ourselves.”

“I am Sheikah.” I agree. “And everyone who is born dies.” That seems to quiet her temper, for she does not speak to me again before I fall asleep, blanketed by stars and the faintest measure of brother moon’s light.

Dawn is hours away when I start awake, dreams fading faster than smoke in a wind storm and just as elusive to my grasping hands. They burn with the agony of magical strain, as fresh and shocking as the day I became a conduit for the ghosts of Aversa Keep. I am not left wondering why for long.

There are five moving heat-shapes the size of average to smaller adults, and Enache is a faint pulsing orb at my side. Exhausted beyond coherent shape, there is no question she has found a way to call her sisters to her side.

::ZELDA, RUN!:: I shout mentally at my queen lying calm and peaceful in her bed less than five large strides from where I am slouched against the doorway.

::...huh...Aein?...wha...:: Her mind stutters with the sudden change from deep sleep to wakefulness, and I don’t give her time to rise.

::RUN!:: I shout, and freeze in shock as the first arrow hits. Pain follows on the heels of surprise, chased by fear. The last is enough to have my Queen casting the simplest spell she has to vanish, and Enache screams into the night with a cry like a frustrated hawk.

I can no longer even blink, the third and fourth ice arrow guaranteeing my immobility, but Zelda is gone where they cannot follow. Even I do not know which of the sanctuaries, Temples, or warp points she has chosen to use.

I do know where I am to be taken, however, and pray with all my heart that I can at least buy enough time for Courage and Wisdom to find a foothold against the Power that would destroy them. I pray for the courage to face what wisdom tells me will come.

Impa has cautioned all those who call her General what the cost of their allegiance could be. I have seen to the survivors of Aversa, the results of Kabocha’s greed, Kinoko’s debauchery, Koume and Kotake’s sadistic mind-games. I know the price on my head down to the last rupee,
know the exponential difference if I am delivered alive and able to speak. There are turns, over a full cycle yet, until Link will awaken to his destiny. Zelda is still weak, vulnerable, and unable to protect herself alone. There are tasks I must perform, duties to see to, a geas worked into my very flesh to fulfill. I must aid him, shelter her, and support them both…

…and so I know the price, should I fail.

Nayru, bless your servant. Farore, smile on my quavering spirit. Din, enflame my passions. Hylia, guide my path. Mokara, turn aside your gaze.

“Keep him encased, Our Lord wishes to attend to him personally.” The captain of this small war party says in Hyrulean, where until this moment they have been speaking exclusively in the Geru’do dialects, in order to ensure I understand their intent. White overtakes my vision, followed quickly by black, alternating so quickly the world becomes grey.

We are moving when I am capable of discerning shapes again, have been for a while by the time color returns. The ice arrows spell of restraint helps a good deal, for with my body unable to panic, my mind does not stay in that state for long. Long enough for the lancers to have my frozen form bound and strapped to four of their mounts, the ice itself the only thing preventing my skin from being worn off against the road. I cannot move so much as an eyelash, but I can see, can hear, and can taste the bile that would be rising if any part of me could do more than exist.

The elevated degree of difficulty in this type of ice magic makes escape even less likely than before, and I know now what the content of the dreams that Zelda wouldn’t tell me about was.

We travel all day, stopping for the night only a mark before sunset in a way-station of the crudest type. The covered well guarantees fresh water, the lean-to has hay and grain for the horses, dried meat and vegetables for the women, and they carry their own blankets as a saddle pad. The discussion about what to do with me is short, pointed, and brutal.

“Break his fingers and knees, then bind his arms behind his back and gag him.” The captain orders.

So they do.

The night is long, and as I wait for dawn the spell fades until every breath brings renewed agony to my injured limbs. The gag holds in my whimpering, ensuring I do not disturb either the guard or the sleeping patrol. I bleed sluggishly around the shafts of the arrows still embedded in my flesh, doing all I can to shield my Queen from knowing.

Sister sun breaks across the field eventually, rousing my captors and warming my face from the night’s chill. The reset spellwork cools me to the core, though I am left mostly free and the cold eases some of the pain. I drink when water is poured down my throat, though nausea prevents me from taking even the pittance of food one of the women offers. From the tone of the words, she is swiftly reprimanded for it, though no punishment ensues.

We wait, idle, until nearly midday. No one acknowledges my presence beyond ensuring that I cannot escape my bonds and continue to breathe, leaving me to at first stay as still as possible to avoid moving my hands or legs and creating the flashes of white pain that stab through my vision if I do. Later, my bladder grows painfully full. I try to tell the one closest to me of my need, but after the horrible moment of realization that no one will help me with this, resign myself to the indignity.

It is not comfortable, lying in an ever-cooling puddle, but at least that is all it is.
I understand the enforced rest when a prison cart pulled by matching palomino geldings
arrives just after my captors finish their midday meal. My trousers have dried enough to itch, and I
am thirsty when they lift me into the small interior, but any thought of food brings my pain induced
nausea to the forefront. Being lifted does not help, for though they can avoid putting pressure on my
fingers, my knees must still support the weight of my calves and feet, and are left to dangle, further
jarring the crushed bone and grinding the pieces of it together. Overwhelmed by the agony, I lose my
tenuous grasp on consciousness.

One of my handlers adjusts her grip on my bonds, and then the cart is swaying, I am lying
curled and prone on my side, and my clothing has been removed and replaced with small clothes and
a rough burlap tunic embroidered with the Eye. I lay on bare wood sanded to the point that I could
not give myself so much as a splinter if I tried, and there is an old gourd filled with musty water a
scant arm’s length away. At least the arrows have been removed, the wounds bound and somewhat
tended.

Doing my best to move without worsening my injuries, I am still gasping and crying by the
time I can pull the cork out with my teeth and tongue, and I spill more than I manage to swallow. It
tastes of spoiled vegetables and stale air, and I drink all that I can.

It is two, maybe three days before we reach Orville Keep, the voice of the guard
unfamiliar, the banners dull. Gefuro’s spirit is gone, though my regret lingers alongside the stench of
sun warmed urine and the sweat of days in the prison wagon spent as immobile as possible. I am
uncertain of how much time has passed, for there are no windows in the small wagon, little light
comes around the seal of the door, and I keep lapsing into catatonia or true unconsciousness.

Water is available, but not plentiful, for if I do not drink I do not pee, and none of my
captors wishes to deal with that. Food is scarce. Half an apple, a small boiled potato, some dried,
green thing with the texture of old tubers, and half the meat of a thigh of cucco. If I am less than
coherent, I still tense at the raised voices of the soldiers who are stationed here, and hiss out the
breath to attempt to divert some of the pain. I cannot stretch out in the wagon, there is no space. I
cannot move my legs without passing out. My hands are useless nubs, the arrow wounds swollen
and yellow, shot through with angry red, and surely infected.

Knowing what awaits me at the fortress, what is waiting beyond, I pray for fever or the
infection or even a Geru’do seeking vengeance to make my frequent trips into nothingness a
permanent move. By now, Zelda should have contacted Impa, and if the General is as intelligent as
she thinks she is Zelda should be safe. Beyond the borders of Hyrule, possibly. Tarakin still owes
the diminished Sage a debt, after all. The catacombs beneath Derinkuyu may even have aired out
enough that they could be habitable in places. As long as I don’t know, I cannot say, no matter how
much they torture me.

And they will torture me, beyond the indignities and pain I have already been put to.
They’ve done far worse to those who have given a fraction of the offense to their King and his rule
that I have.

“Oh Golden Din, Goddess of Might, we see your radiance bright. In your strong arms,
protect from harm, and deliver us from fright. Oh Golden Nayru, Goddess of Calm, we see your
gentle flow. In your kind hands you bless the lands, and from you mercy grows. Oh Golden Farore,
Goddess of…”

:A little soon to be reciting the prayer of the lost, no?:. My queen, my lady, Mistress of
my Soul and match of my mind, intrudes as gracefully into my litany as Nayru herself is said to
move.
.:Hanyana, are you safe? Did you run?:. As long as she is safe, I can meet my fate with my head held high.

.:I am safer than I have ever been. I will not tell you where, but I need to know where you are.:.

.:Why? My life is forfeit. Mandrag Ganondorf wishes a personal audience with me.:.

.:Where are you, Aeín-ah?:. She asks, her mind twisting around to compel my answer, steadying my nerves to allow me to think, holding me stable long enough to find out all that I know. My truth is hers to see. It is faster than speaking, even mind to mind, and I have no defences built up against her. Never against her. She plays me as only a master can, handling her tool with ease of familiarity and comfort, and I relax into her warmth. The shouting outside fades from my consciousness as I fade from it entirely.

“…should be able to cross around….”

“…the wheels…”

:.Be ready.:.

“...not like he’s…will be…”

“…the Sheik, to claim the reward once we’ve…”

“…like it. Not one bit.”

:.Rest, I will guard your dreams.:.

“…cat. It’s been following the…”

:.And I.:.

“Damn stinking fish. Made a right mess of the bridge too.”

“Should drop a boulder on the lot.”

My return to the aching mortal form I inhabit is slow and agonizing. My head rocks with the motion of the wagon, the wood blurring and shifting before my eyes. Sometimes I see things that shouldn’t be there, that can’t be there, and don’t see that which I should. Enache has disappeared, but in her place Arik stands, lecturing me on what awaits me in the Arbiter’s Grounds. I am cold and hot at the same time, dehydration and hunger taking their toll. I need to stay close to maintain my own bonds to my body, they are weak and fragile as they have never been. I am dying, albeit slowly, but the signs are there.

Zelda maintains tenuous mental contact as much as she can, even taking over moving what can be moved for me when the pain overpowers my senses. Without her help, my body would be in much worse shape when we stop for the night on the Hyrulean side of the chasm leading to the desert. Without her foresight, there is no possibility for the things I hear, and as I am already seeing phantoms of light and hope, when the shouting and screams and crashes become the prison cart being over turned, I am tossed about like so much baggage.

Landing hard on the side, partially against the roof, clears my head as the torment of my injuries is driven beyond what I can process, and I see a large pair of gleaming eyes the color of aged myrtle through the hatch in the door.
When the whole door is torn from its hinges, it is all I can do to blink in surprise until Busi tears the side, now the roof, off as well. What he is doing here, I can’t imagine. Why he is featured in my fever dreams, I do not know. It has been over two cycles since I last saw the young Goron, just after Elig gifted him his trade route.

For all their massive size and formidable strength, the Gorons are a gentle people, if enthusiastic. Busi’s large hands, so easily capable of ripping apart a well-constructed wagon, have no difficulty with my weight. For a moment I feel as safe as when I was a child in Birog’s arms, the scent of papa’s leatherwork strong in my nose and the texture of stone hands beneath my back.

It is only when I moan and the sound is muffled that I can see the leather armor laid over Busi’s shoulder protecting me from waist to skull is also blocking out the flame.

We are going towards the bridge, which is now little more than anchors on either end of the gap and splintered logs trailing tattered rope.

“I’ve got you. Trust me, little brother.” Busi rumbles, and then curls in on himself and rolls. It’s nauseating and disorients me in a heartbeat, though it seems to last forever. Compressed against his core, I can see nothing but his paintings and the texture of his body, though the small space ensures I am secure. I know we are moving, bouncing and spinning and churning through the air until we aren’t.

I can see the ruts he has left in the canyon walls, though the entire world has yet to cease whirling, the moment he comes to rest in the basin and unfolds himself. I would surely be vomiting, if there were anything in my stomach, the world shifts again before I can get my bearings.

“Brother Sheik is badly hurt, Big Brother is expecting him, but take him to the Great One of Wisdom first.”

“We cannot get so near, the heat would kill us.” A Zora I do not know flares her gills. “But we have guardianship of a small light spirit fountain that lies enroute. We shall deliver him to your Big Brother whole once more.”

“Ware the Kakariko cistern.”

“The foul menace cannot reach us in the pure waters that Jabu-Jabu has gifted us. We shall not leave the clear waters.” The Zora reassures, which is not reassuring to me at all.

I cannot swim as I am, nor can I breathe underwater. I can hold my breath, yes, but not so long as a swim upstream all the way to even the base of Death Mountain would take, even with a golden scale. Days, at least. It does not seem to matter, for Busi wades hip deep into the river at the bottom of the gorge and lowers me into the water.

The buoyancy relieves some of the pressure on my shattered joints, and the cool water soothes the inflamed wounds. Three of the Zora, including the one who spoke to Busi, take up my weight while a fourth places a cowl of gold about my throat and shoulders. She notices my confusion and chitters out a laugh as piercing as any Ruto could produce.

“Magic it has, to breathe you can.” She tells me in broken Hyrulean, scratching at the back of my head in what I have to assume is meant to be a comforting gesture. The netting they wrap about me puts me into a near panic attack however, breaking any calm I may have acquired from her attempt at kindness.

Hyperventilating just proves the jewelry, made of tiny golden scales, works, for it takes...
them towing me into a submerged cave system to break me out of it by throwing me into a state of catatonia.

Claustrophobia, being restrained, utter darkness, fear of drowning, broken bones and a wounding fever conspire to send me mad with fear, even Zelda’s calming presence barely makes a dent in my terror. The chasm on the way to Derinkuyu started it, the passage down the River and through the first gate completed my fears. For the dead, it is a release and relief…for one still living it is a trial. I may help the spirits of the recently deceased find their way, but I do not carry them through. I know the path, have crossed it to retrieve resusangeul bi hundeou, and wish to avoid it until my duty is complete and I am called to the Silent Realm. She solves the problem by removing me from the situation entirely, and I find myself Between, next to the two Chosen by Destiny that do not inspire me to flee.

I cannot bring myself to speak, for though I lack a physical body, the lingering remnants of illness and dread keep me paralyzed.

“Come here.” Zelda says, and I am perplexed, for her spirit cradles mine as a mother calms a child during a thunderstorm. I am already here. It is only when a strong pair of arms helps lower me to lay on the grass and then a weight and a worn green cap rest upon my chest that I understand. With my Queen at my back and my Hero at my side, in time, I relax. In time, I can close my eyes. Between, I sleep.

It takes relays of four Zora five full nights to reach the tiny fairy fountain, and I spend perhaps four marks with them all together. While facing my fears is all well and good, and bearable if I am initiating the instances, they are still valid and reasonable fears. With the alternative being spending my day with the burgeoning Hero of Time, I have difficulty remaining in a sick and sore body as it is dragged through the stuff my tamer nightmares are made of.

I do return frequently, and I know that Zelda spends some of her days inhabiting my form as well, keeping it relatively active and thus whole, but she must remain in her own body nearly all the time, and cannot risk absences of even a consecutive half mark. Between the two, I am, for the most part, alone.

I am supposed to be protecting her…protecting both of them. Not being coddled and carried. My anxiety makes the inhabitants of the fairy fountain the Zora eventually emerge in cautious of their approach, and my heart aches. How can I claim the title suurin if I frighten fairies, when there are much more skittish spirits out there?

It takes six of them for my left knee alone.

On my own two feet, freshly restored and still sore for the extensive accelerated healing the small red fairies wield, Darunia welcomes me in his chambers and shuttles me off to the relative safety of the Fire Temple. As Sage of one of the two Temples to remain untouched by the Usurper King, his power is not at all diminished, and neither is his enthusiasm. I am certain I have fresh bruises from both his greeting and the introduction to his mate Magetus and their pebble, Link. The tiny Goron baby still has a grip of stone, and I am glad of the few red fairies that decided to accompany me after I invaded their home. The knitting bone had no chance in little Link’s hand, and the fairy re-healed the break before I could react poorly.

A diplomatic incident is to be avoided at all costs now, when the Loyalists are marshalling every resource simply to endure, and Impa is visiting from Kakariko.

Being rescued and brought here suddenly makes much more sense.
“You failed.” She greets.

“Yes.” I rasp. Darunia cannot do anything subtly, including leave the room, but he does leave, and clears out the surrounding area with a few bellows. Impa stares. Even with her Sagehood sealed, her power ascended, she is intimidating. She is still the General, still one of the most experienced people in all of Hyrule in dealing with the logistics and tactics of war, and still my physical superior in every way. I bow before her.

"You had one job.” She starts, pauses, and rephrases. “One primary job. Keep Zelda safe.”

“Hyeh, Impa-yan. Keeping Link sane, fed, and healthy was always a secondary task. Nearly as important as keeping Zelda safe, but still…secondary. Teaching either of them was something I took upon myself, as a way to pass time effectively. Easing the communication of the Sages in the Sacred Realm was an inborn talent as much as a curse. Reorganizing the Shadow Temple to effectively seal the tormented spirit of Jo Bongo was temporary, if necessary. Traversing the entirety of Hyrule to spread rumor and hope was incidental. Acting as an assassin for the Loyalist army was a useful skill-set to have, if only to protect Zelda from the same. That Zelda is safe now is not my doing. I failed.

“You’ve managed well.” She tells me, and I wait for the caveats, the repercussions, and the punishment. They do not come. She takes a step towards me, as silent as the wind, and I flinch. She sighs, and rests a hand on my head. “You’ve managed exceptionally well. No longer so much a runt or cleric, but still too short, too skinny, and too pretty. How old are you, anyway?” She asks, then snorts. “Too young, anyway, for the responsibilities we’ve laid on your shoulders. It’s a miracle you lasted as long as you did without true incident.”

“Impa-yan, I…” I begin, stunned that my failure to protect our people’s Goddess given charge is being so easily dismissed.

“Shut your mouth before more of your inexperience falls out.” She snaps, facing me once more. As her gaze rakes over my form, her posture shifts again to one of resignation. “Follow me. We’ll get you some actual clothing, a salve for those scars, and a place to sleep. Then once you wake, there is something you must see.” The orders are clear, and subdued, I obey.

The Goron city is dulled, the spinning storage silo quiet but, for once, full. Impa’s appointed apartment has obviously been designed for a softer person than the Goron craftsmen that created it, and I can’t help but compare it to the last rooms I occupied while visiting the Goron patriarch. While the ubiquitous cloth drapery continues to serve as doors, there are three such areas sectioned off instead of simply blocking a casual gaze from passerby. The first is for social activity, for it holds a thickly woven rug and little else, though it is still twice the size of the rooms I am used to. A sleeping alcove lies next in succession, the raises stone platform covered with plush cushions, thick furs, and a well-made if worn screen to further shield the sleeper from public curiosity. The last, a water-closet the likes of which I thought to never see outside of the summit of Snow’s Peak.

A basin has been sanded down to the point that I could lie down and stretch and still not touch the walls with my extended limbs, and stand on the bottom with the water coming up to my chin. Faintly steaming water, and a faintly sulphurous scent to the air tell me that this natural hot spring has been improved to suit the potential guests to the Goron city, and that the water itself is not potable.

“Clean up.” The General orders, and despite being submerged for most of the last quarter moon, I agree. I smell, and the soap has thyme sprigs as well as oil in it, and is of high quality. By the time I’ve finished scrubbing, the resultant film disappearing on the opposite side of the wall from
the feeding spring, the rags I had have been removed and replaced with a battle suit in the Han style.

Blue and violet dyed dodongo leather lined with finely woven cotton trousers and a tight fitting tunic designed to keep cloth from catching or a grip taking hold fit me slightly loosely, though the weight I have lost recently is replaceable. There is a starched pad I cannot figure out the placement of, but the tektite shell arm guards and boots have, for once, been made with the intent to fit my frame specifically and not cobbled together from others old or ill-fitting pieces. The cowled tunic that covers the chainmail habergeon has the Shaekha’ri weeping eye featured as prominently as ever in embroidery that I recognize well.

.:Thank you, Hanyana:.:

.:Wear it well:.:

There are a number of wraps for both my hair and as supports, though one piece of clothing is conspicuous in its absence… and I know now what the starched armor, with its thin straps and odd shape is for. I am certain I do not want to know how my Mistress came about having my measurements there, but know that Impa at least does not care beyond its function. I make sure the straps lie flat against my hips before threading them through the clip at the back and tying them off. My manhood protected better than simple small clothes could ever achieve, I’ve just finished lacing the tunic closed when the General returns.

“How does it fit?” She asks, and not content to take me at my word, has me perform a number of acrobatics that strain my recently healed hands and knees before making some minor adjustments and having me do it all again. By the end, I am exhausted to the point that I am fighting sleep every time I blink. Though the sun has yet to set, I am at my limit. Now that I have the suit on and it has been fitted to me, Impa makes me strip down to the strange codpiece and one of the blankets from the bed when my discomfort at being nearly nude rears its ugly head.

Though the battle suit is much better armor, even regular clothing is a measure of defence for me, if only in my head. Even the Geru’do loyal to their King, hauling me about like cargo and treating me as a prisoner when they had to consider me at all, left me some form of covering.

Pots of salve consisting mostly of thickened red potion stink from across the room when Impa brings me back to the bed chamber and has me sit on the mattress. She would prefer I lay on my stomach, but even though she is a guardian to her core, a Sage, my General, and my elder, I cannot bring myself to be that vulnerable to anyone. Not anymore. I tense at her touch, pulse speeding and breath quickening, and from that point on she tells me where she is about to move, to touch, well before she actually does it. It helps, and the salve soothes what the massage itself cannot. When she stands and retrieves a night shirt, it is a relief beyond even that.

“Sleep.” She instructs, putting away the now mostly empty pots. I stink of potion and the lights still burn, but she extinguishes them as she goes. With the screen up, I cannot hear the water trickling from the next room or see more than residual heat. The nightshirt is soft, the furs warm, and the gentle noise of the Goron city at night lulls me into an exhausted sleep.

The depths of the carved room leave just enough light tumbling through the caldera of a previous venting of Death Mountain that I wake early enough that it is still considered morning, but not by much. That Impa has thick slices of barley bread already buttered and waiting for the fried apples, onions, and bacon that I can smell has me much more inclined to actually rise. I eat probably more than I should, and feel overstuffed as I put on the suit from the night before.

Once I am mostly concealed again, she leads me through the top tier of the city to emerge at the crest of Death Mountain overlooking the greater portion of Hyrule. The Triforce banners stir
gently in the faint breeze and the scent of recent rain lingers as Impa guides me out of the sheltering tor and down the path that will become a steep, meandering trail where the natural ledges have been smoothed to allow passage. My calves ache at the unaccustomed pitch and hard surface beneath my feet by the time she stops nearly halfway down the second switchback and walks into the mountain side.

With a prayer to Farore, I follow.
The Memory of Purpose

Chapter Summary

Who we are is who we have chosen to become.

Chapter Notes

Here we are, in the last handful of chapters. This one picks up right where the last one ended, but there will be more jumping across months and seasons to look forward to, and more action than this relatively quiet chapter.

Other things to look forward to include: Introspection, Magic, Memories of Genocide, Cultural Differences, Metaphysics, Expansion of Canon Typical Religion.

The lizalfos deep in the cavern individually pose no threat whatsoever, but they do not attack individually. Perhaps once, when their master bade, but no longer. Now, knowing only the dark recesses of the earth, warmed by the lava and feeding on their lesser kin, they fall before Impa’s pike and my needles and dagger like grass before a scythe. On my first entry, we moved through the shadow, the guardian dead enshrouding us both. Now my training has turned to aiding Big Brother and freeing the caverns from these dangerous pests.

The luxury of regret must wait. I blame the moisture in my eyes on the sweat beading my face in the muggy atmosphere. Impa is not fooled, but cannot chastise me for a shared sorrow.

My eyes are as perceptive as hers, and the truth is plain to see. The consolation for me is in the dissipation as the bodies return to their rightful realm even as the traces of personality and intent rush towards the River. The consolation for her is something I cannot fathom.

The third eye hidden in the hallway is masked with an incredibly complex illusion that guards our destination from all reptilian inhabitants and is released only upon piercing the iris with some sort of projectile. Fortunately, there are small rocks littered about the floor, and my aim is true. The ubiquitous bomb flowers grow here in abundance, the crop untended and wild. There are as many in various stages of decay as there are fruiting growths, and we must step carefully or risk grievous harm. It is slow going, and I know now where Impa gathers both munitions and the dodongo carcasses to feed the clutches of wallmasters she trains.

The smell is spectacularly awful, and I gag repeatedly trying to clear my nose of the scent despite the filters of my mask. The necessity of slow passage does nothing to let me grow accustomed to the stench, for each step disturbs either putrefied innards, overripe bomb flowers, or some unidentifiable and unholy amalgamation of the two. The humidity and heat ensures that each waft of festering decay lingers as we cannot, for the moldering rot beneath our feet acts as a sinkhole with the weight of our steps. We must keep moving, or be enveloped in a mire of fetid ooze.

From the passage, a series of large steps or short terraces guides us upward once more, and I know I will be spending the better part of a day cleaning my boots after this, but the General of the
Loyalist army has insisted that there is something here I need to see. Beyond clearing the harvesting grounds for most of the Goron’s food, this is the reason we are here…and we alone.

In addition to being the main source of our Brother’s nourishment, the Caverns are an ideal training ground for a hidden army, yet Impa has ensured that our arrival was scheduled between drill rotations and after the last harvesters have come and gone. Being the sole recipient of the ascended Sage of Shadow’s regard is nerve wracking normally. In a mine shaft where only rabid lizalfos can hear me scream, I tread as carefully as I can.

“Stop.” The word is whispered so quietly I don’t clearly hear the syllables, but at this point every word from Impa’s mouth has me stopping whatever I’m doing as surely as a Freezard’s breath. There is so little light available I don’t rightly know what it is she does, but the results are instantly apparent.

When I was young, a travelling Goron petrology brought a number of relics through Sahila on their way to Kansadi where they were to be studied. Yoru wanted to see the studs of the Hero of the Sky’s shield, Aennah was fascinated by the fragmented Fire Rod used by the Hero of the Four Sword, Melo wanted to teethe on the elder’s finger. I…I was drawn to the dull shards of pure Timeshift stones that made up the Great Impa’s necklace.

I recognize the glow of suffusing the chamber because of it. I know the Eye Stone by the shape. I never contemplated what an amalgamation of the two would look like…especially one so obviously recently carved. The tool marks are apparent, so it is less than a century of age, though it is smooth under my hands. The pillar it rests on is only superficially concealed in the muck, and I do not hesitate to kneel before it.

Yiga Shuar

I hesitate at the engraving, my gaze directed instantly towards my General and the current Sage of Shadow, seeking.

“Know why our people have dispersed. Witness our guilt, our shame.” She tells me.

“Why?” I ask. I know the stories as well as any historian, my mother helped write them down for my generation, our children, and our children’s children. My grandmother, before her passing, told them to my mother, and spoke of her experience, and also wrote it down. We must never forget.

“Learn. Watch.” Impa is immoveable, her posture resigned, her frown determined. She still bests me when we spar, and has command of the shadow to aid her, if not the Shadow itself. I cannot flee. I do not want to immerse myself in the memories of the vilest of all of my people to live in recent memory.

That resistance to so simple a task has me stopping any further protest.

Why?

Why am I so repulsed by even the thought of seeing through Shuar’s eyes, knowing his motivations, understanding his mind? Sharu, my mentor, would be proud of me for even recognizing my reaction as extreme and emotional rather than cautious and compassionate. Knowing that, I turn back to the placard on the stone and stare at the name engraved there as though it will give me the answer I seek.

First, anger. What does anger tell me about myself? Consciously slowing my breathing, I
reflect and recall one of the first lessons the elderly shiik ever taught me about the job. Anger says passion, indicates a strong belief, and shows not only what boundaries are there but what I feel needs to change in the world.

The discomfort is an opportunity to change, either the circumstances or myself. Guilt isshouldering the responsibility of other peoples’ expectations of me. Anxiety whispers that I need to pay attention and consciously make a decision to let go of the past and stop fearing the future. Courage is what I need, to act on the wisdom I already have.

I place my head inside, not caring that there is no cushion, ignore the churning of my gut, depress the small keystones on the rim, and open my eyes.

Soon. Soon it would be complete. The work of a lifetime, of hundreds of lifetimes finally, finally, coming to fruition. It was already heavy, yes, but the weight of the world wasn’t easy to bear in the first place, so why should the ability to change it be any less cumbersome? The child seemed to carry it easily in any case. Sacred child, that one, Chosen by Destiny to bring the people back to their rightful place.

Hylia, so noble, saving the weak, the fragile, the soft. Leaving the strong, the smart, the powerful to deal with the demonic army of Demise. The harsh lessons of the world imprinted on flesh and bone, in martial and magical arts, just to be disregarded and lost on the return of the few golden youth. Surely, surely there had been discourse at first. Dialogue. A collaboration of peoples for the benefit of all. Hylia wouldn’t abandon those She knew were capable of sealing the spirits of the Dark God, of maintaining the boundary on the Imprisoned. She loved all the Goddesses’ peoples.

All of them. Not just the Hylians. The Kikwi, the Remlit, the Goron, the Fairy, the Dragons, the Humans, and yes, the Shaekha’ri. Even once the bloodlines intermingled in the races that could breed, She was to look after them. Geru’do, Picori, Yeh’ti, Deku, Kokiri, Zora. Not just the Hylians, but all peoples. The Hylians had forgotten, but the Shaekha’ri remembered. I remember. I know that She did. Am I not a devoted follower? Do I not worship Her every day?

I will remind the Hylian king that Her blood is carried in the female line. That the other races stood on equal footing. That the Shadow was as powerful as the Light.

Especially when Fused like this. My work makes Her benevolence simple to see, a glory of achievement, all for the One True Goddess of the Living peoples.

It is the work of a lifetime, and those who have donated their lives would be proud to see the Shaekha’ri finally reclaim our birthright.

They will march in the morning, those loyal to their blood, leaving the weakened and enfeebled huddled in their homes, safe from the thought of displeasing their master. Dogs, the lot of them, trained to come when called, to heel at the hunt. It has made them easier to break, less likely to run, simpler, really, to bring their otherwise useless lives in and put their natural-born magic to good use.

I’ve bled enough in their name, it really was the least they could do to return the favor.

That, or burn.

Tonight, I would paint the town red.

Impa is ready and waiting with a bucket, water, and a cool compress when I manage to
jerk myself free of Shuar’s memories, still tasting the blood and soot on my tongue as I vomit helplessly into the provided receptacle. Her hand is a light, steady pressure on my back, guiding me first to sit, then to lay upon the damp surface at the base of the memory stone. Every flicker of the eerie blue light emanating from the decaying Timeshift stones around us brings another image to my mind’s eye, every whisper of wind becomes the wailing of those innocent and not so innocent people the Fused Shadow was first tested on.

My clan, mostly, and the Dar with whom we shared territory. Faces that could have been cousins, aunts, grandmothers, frozen in the fear of their last moments. The satisfaction of it all.

It takes me a long, long time to listen to the real sounds of Impa’s humming and the present sounds of Zelda’s babbling instead of the historical slaughter of hundreds of my extended kin. I can’t contain the whine that burbles from my chest and out my throat, but at least I have nothing left to regurgitate on Impa’s boots.

Oops.

Panting, flushed, and slightly panicked, I also get to experience a rush of shame as the ascended Sage bodily picks me up and uses a deku nut to extend the shadows beyond the bomb-flower room and back into the now emptied Dodongo’s Cavern.

A slap across the face gets me focused on the now once more, no longer seeing the broken body of a woman who could have been my mother and was most likely a great-aunt still leaking from the wounds I inflicted as I…as Shuar…cleansed Kakariko.

At least the misborn and demonborn don’t leave bodies behind. The only signs of the lizalfos we have recently slain are claw marks and a lingering tension.

The trip back out is not pleasant, but the dry, cool air helps settle my stomach, and Zelda’s dry, cool humor teases me out of my repulsion by the time the Goron City is in sight.

“Brother Impa! Brother Sheik!” Bogorak’s second calls out, sitting up from the cavernous entrance to greet us, and ponderously rises to gain his full height. He’s almost as tall as Medigoron, though not nearly as round, and I understand why he never accompanied the Goron captain to any of the meetings of the Loyalist command. He wouldn’t have fit in the space designed only for those approximately Hylian-sized.

“At ease.” Impa nods to him as we pass, and with a groan of relief he nods and curls back up. I want nothing more than to do the same, but there is work to be done.

At least, I assume there is work to be done. I still don’t know where Zelda is.

::*Safe:.*

I haven’t checked in on Link today.

::*Also safe:*.

We haven’t told Darunia that the Caverns can be harvested from again yet. Impa hasn’t received any intelligence in at least two days. The snows will be coming soon and I haven’t ensured that all the sanctuary options are still weather-proofed and sufficiently stocked…

::*Aein!:* Zelda fairly screams into my mind, throwing off my worrying just enough that Shuar’s memories rise up in my head yet again. Flares of flame rise to scorch my mind even as blackness swallows them whole.
“Brother Impa, he’s waking up.” The low rumble of a particularly dominant Goron greets me and I open my eyes to meet my General’s.

“You call yourself a shii_k!?” She hisses, enraged. “Compartmentalize! You are not him!”

“But I could have been.” I whisper, unable to turn my face, letting my gaze focus on the stone walls of the Goron City’s guest chambers instead of the grimacing visage of the only other Shaekha’ri left in all of Hyrule. She is silent as I fight against the influx of how, exactly, I could use the power I can see seething inside of her, make the Fused Shadow stronger yet with that rich, almost oily shade.

“No.” She shakes her head. “You couldn’t.”

“Impa-han, uiya anslutasida!” I know I am shouting, but she must understand, she does not see how badly I have been affected. I am not expecting her to laugh, especially not so hard that she tears up. I’m confused, and it stops me short. It takes long enough for her to calm down and speak that I begin to grow annoyed, get a little hurt, find embarrassment, and then return to annoyance before she can make words of her mirth, though her posture and expression say enough that I’m willing to wait.

“Oh, Sheik.” She sighs, smiling, and actually ruffles the unruly mess of hair escaping from my wrappings, causing me to jerk away. I…don’t like being touched. Not anymore. She loses her smile. “Tor Aein, listen to me. Yiga Shuar couldn’t empathize or sympathize with anyone or anything. He understood only himself, and never wept over any hurt or loss. There was only anger in his mind, only greed in his appetites, only pride in his heart. The very fact you can understand him, can feel for him, means that you are not like him. Not in the least.”

“But…” I begin, knowing that I felt his joy in the creation of an abomination of our magic, knew his revelry in the suffering he caused, how it made him feel alive…and my repulsion in response. My repulsion…mine. Mine alone. He would simply see whether something…someone…would serve his purposes, and use or discard based on that alone. Not should he, only could he. The first is as important as the second, to me. To us. I don’t understand. “…why would you take me to see his memories if not to understand him?” I ask of the Sage, needing the answer like I need my next breath. Surprisingly, it is the Goron that sits with us that answers.

“We fight for what we believe in, for what we think the world should be, but the world is bigger than any of us. It’s bigger than all of us. Yet, you still direct your own destiny, little Brother. Unfortunately, that means you can do everything right, and still lose. It is a lesson that some of us never learn, others learn quickly, still others have beaten into them…but you, Sheik…you seem to have been born knowing. Perhaps it is Nayru’s gift to you, perhaps it is a curse, for even so, you keep trying. That might be Farore’s doing, but it reminds us that one fault does not make the bedrock unusable.”

“We would say that the experience of evil creates the opportunity for good.” Impa returns, bowing slightly to the craggy Goron probably old enough to be Darunia’s great-grandfather.

“And the forest children would say that even bad apples can fall from good trees.” He agrees, rumbling to his feet and pulling a bottle of blue potion from one of his crevasses. “Restore yourself somewhat, Shaekha’ri child of Wisdom. Now that you’ve put down the mountain you carry, don’t pick it up again until you’ve got steady feet beneath you. An unstable mage is like a bomb flower picked past ripeness: you never know where, or if, it will explode.” Dark, shiny garnet eyes gaze at me from within the sandstone complexion, and I find myself nodding.
“Yes, Elder Brother.” He is right. I must find my balance once more before I can seek to create it elsewhere.

“Rest, Sheik. Your mountain is safe for the day.” Impa assures me, and follows the ancient Goron out, the door fluttering closed behind her.

:.She’s right, you know.: Zelda chimes in as soon as I’ve gotten relatively comfortable on the thick rug that serves as bedding for guests of the Goron patriarch. I hold my silence close, trying to clear my mind of anxiety, let go of the burdens I carry. That I willingly hold, even if they are slowly crushing me. They are mine to bear. .:We’re safe. It is better with you, and we look forward to the day when you once again take up your duties with us, but for now, rest.” The constant presence in the back of my mind retreats once more to a point where she no longer puts pressure on my sanity, and I wonder how much of it I actually have left. How much of what I consider me actually is.

She’s been so much a part of who and what I have forged myself into that relaxing my hold on that association is painful…Ike lancing a blood blister. I cannot let go entirely, though I must admit that I do not honestly try very hard. It’s lonely in my head without her beside me…and like a breath of fresh air. Freeing. Spacious. Clean and clear and allowing me to trace the smaller spirits around my periphery. The rodents, bats, and fairies are first, given the warmth of their bodies, followed quickly by the Picori, reptiles and larger insects. My arrival has displaced some of them.

What would my life be like now, had I never set foot in the Sacred Lands?

Different, that is most certain, though how I do not know, in what ways, I cannot fathom, only that I would most likely not be as weary, and could bear the touch of another living being.

I haven’t seen Niakara since my capture. She is most likely dead. I could not ease her passing, and that hurts more than the thought that I shall never see her again.

Strange, that I can find tears for a beloved pet, when the death of known acquaintances and fair-weather friends leaves me dry eyed. Stranger still, that I have not seen my charges in half a turn. Even the thought of travelling, through song or shadow, to see either Link or Zelda, has me wanting to weep in exhaustion. I’m so very tired, and though the fairies in the fountain have healed what physical hurts I have suffered, there is nothing they can do for the wounds of mind and spirit. Healing those things is supposed to be my job, as suurin. I can’t even heal myself.

:.Of course not. I wouldn’t expect anyone would be able to.: The Child chosen by Destiny to bear the Triforce of Wisdom chides me. .:What ails you is a conspiracy of circumstance and lack of collaboration. Together, though, we should be able to do something about it. I asked Impa to keep you close to the Great Fairy for a few days, and you will be seeing her a few times over the next quarter. When you are not in the fountain, I will be helping you. When I am not helping you, Daros will be there.: With the name comes an image of the Goron Elder that was sitting watch over me. .:If you are to pick up your mountain of responsibility again, there is no better teacher than a Goron!: The laughter of my Lady drains some of my depression, enough that I can turn to the stone palate with its thick rug laid out and at least sit.

Lying down is difficult. I’ve been lying down too much, and my knees ache at the thought, even though there is more than enough space for me to sprawl out. At Zelda’s urging, I try anyways. She sings her lullaby to try and encourage calm, but my mind will have none of it. The poor light that filters in from the pathways through the curtain door and the faint gaps on the sides is too like that of the prison wagon. The stone, though covered by a very well woven rug, is too much like the smooth floorboards. Indistinct conversation, though I can understand a good portion of it if I focus, requires too much attention to not be meaningless babble.
I sit, and from there, stand. I am unsteady on my feet. Weak. There is no chance of running anywhere, and I cannot effectively fight. The lack of options makes either of them the only possible solution. My lungs heave as my heart races and the light flashes as the curtain is jostled by passerby and Zelda takes over entirely, shoving me from my body while I panic and calming the physical symptoms. She has not pushed me far, and disassociated as I am, I cannot focus enough to either make good on the escape or take back control. I am...worn. Useless, at least for the moment.

She dons my form as one would armor, heavy and strong, and covers my face with the loosened cowl before marching down the circular layers of the Goron streets to present us at Darunia’s doorway. The guard there waits for a response, then allows the intrusion, and I am unsurprised to find him in discussion with Impa, though a rounder looking Goron whom I must assume to be Magetus is holding Link of the Gorons is present as well.

“Sheik, this is a surprise.” Impa is not pleased, but I am too hollowed out to care and Zelda is in control.

“I cannot abide. I shall return in the morning.” She says, and wisely, does not wait for permission, but fingers the moonstones wrapped once more in my hair to select one that I had not thought of. My spirit is dragged along behind my body as she carries us to the sanctuary by Elydis, and then immediately plays the Minute once she is certain I am still with her.

“I didn’t want them to be able to quickly follow.” She says aloud, and Saria smiles.

“Though the Temple is overrun with monsters, there are still places where you will be safe, here.” The Sage of Forest speaks with a skull kid before leading me from the clearing and towards the Kokiri village where the eternal children are curling up for the night. One with a distinctive personality to accompany his distinctive coloring grumbles as she passes, though he does not wake.

We travel through the village as twilight fades from memory and night blankets the woods in an eerie stillness unbecoming of a place of such life. Though the Kokiri do not give off the same type of heat as other large animals of intelligence, the plethora of Deku around the boundaries of the settlement are like enough that I can easily distinguish how many of the Forest Children live...and my count is lower than I expected.

Distracted by the subtle glow of the Heart of the Forest’s charges, it is only when Zelda inhales sharply that I realize where the Sage is leading us.

The clearing has few trees aside from the Great Deku Tree’s remains, and they are short and sparse, the light that would filter through the branches of the ancient giant insufficient for anything taller than I am over again. There is a good deal of grass, and a thick sproutling, but the guardian of the forest himself is as cold as still as the stone marking the edges of the clearing. He has been dead for cycles, and we did not know.

I must find a way to inform the historians that observe the lines...or at least the Hierarchy.

“It’s a little bit scary, but perfectly safe. Even the meanies don’t come in here.” Saria admits, gesturing upward in the circular core of what was once a being not unlike the Light Spirits said to hold sway in each of the four directions, or the great Dragons of old. Now, vines cover the innards, rings of curing wood rising to let the faintest traces of the full moon illuminate this sacred space.

“Thank you, Saria.” Zelda bows low to the Sage, who nods her acknowledgement before returning to the village. When I can no longer see her, and Zelda cannot hear her soft footfalls on
moss and loam, we grab a handful of the vines, test them, and begin the climb.

By the time we reach the top, I am in control, and Zelda rides passively without comment. By needing to focus in finding secure footing and hand holds, I cannot risk the distraction of a looping and surging mind. The exertion of the climb serves both to still my emotions and ground me in my form once more.

Brother moon is bright, and I can see clear to Hyrule Field by his light. A remarkably large bird circles lazily before descending in a silent and deliberately ponderous fashion to land on the Great Deku Tree’s massive limbs.

“Whoo, whoo, young one.” He greets, his head tilting nearly upside down and making me dizzy.

“Rauru-yana?” I squawk, nearly losing my grip on my perch in surprise.

“In another time, at another place, perhaps.” The owl hoots in amusement. “I am called Kaepora-Gaebora here and now.” A chirr, and his feathers fluff up in a sure sign of avian agitation.

“Do the Heirarchy know of the loss of the Great Deku Tree? Can you tell them?” Focusing on someone else’s problems helps me ignore my own, and I cling to the presented dilemma with all the desperation I can, transferring what emotional distress I did not successful transmute.

“They know, Aein. They have known since the parasite began its infestation. I am here to help you sleep.” The Sage of Light I thought confined to the Chamber and the Temple wafts feathers that smell of must and pine.

“But…” I protest, but follow the drape of wing to the branches one level lower where a nest capable of bearing the weight of an owl the size of a house rests. Knowing the dietary habits of natural born nocturnal birds, I glance about for the castings, not really wanting to know what would go into an owl pellet of that magnitude, and find none. It…is as good a place as any, and protected by two Sages, even ascended, and the magic of the Lost Woods, I feel safer.

Cocooned by cast off feathers and shielded from the light by Kaepora-Gaebora’s warmth, I can relax. Guided by Zelda’s encouragements, I can rest. Exhausted, I sleep.

Dawn brings the nearby village to life beneath me, the watery pale beams of light piercing the clouds lending a gloaming to the cocoon of feathers about me. Gentle as my waking is, I am disinclined to rise. Despite sleeping the first night through since my capture, I am tired still, in a way that has nothing to do with sleep itself. I have a mountain to retrieve, and cannot bring myself to anticipate its weight. It would be so simple to relax my grip, to slip between the branches of Kaepora-Gaebora’s nest and let my bones fertilize the Deku Sprout…

:.Simple, yes, but when is the simplest choice the correct one?:. Zelda asks, and it is not rhetorical. She is questioning my thoughts, and directing me to examine my answer. I pause, maintaining my hold and my footing, and let the first answer slip away, followed by the second. They are trite, foolish, and lack the examination of my patterns, true introspection, and my perception of my place in the world in their quick and easy nature.

:.The simple choice is correct only when full knowledge of the situation has been evaluated without bias.:. I return, and shift to rise. I am biased, and there is work to be done. If not by me, then by others. If not by others, then the Oath of Demise will conquer all, and leave all life blighted, cursed, and filled with suffering. The simplest solution is for me to do it. Knowing does not make the choice easy, nor does it alleviate the bleakness of the work itself. Zelda, wisely, says nothing,
only sending me the warmth of her regard and affection. I have passed this test, then. There will be others.

“Would you like a ride to the summit? I hear there is breakfast waiting, whoo-whoo!” The gargantuan owl asks as soon as I am upright, the barbs of his feathers soft despite the calamus being as thick around as my wrist. The after feathers alone the size of my palm, I find myself stroking the recently preened down and pondering his offer. I want a bath more than food, but Impa and Darunia will be expecting me and there are hot springs near the Fire Temple that I will be granted access to should I ask, and so I accept as politely as I can manage.

The view of Hyrule from the grip of Kaepora-Gaebora’s talons is spectacular.

.:This is what we fight for.: My Queen whispers across my mind, watching through my eyes, feeling the wind of our passage on my face. It is beautiful, this place. The Fountain, the Forest, the Plains, the Mountain, the Desert, the Lake…and then, like an infected sore on the face of the landscape, the Tower. Though we fly too high to make out any detail, it is clear that the pinnacle of Ganondorf’s Power does not belong…and that he is stealing the energy of the other places somehow, using it to bolster his own stronghold. I can See the magic of the Forest, the Desert, and the Light already amalgamated into the malicious trials contained within, and frown. The patterning is vaguely familiar, and I don’t know why.

It is not as though the ascended Sages and their corrupted Temples are the answer, for the Shadow should be amongst them if it were, and it is not. The Sage of Shadow though has sent the Power inherent in that position of divine precedent beyond the reach of any mortal…just as The Sage of Light has fragmented his, the Sage of Spirit removed hers, and the Sage of Forest deeply buried hers. The Sage of Water still holds the full clout of that station, as does the Sage of Fire who is waiting with solemn calm unbefitting his normally jovial nature.

I roll to cushion my landing somewhat, and blink tears from my eyes to clear the dust that rose with the gusting wind from gargantuan wing-beats as Kaepora-Gaebora takes once more to the sky. The banners of the Goron Tribes flutter, and their leader approaches me with a measured pace. I wait for recriminations over my abrupt departure.

“Come, Brother.” Darunia rumbles, clasping his arm across my shoulders gently for a Goron, the pressure light enough that I do not feel encumbered by the weight of his limb. He leads me down the circular layers of the Goron City to the lowest and least frequented, where the business of Town and Temple are conducted and little else. Sidestepping the twisting boulders on the way, dodging those out for their work or simply to enjoy the morning, I am pleased to see that the larders have been filled, and the cut marks on the stone there are fresh and raw.

The lizalfos’ remains dissipated at death, returning to the Demon Realm from whence they had been summoned…but knowing that the return is a restoration of proper order and justifying the blood on my hands are two very different things. Seeing the Goron populace eating, relaxed, and happy helps restore some of the equilibrium of my hurting heart. It helps a great deal.

The scent of cooking and the welcome I receive alongside a filled plate is also a boon. The round, reddish skinned white tubers that have been finely chopped and fried with onion, and then topped with two eggs and a few leaves of late basil, improve my mood further, to the point where I am ready to listen to whatever it is the Sages say. I am not cheery, nor am I jovial, but I am no longer even passively suicidal, which is good. I can devote my energy to the tasks I will be given, and not to simply waiting for my heart to fail and my will to collapse.

Darunia leads me to the room on the opposite side of the lowest level from his chambers, and I do not question the change in location, merely following along, resigned to my fate. I am not
expecting that he would be taking me to the cluster. Pebbles, some capable of toddling along on stubby legs barely thick enough to support round, smooth bodies, some only capable of blinking gemstone bright eyes at the changing light, crowd under the three adults providing succor.

“Brother to Brother, Tribe to Tribe.” The Goron Patriarch begins, and the babble in what would be a nursery were the young there Hylian or Human ceases. He grins, then uses the arm still slung about my shoulder to push me towards a scattering of four of the largest. “Play nice.” He says, and I am uncertain who his words are directed at. Not that it truly matters, for a young Goron perhaps as tall as my knee and the color of rosy feldspar promptly hands me a brightly colored ball and burbles.

When put like that, I cannot refuse.

The ball is weighty for its size, I understand the need for toys to be remarkably sturdy beneath the hands of growing Goron children still young enough that coordination is something to be discovered. Simply rolling the ball back and forth requires the use of both large and fine motor control that the child I am playing with manages…for the most part. I am swift in retrieving the well-loved sphere when he misses, and reliable in returning it at a speed he can accommodate.

A mid-morning snack, a stacking puzzle, blocks with the primary forms of Goron glyphs on their faces, and a song-game of basic body part identification leads to lunch and is quickly followed by a nap. Three of the pebbles have decided that I am a good place to nap against, and it takes two of their caretakers and Darunia himself to free my clothing from that rock-solid grip without disturbing them or destroying the fabric. Somewhere between the blocks and when Balodun asked if he could curl against my side, I have lost my reluctance. Meeting with Impa and Darunia is no longer a monumental task requiring all my willpower, but rather an activity that furthers my hopes for the future.

The hope for Hyrule’s future is a major talking point. Link is, now, the most proficient swordsman I know, and one of the best archers. His mind is quick, his heart true, his body strong and flexible, and what he lacks in memory Navi can convey. I tell the Sages this, for once secure and united in their Chamber in the Sacred Realm, and have my observations backed by my Queen.

She looks remarkably well, her skin radiant and glowing, hair smooth and glossy, standing tall and regal before the assembled Sages, and has put on enough weight in muscle that it is noticeable. I notice the strength in her legs is enough to support my slide down them as the overwhelming pressure of the place becomes too much to bear. Though I barely noticed their passage through my magic - focused more and more on harmony, balance, and the creation of sanctuaries great and small – their presence in the same confined area which is already teeming with vibrant, pulsing life is slowly crushing me. Yet it is safe.

Safe does not mean comfortable, and the protective barriers about the Chamber with its reflections of reflections is dizzying at best, nauseating at worst. I am somewhere between the two, and close my eyes against further disorientation. Zelda drops a hand to rest on my head, letting me lean against her and retain at least some of my dignity along with my vertical status, even as Nabooru finishes describing her imprisonment in a specially crafted Iron Knuckle. The lack of focus brought on by being under a good deal of metaphysical pressure, as well as Hyrulean being my third language to master caused some initial confusion, as I thought the Sage of Spirit said “Aein nakkur” at first. It was only when Impa and Zelda did not react to the crude insult and I listened closely that the words became clear.

Not to mention, I doubt that the Sage, a full grown Gerudo warrior with all the muscle that entails, would fit in that particular portion of my anatomy. She would have to be ground up into a
I know why the patterning I saw in Ganondorf’s Tower is familiar.

“Aein?” Zelda asks, kneeling and shaking my shoulder gently. My distress has her in tears, and I try to calm myself enough to speak by breathing deeply and focusing on the feel of her pressed against me, holding me tight. On the second inhalation I choke on air, gasp, and retch. Hard.

“Sorry!” Ruto calls across the divide, and I have a heartbeat to wonder what she is apologizing for before my magic is stretched and yanked wide, and she batters her way through to return to her Temple, pulling me along behind. It burns more than the stomach acid fighting its way up the back of my throat, the whine of pain that tries to follow more of a wet gurgling.

“Sorry. Sorry, sorry.” She murmurs, and calls on her gifts as the Sage of Water, deep in the Temple. I don’t know if she lowers me, or raises the water to meet us, but it covers me and supports my weight gently, soothing and calm. The parts of me that would become the challenge of this Temple flow from me, taking with it my anger, my resentment, my grief, and my fear, only to return as direction, purpose, remembrance, and a thrill of excitement.

My breathing regulates on its own, anticipation and discovery keeping my heart racing, my words quickened. My hands burn, the backs blistering, palms red, fingers itching, as Impa and Darunia join us in the Depths of Reflection. With Zelda holding the center, Rauru, Saria, and Nabooru wait in the Chamber of Sages for my return, and my Queen can convey my sudden realization. My clothes squelch, but I sit up on my own, tired, but no longer strained. Panting, but no longer breathing so quickly I am in danger of passing out.

“Mandrag Ganondorf is building a smaller version of the Unspoken in the base of his tower.” I gasp out, shuddering. If Impa hadn’t taken me to visit Shuar’s memories…if I was unfamiliar with the process required to create the Fused Shadow…if Kaepora Gaebora had left me to return on my own…if I hadn’t misunderstood Nabooru’s imprisonment…

There are too many factors for the timing to be coincidence.

Sweet Nayru, if I didn’t help create the bier that sustained Zelda’s mortal form after she passed the First Gate, I wouldn’t know how to recognize the barriers the Dark King is using to sustain the Trials at the base of his Keep. If he wasn’t using spirits at the core, keeping them locked from the Silent Realm or from becoming ghosts or Poes, I wouldn’t have connected the magic to the creation of the Fused Shadow. A Hylian, a Kokiri, and a Gerudo spirit thus far…

It’s all I can do not to retch again. Crying is an acceptable substitute, as is trembling. Crying alone doesn’t keep me from talking, though I have to be careful with the ink and parchment Ruto supplies when my sketching in the sand keeps getting washed away by the water, lest I smear the lines with drops of warm salt water. By the time the Sages have gone over my diagrams and explanations enough to satisfy both those present and those still in the Chamber, I am exhausted and the light has changed from a pale gold to faint silver with effervescent azure flares. It is the right season for Farore’s Scarf to be trailing through the sky, and brother moon was fully rounded yesterday.

It is Impa who catches me when I try standing, Ruto who fills my depleted magic enough that I stop drawing on the energy of my body to sustain it, Zelda who closes the link to the Chamber, and Darunia who carries me in Song back to the Fire Temple. His large, solid hands cradle me as a mother does her child, and I am too drained to protest as we enter Death Mountain’s Crater and the Great Fairy’s Fountain contained within.
The Patriarch of all the Gorons of Hyrule sings the summoning, and, with my channels so very strained and raw, the rush of magic as the Great Fairy of Wisdom answers draws lines of black and a shaded periphery about my vision.

“This won’t do.” The Great Fairy murmurs as she directs her lesser brethren to attend to my form and my spirit. The weakness of seclusion, of injury, of illness are mended along with the physical bruising from being carried by a being with rocks for hands, and the channels and wellsprings of my magic follow shortly thereafter as first the producers, and then the directors of my strength in the mystical arts are restored. Chilled from the soaking first of the Water Temple, then of the Fountain itself, I test my limits with a precise flare of mage craft and dry myself and my clothing. The act makes my ability seem limitless, and a heady rush of determination leaves me breathless. It’s magnificent, the sheer power I am capable of accessing, of using to further my goals.

:Which are?: Zelda interjects, staggering me from the euphoria of mastery I’ve been engulfed in, long enough that Darunia looks mildly concerned.

“Sorry.” I whisper, bowing my head to him. “Many thanks, Great One. Is there a service I may perform in restitution?” I ask, facing the ancient fairy but careful not to look directly at her face. It is not my place, however energized I feel, nor is it appropriate to meet a gift with arrogance and entitlement.

I still feel as though I could run from the heart of the Desert Fortress across the Field and through to the Kokiri Village without stopping, and know that the Fairy has gifted me with more than just restorative magics. What enhancements she has bequeathed, and to what extent they are entailed, remain to be discovered.

“Clear a way for the small ones in the base of the Tower of Darkness to gather or flee, and your debt will be repaid in full.” The flames on the pillars flicker with her words, the water in the basin dancing. To be indebted to a Great Fairy isn’t something I’m comfortable with, for retribution often occurs at the point of death…leading to bound Poes. My spirit is intended for another purpose, and if the last year culminating in my collapse in the Chamber has taught me anything, I should make certain of that pledge quickly. Discharging as many debts as I can, so my spirit will be free when my body meets its end.

Verbally thanking the Great Fairy once more, I wait for the Sage of Fire to lead the way before she returns to tend the small ones. His pace is sure and steady through the brief portion of the Fire Temple’s forecourt, though I am still sweating by the time we reach his rooms of office.

“Will you be using the guest chambers, Brother Sheik?” Big Brother asks softly as we enter the Goron City.

“Not this evening, Big Brother Darunia.” I respond in kind. It is early evening, and if I am quick, I may be able to view the sunset from a place of solitude and peace. Both will be needed if I am to complete my castings by the new moon. I have access to most of the tools I will need, can make some of the ones I lack, but there is one thing that I must have if I am to be successful in my endeavor.

:Hanyana?: I ask once I’ve crested the last curve of the Goron streets built into the caldera of the active volcano that is their home.

:Yes, Aein-ah?: She is tired, but satisfied. I get a wave of drowsy contentment and allow myself to enjoy the feeling she is sharing for a moment before returning to my initial query.
Where are you?: I ask. If I am to tie myself to her...after...then I be in her presence for the fading of the last of brother moon’s light.

I will be there when you need me.: She responds, and no matter how I press for a more exact time or location, she will not be moved.

Watching the waning moon rise over Hyrule from the peak of Death Mountain, I can see the faintest pieces of its sibling neighbors stretching out north and west, though the forest beyond Zora’s Domain prevents me from so much as glimpsing anything more than the mists that keep the land of the Goddesses safe.

It’s not really...: The living representative of not one, but two of those Goddesses interjects in my thoughts, and I feel her settle in my mind to appreciate the view that only Shaekha’ri eyes can see.

Hyrule. High-rule. What is it called again, in your tales?:

The Descent, where Hylia brought Skyloft down after the defeat of Demise.: It’s Her place. For Her people. The Three...they created everything. Hylia kept their relics safe, kept evil from claiming the last remaining fraction of their power...because they left.: They had to, to keep the Peoples from becoming mere playthings of the Divine.: But they left, leaving Hylia to guard the Triforce, and She died protecting it.: She gave up her immortality to protect it.: I correct. There is a distinction between the two.: She still died.: Zelda insists, and Nayru gifts me with just enough insight to understand why that particular historical fact is so prominent in Zelda’s mind...and why I cannot simply reassure her and be done with it. Context, in this case, is as important as concept.

She did, but the Three provided for even that. Nayru gave her the Wisdom to ensure that there would be others to take up the task in the interim. Din gifted her the Power to create the tools and the clues and the respect of the creatures that would be needed to perform the work. Farore granted her Courage to face her fate, solitude, sleep, loss of divinity, death, and all.: As if in response to my words, the sky flickers a brilliant green, eclipsing the blue and red tones on the edges. And so she became mortal, in doing so she lived, and so she died. As will you, for though you were born mortal, you carry both Her bloodline and Her divine task. Keep the Triforce safe, from any who would use it unjustly, uncaringly, or for petty reasons.: She is quiet, and my mind stills, falling into a light trance in the face of the light show going on directly overhead. The fluidity of motion, the grace in shifting from one form to the next, a perpetual constant becoming...Farore’s Chosen is aptly picked. Not that I would expect anything less from one of the Three.

I thought...: My Mistress begins, unsure of herself for the first time since our separation. I wait, leaving myself as open and as welcoming as I can...a first for me, for nearly a full cycle of the seasons. She knows, though, what I am doing and how much it costs me to do it. Her appreciation and pride in me is nearly overwhelming, and in the face of such warm regard and gentle acceptance I
can only respond in kind.

She finds the place in my mind that I have made to hold her, and fills it without reservation or hesitation. The comfort of it, the contentment, the feeling of *rightness* it brings blurs the lines of Farore’s Scarf and leaves a faint silvery trail down the sides of my face, barely noticeable above my mask. I close my eyes against the swimming of my vision, breathing deeply and simply appreciating her presence. She completes me, though she does not fill the void in my heart or create a fire in my loins, she is constant and sure, steady and warm.

:.Thank you, hanyana.: I whisper across the bond of our souls.

:.Thank you, suurin.: She smirks back, amused at my use of her title in the face of all that we share and all that we are to each other.

:.Zelda.: I correct myself, and she laughs.

:.Aein.: All that I am and all that I can be is contained in the syllables of my name on her lips…which I can feel as they move downward once more into a frown. :.I thought that it was your geas to keep the Triforce safe, my Wisdom in particular.:.

:.My geas is to serve the bearers, burned into the flesh of my back. My oath is to serve you, burned on the back of my hand.: The first is because of what I am, the second, because of who I am. Who I choose to be. I am not a plaything of the Goddesses, though I choose to follow one. When put like that, it’s so very simple. :.I am an instrument of your will.: She is a descendant of Hylia’s mortal form, chosen by Nayru to bear Wisdom.

She sings me to sleep on the peak of the mountain, nestled close in the confines of my mind, soothed with the lullaby that is hers. Everything else can wait.
Sweat and tears are analogous to flesh and blood. What one can accomplish, so too can the other... but the second set are that much more powerful. Faster. Stronger. It is something the Dark King understands well. Power, and the uses of it. The uses of sweat and tears, flesh, and blood. Especially blood. The heralding cry of the patrol on circuit through Kakariko is audible from halfway up Death Mountain Trail, offering now instead of rupees a month’s worth of food for information on my whereabouts. A year’s worth for my corpse. Food for a family, for a year, if I am captured alive.

Double that, if I am unharmed.

Nauseated from the fear, knowing what hunger can do to blood relatives, knowing that I am the last aside from Impa of my people, I retreat to Dodongo’s Cavern for the scant shelter from ever cooler skies and reception that is available there. The isolation of the previous winters is compounded by the loss of Niakara, of Zelda’s physical distance, sending metaphorical chills down my spine to join with the ones brought on by temperature. I recognize that it is a necessity for survival, not just an imposition, in the same breath that I must survive.

No matter the cost.

Zelda’s fate depends on it. Link’s depends on her. Hyrule depends on them both.

My coin is useless for trade, my skills unavailable to bargain with, in the face of this most unwelcome news. Too many know my face, hidden though it is. Too many will be hungry, sooner rather than later. A spent land cannot account for an exhausted populace, drought in the south, rot in the west, locusts in the east, and a tyrant on a stolen throne in a castle resting over a wound of the earth still bleeding freely means there is not enough food to go around. Not anywhere in the Field, never the Desert, the holdings and forts and keeps have had stored goods exhausted and so will face riots, definitely not enough here...

...even with the corpses decorating the gate on the mountain side of Kakariko meaning that many fewer mouths to feed, that many more goods to be divided amongst the survivors.

Lyam. Erys. Conrad. Haruld. Valyarie. All of the Kakariko militia, most of the staff of
the Lost Cucco. No Anju, but there is another wall on the other side of the town that I cannot see. None of the children. Not Brant, not Johanna. Doylan, for what it’s worth, in all his bloated glory. Never have I been more thankful that none of the writings produced in the basement rooms stayed there, or not one of the Loyalists would be safe.

Never have I been more thankful for the Great Fairy’s gift. I can once more draw clear distinction between myself and others, between what I am feeling and what the spirits of the land are telling me, between myself and Zelda and what the land is telling her, between the living, the dead, the malformed, and the corrupted. My ability to create illusion would rival Chia’s, and she has studied that particular talent all her life—or at least she had, when I last saw her. It means I can hide. It means I can compartmentalize everything into need, want, benefit, detraction, and baggage. I don’t have to like it, but it makes my decision making process much quicker.

Leave. Now.

I do, letting the barest breath of breeze become my guide as the moonstones dance beneath my bandaged fingers.

Lanthrop Fortress is almost directly south of Elydis Hold, and it has the benefit of not only being abandoned, but in the one area of Hyrule that I’ve mostly avoided for the duration of my time here. No one will expect me to flee there, especially with Sheik sightings happening all around Fort Heathersage and the remains of Aversa Keep. The single set of keyed moonstones from the sanctuary by Orville Keep allows me that luxury, and the local spirits are happy to keep the small luminous gems safe from outside interference, and the local uncorrupted dead guard them.

That I am never far from Zelda is part of the common knowledge of Loyalist and Traitor, Lord and peasant alike, and that keeps her safer still. The sanctuaries I constructed and now will not be returning to means she has physical safety, wherever she goes. The layers of warding and shielding keep her metaphysically as secure as the Sage of Light…and as isolated.

I have moved beyond isolation into the realm of myth and rumor. The Sheik of legend is less tangible than the large Poes that roam the field at night, twice as frightening, and three times as fast. In reality, I simply do not rest much, and have enough ability to bolster the hushed whispering in the villages…and that leads to murmurs in the barracks, soft words in the dark. If it were not necessary, my life would be much, much easier.

I will need to find or construct a better shelter than abandoned cougar den I used last night for the coming winter, and quickly, and supply myself with foodstuffs and a means of keeping myself warm, but for the time being, I travel. The sheer edges where Skyloft descended once more to the surface have pitted and cracked, fractured and fallen over a dozen centuries, and where there is a fault in the earth itself, there may be a place I can alter to suit my needs.

Despite the looming seasonal dangers, I must still find time to stabilize the shelter of the Hero of Time. Fi’s magic is running out, and she’s been storing it for so long her name has been forgotten and her form is of mythical stature greater than mine will ever be. For all her divinely sanctioned existence, she cannot maintain him much longer, needing more and more energy just to keep him hovering in the spaces between places and the time between moments. Soon, I will not be able to visit, the strain of my understanding of the world placing too much additional stress on her spell work. She cannot die, being a sword…but she can fade into nothingness, cursed to sleep within the sword, and that, somehow, is so much worse.

To stall, purpose unfulfilled, unknowing if it ever will be, unable to actually stop, to rest.

There is nothing I can do for her now. All I can do at this time is to teach him as much as I
can, in the hopes that, even if he doesn’t remember, he’ll somehow know, and leave her to her work. Trust in them both, and keep both Zelda and her portion of the Triforce safe.

I can’t do that well when I am hungry, and so, with the help of the Picori and the Deku, the unnamed spirits of land and flora, the agreements of fauna and the restless dead, I hunt and forage as I run. A patch of groundnuts leaves me with a dozen fist sized tubers and an herb bag full of legume pods. Two periods of walking later, a robust bed of flowering gallant soldiers lies by a small stream, and so I quench my thirst and boil the leaves in a bottle for a small midday meal.

As the sun begins her downward trek, speedwell and both endure and stamella mushrooms fill my second bag, and two fat hares slip into the spelled hunting pouch. The season of easy hunting is rapidly drawing to a close, and though I take pride in the clean, swift deaths, I also give thanks to their spirits for their sacrifice, to Farore for the life She brought into being, and to Mokara, that they find peace and sweet clover in the Silent Realm. Though there is little of it left, I take the last of the clover they were feeding on and hold onto it as I look for an acceptable campsite.

Though my clothing provides decent protection from the elements, my bedroll further warmth, it is cold at night and I would appreciate being able to build a fire for more than just warmth. Light to see by, a means to go about cooking the meat I carry, perhaps even the simple comfort of tea. But a fire means light for eyes to be alerted at a distance, cooking meat sends smells out to tempt predators both wild and domestic, and the warmth itself calls to the dishonored dead that Ganondorf has conscripted to his army.

An acceptable campsite will hide all these moderately well, with room for me to lie close enough to benefit but far enough to not accidentally roll and have my hair or clothes or bedding catch fire. A good campsite will have a water source nearby, a place for me to dig a necessary, and ground that I can overturn with my small spade.

What I find is far, far superior to even my wildest hopes.

After spending two full cycles both preparing for and building sanctuaries for my Queen to travel between and keep knowledgeable about the various parts of the country she rightfully should rule, I have grown experienced in seeing what is natural and what is altered by the hands of various peoples and animals for habitation. This particular crevice is just large enough for a small Goron to squeeze through, and a larger one to carefully shuffle by, if they crouched low and were not afraid of a few scrapes on the rock. It has been longer than I have been alive since anyone has done so, longer still since a Goron traversed the distance.

But it is a space, designed for intelligent life to live in, and quite comfortably at that. Beyond the crevice the stone opens up to a small courtyard, perhaps ten by twelve paces, that once contained a garden and now houses an overgrowth of mushrooms in the shade and a growth of hearty radishes in the light. I cannot walk through the square without stepping on one or the other, and so tread lightly upon the mushrooms whose scent tells me they will consume the stalks and caps of their fallen and can have an interesting effect on one’s sense of time if eaten in quantity to explore the home beyond.

And home it is, in truth, though that of a recluse. The door has long since rotted away, even the metal nails holding the frame in place powder at a cautious touch, telling me I am not invading a current occupant’s dwelling. The stone itself is firm beneath my hand, and the air fresh in my lungs, and so I continue deeper in. Mice and beetles scurry as I bring forth a ball of illuminative light to see, and the skins and skeletons of rodent and reptile, bat and bug, and even a few keese litter the floor. It smells, but not of foul molds or poisonous rot, rather of droppings and decay that can easily be swept away.
The first room is a gathering place, and has a simple stove carved into the wall with a chimney that is blocked by dirt and roots of the plants overhead, but again, that is easily cleared. Immediately beyond, sharing the wall with the stove, is a room for sleeping, definitely build for Gorons but just as obviously most recently used by Humans…aside from the rodents nesting in the remains of a trundle bed. The walls are marked with holes where nails have been removed or rusted out that must have held furniture, most likely chests and shelves, and possibly a curtain or two to help contain the warmth of the crude stove.

Beyond that are two storage rooms, each one lower than the last, and a well in the final chamber that still holds water from the sound of a pebble dropped, though if it is fresh remains to be seen. Here, where the sun never shines and the earth stays cool, I shiver, but that is good. I could store meat there and not fear fouling and rot in the winter and early spring. It serves my purposes for shelter, and I spend the rest of the afternoon clearing enough space to first scale the rock and clear the chimney, then scour the ground with what brush I can gather in the main chamber enough to place the moonstone securely. The hard earth-pack crumbles to reveal the remains of a wooden plank, then still deeper a tough tile that my metal spade cannot even scratch. My moonstone rests easily on the still perfectly level floor, telling me even more about the original occupants.

I will need to be careful, and most likely must resort to theft, to procure enough rope, nails, and a bucket for the well water, but between the sanctuaries and my own ability, I should, over the course of the next turn, be able to transform this place into a shelter for the winter. Rabbit stewed with the groundnut tubers and beans makes a hearty evening repast, and I curl up in the crevice itself with my bedroll to avoid dealing with the crawly things tonight.

Dawn comes a little bit later, every day, but it still comes and I still rise with it, the days of complaining about it long gone despite the desire to return to sleep remaining. There is work to be done, only so much time to do it, and no one else to take up the task should I fail. The second rabbit and mushrooms roast on a whittled skewer as I gnaw on a larger radish. The groundnut tubers I left in the ashes overnight have softened enough to be edible, and I take them with me Between to find Link running laps around two markers as both Navi and Fi lob projectiles at him. The spirit of the sword wavers with my arrival, dissipating moments later, even as a shirtless Hero pounces on the food like a wolfos on injured prey.

His body is nearly that of a man, his shoulders broader now than they have ever been before, his voice lower, and seemingly taller…yes, definitely taller. The moment he finishes his meal he becomes a puppy once more, bounding over to play in the only way he knows how, the only consistent means of physical contact I have provided him, jumping on anything resembling affection with the same intense hunger he displayed for food. We spar. He wins, and claims a shoulder as his reward. The childish mannerisms keep me from recoiling at the intimacy only by the slimmest of margins, but it is enough to keep him healthy and me at least mostly sane. I leave the last of the raw groundnut pods when I go, alongside my sense of propriety.

I know where supplies are kept in all the major and most of the minor settlements, and ensure that I do not take more than one item from any one place, leaving behind double what the item would cost in rupees…but it is still theft, and I still do not take any pride in my work for the afternoon. Reluctant satisfaction that I have what I will need, yes, but no pride, and no joy. Zelda, though engaged in other tasks wherever she is, notices my foul mood and sends a quick burst of confidence and affection before returning her attention to whatever it is she is doing.

I tie the stolen rope to a pilfered bucket and toss it over the lip of the well, pulling up more of the same refuse that litters the floor of the ancient traveler’s house over and over again, dumping the accumulated muck and trash of decades carefully in the crevice itself, letting the water run back towards the small garden and leaving the sopping mess block the path even more. Now that my
moonstone is set, though I will move it to a better location later, I needn’t use the awkward walkway again. Having further deterrents for possible intruders gives me slightly more peace of mind. The restless dead seeking the peace of my touch will be unperturbed by something so physical as detritus, and the snakes and mice and insects will be able to escape easily.

Ten buckets of clear water later I have the confirmation that the water in the back chamber of my recovered shelter is potable, which means I will not have to distill it, which means I do not need to further my career as a common thief right away. Coiling the rope, bucket on hand, I return to the clearing hosting the rush mushrooms and radishes. The task has taken most of my remaining daylight, and since the bed I used last night is now covered in rot and filth, I uproot enough radishes for a small meal and lay as much of my bedroll as I can in the cleared area. Resigned to a lumpy, oddly textured surface beneath me, I cover my head and hope none of the residents of the home decide to join me in the night.

In the morning, starting in the depths of the place I hope to call home for the winter, I state my intent, build warding in the blocked crevice and illusion over the skies, and start a fire. The light alone is enough to send beetles scurrying, and the nearby nest of snakes slither after them. I start another, a step away from the first, and then another. By the time I have the back wall ablaze, the smoke is thick enough to chew, and the flight of the small lives now displaced is in full riot. The second room I manage to start three flames flickering before I need to leave, and only one in the first chamber. The garden is rife with fleeing creatures, but in the sunlight it is easy to see the coloring of the snakes as they travel and which ones have fed recently.

The small, pale taupe youngling with the sleek body and quick movements dies quickly beneath my knife, its head now a separate part even as the rest twitches forward. That head gets tossed back into the flames, now thick and choking in the open garden, even as I use a larger rock to pin down the tail just inside the doorway. Then, with a late lunch cooking, I take myself to Lake Hylia for a bath and further bartering, foraging and thievery.

The first I accomplish at the lakeside laboratory, handing Lyell enough rupees for two bottles of blue potion alongside a false name, assumed appearance, and someone else’s story adopted as my own. The second comes once I reach the eastern shoreline and alongside the third. The seaweed and fish are available here for any with the means to gather them, but the soaproot planted at the shore is cultivated and therefore someone’s property if not livelihood…and I use it anyway. This will most likely be my last bath before spring that is not sporadic, partial, and relatively ineffective.

My clothing, herb bags, skin, and hair all get as thorough a scrubbing as I can manage without a stiff bristled brush or paddles, and the game sack a thorough rinse. The spells on it prevent decay, but there is a build-up of blood, fur, nails, and skin that is more than a little revolting. As they dry, I dive for two stems of the alaria, brilliant green and boyant, that I can see floating from shore. Those two stems fill one herb bag completely, eel grass fills the second, and I take the time to dig up enough mussels to fill my stolen bucket with enough water to cover the lot, replacing the liquid twice before it runs clear.

Driftwood and a touch of mage craft provides me with a fire, and in relatively short order, breakfast. Bland, chewy, and a touch gritty as not all the sand was expelled in my washing, I still give thanks for the bounty of the water and the gift of their lives, and appreciate the fire in the cool autumn air. Sated, I return to my gathering, and in the space of a mark my game bag holds as many heads of wild rice as I can find, and a handful of dandelion roots besides.

I am dry enough to simply brush off the sand clinging to my skin, I dress and pack up my gleanings…though not before removing two blue rupees and leaving them in place of a bucket worth
of salt left slightly inland where smoking and salting of fish has recently taken place. Not today, and not yesterday, but less than four days ago. If someone comes back for it, there will be recompense. If not, the tender of the soaproot can have it.

I cannot eat money, and need the salt almost as much as water.

I need to get back and check on the fire.

Soot covers the moonstone, the walls, the ceiling, and what little of the floor is visible beneath the thick layer of ash that is all that remains of decades of detritus. My snake is overdone and mostly char, but that means the fire burned hotter than I anticipated and that means there is better airflow than I thought. The few mouthfuls of meat that remain once the skin has flaked off are hot and tastier for it, and though the tops of the radishes closest to the door disintegrate at a touch, the radishes themselves are mostly cooked and also quite palatable. I eat as much as my stomach will hold, and venture inside for a better look.

The plastered wall has completely disintegrated in the heat of the fires, still warm enough through the soles of my boots to make me move quickly, leading to a sand room and confirming my already informed supposition as to the original creators of this place. That chamber leads on, deeper into the cliff side, to what can only be a cache for valuables. The room is lined with figures, from floor to ceiling, that come to life with an inadvertent touch. Though I consider myself almost capable with the Goron’s current writing system, this is only distantly related. I have had enough exposure to the ancient system of glyphs that both of our people’s used to recognize it on sight, if not translate. The runes for our magic and histories developed from this simple system of etchings, while Hylia’s chosen few formed their own living safe in the sky.

Whatever this space was, someone highly proficient lived here, for a very long time.

At least I won’t be bored this winter…and there is work that must be done for that to happen. The moment my fingertips leave the surface of stone, the ancient land writing fades back into obscurity, leaving me standing in the dark of the soot stained walls with a thin, watery beacon of daylight from the doorway my only source of illumination. It is more than enough for me to see by, and find my way back, still in awe of the mystery of that hidden room. Throughout the next three days of scrubbing soot, stocking, foraging, and making a list of supplies that I must steal, it hums in the back of my mind like a distant mosquito, not quite annoying, but definitely present.

The first snow falls on the second day of the Hunter moon, while his light is a mere sliver in the sky, and I wake to the heavy thrum of magic working hard. It is not malicious, with the texture of firm protection and a softening core of warmth, letting me rise from my bedroll instead of fleeing the place entirely. Rubbing the grit from my eyes, I follow the steady pulse of ephemeral energy purposed specifically to this task, and am unsurprised to find the room I assumed to be a cache is glowing brightly with ancient power.

The runes etched carefully onto the surfaces of the place are those of protection, security, and stability, yes, but not for a treasure as I assumed. The Humans must have plastered over the wall when they could not fathom the use of the space, and installed the stove to replace at least part of its function. Awake and curious, I follow the lines of mage craft as they separate and divert, only to fill the window and door with a nearly transparent wall of faint blue energy… and cover the garden with the same type, though it is thinner than and not as cushioning as the first. The interior is also comfortably warm, despite the cold air coming down the chimney of the stove.

Well then.

Zelda is still fast asleep, and I shan’t wake her for something that poses no immediate
threat, but I send a prayer to Mokara to thank whatever long-dead ancestor of the Gorons I know created this space and set it with magic that responds so readily to my Shaekha’ri blood. If it is in fact from the time of the Descent, then it could very well have been a mutual shelter for both of our peoples. It is old enough, and there are traces of indications that it may have been so.

No Goron needs a garden for plants, let alone a forcing house to grow green things in the depths of winter. No Shaekha’ri requires a doorway that tall or wide. Both peoples enjoy warmth, but our other needs differ greatly. Shaekha’ri need water as much as the Hylians and Humans do, though more than the Geru’do and less than the Zora. Gorons need a sandpit for their waste as much as any of the peoples, though not as often, and not in the same way. The best metal smiths are Gorons simply because their stomachs do the purification and amalgamation of differing metals from culm for them, the ingots they produce in a few days equivalent to the work of weeks of hard labor for any other. From the size of Biggoron high atop Death Mountain…perhaps even months for a fraction of the ingots he makes, just by being what he is.

I wander to the back room, and am pleased by the instant chill I get stepping through yet another filmy and ever so lightly blue barrier. There is a puff of mist each time I exhale, and a thin layer of frost over the birch bark, hickory nuts, leeks, late rice, acorns, squash, cabbage, and groundnuts I managed to gather. I remove them from the ice box room immediately, for it is far too cool to keep them in for any length of time, and leave them just on the other side of the wall where it is cool to the touch but not freezing. The cool, dry air will preserve them well enough, and any meat I can procure will freeze in a few marks, alongside some of the late season fruit and vegetables to be had still in future foraging expeditions.

I may as well hunt now.

The rabbitskin mittens my father made at the start of my journey have worn to the point that they don’t truly keep my hands warm in winter, but for now, with the snow melting in the sunrise, they will suffice. I forego the chainmail haubergeon, but keep the muffling scarf and the tighter mask beneath it, tying my hair up with bandages since I lack a proper cap. The battlesuit’s leather and cotton in both a denim and jersey weave keep me moderately warm, but not so much that I don’t add a cloak over top, both to conceal and to provide an extra layer of protection from the elements. I have lost weight, the leather speaks to that much, but it is still the best I have.

Alone in the deep woods, beyond the Lost Woods and around what was once the Forest Temple, I am given the time to ponder my problems even as I stalk an old buck. The hooves are pitted and scarred, the last leaves brushed free of snow close together, no herd surrounds him, no signs he is chasing a doe in rut…he will not last the winter, but with his help, I might. With my help, Fi might. With her help, Link might. If not…I still must finish the work to guarantee that the strength of my bonds transfers to Zelda upon my death. Her bier, still deep within the Shadow Temple, was enough to hold her steady, and so I will build upon that unwieldy attempt of desperation. Eliminate inefficiencies, streamline the most effective energy usage, the best preservations, and reinforce the neatest transference points.

I have a solid opening line formed for what will be the most important spell work I ever do when I catch sight of the buck’s heat. Most of the snow has melted, and he is thinner than I thought he would be…and sick, from wounding fever. The flesh of his front leg festers, dripping thick yellow pus to the ground where he stands waiting for me. Wolfos claws, from the line and spacing of the cuts, toying with him, for no fang marks dot his skin and he cannot move quickly, so that means they let him go.

“I’m sorry.” I tell him, in word and in spirit, sharing his pain as best I can. The cruelty of the dark version of wolves brings tears to my eyes even as my feet bring me to touch his muzzle, feel
his breath on my hand through the worn mittens, the wetness of his tongue as he touches the pulse point in my wrist. He lies down, careful of his antlers, faltering with the pressure on the horribly infected limb, and I help guide him to rest.

“Thank you.” I whisper once he has settled on his side. His brown eyes gaze up at me as I open a direct path to the River, and he lets go, slipping in with barely a ripple.

My knife, the pilfered rope, and nearly three and a half marks later I have a decent stock of venison in the ice box room and a thick steak roasting with groundnut tubers, while I mix a salad of watercress, eel grass, clover, and service berries. My thoughts on the spell work are scrawled in the sand, and I have a faint idea that needs some honing before I can act in regards to the dilemma of Between constantly draining Fi’s centuries of gathered magic. I pay attention to my passage there once the food has cooked, and arrive more fatigued than usual, but heartened by what I have seen.

The way to his divine shelter is clear, closer to what I think of as the Mortal Realm and supported by that proximity…but it is smaller. Narrower than I’ve ever noticed, shorter than I’ve ever seen. Rather than expending the energy to keep the broader structure secure at the potential cost of the awaited Hero, Fi is withdrawing to preserve the heart. Link’s space Between is little larger than a standard sparring circle, and as ill-defined as one inscribed in sand. It is a problem that I must attend to...after. If I can.

He eats. We spar. He wins, and I reward him with the story of his journey to collect the suseko still revolving in the physical Temple of Time, as it will be told to future generations should there be future generations. Unsatisfied with the tale, he turns eyes the color of the sky in summer to begging, and I give him a puzzle to work out with rocks and straight lines. He only fails once. Navi chatters while he works. Fi is nowhere to be found. Despite the progress made in retention, they have both forgotten her name.

Link has forgotten mine, Navi only remembers “Sheik”, and I am not certain I wish to remind either of them who “Aein” is. I’m not entirely sure I remember myself. The young man I was bears little resemblance to the man I am now, though traces of his thoughts and patterns can be found in my weaving. It is…easier…this way. As long as Link continues to respond to my presence with trust and that eagerness for stories, it doesn’t matter what he calls me. As long as I can fulfill my duties to Goddess, Queen, Master, and country, I will be satisfied. I do miss my family, though it is a vague and melancholy sort of wistfulness, not a lonely or frightened one.

It is those attachments that will keep me here, and those attachments are as good a place as any for me to start. The attachments Link holds still may even serve to strengthen the structure of his protective prison Between, for his connections to the people he has met and the land he has travelled are exceptionally secure. If my spell work towards Zelda’s restoration succeeds, then I will be able to modify it for him, after. If not, I will only have hurt myself.

And this will hurt, dreadfully, if merely physically.

In the first dawning of the Snow moon, I begin my preparations. Surreptitiously visiting each of the Temples with their respective songs, leaving offerings, declaring my intent, in my natural state. Ruto giggled a little, after staring a lot, and none of the other Sages could honor me with their presence. The last day of the waxing quarter I spend honoring Hylia at dawn, Farore in the morning, Din during sister sun’s peak, Naryu in the afternoon, and Mokara in the evening. Ashyunera’s time is spent asleep. After a day of rest and attending to the nascent Hero, I honor the spirits of land, sky, and sea.

Three days, for the Three, I dance my script. On the forth, I sleep, the fifth, eat, and the full moon’s quarter finishes.
As he wanes, so do I, taking in only water, whispering my need. In the day before new, my answer surfaces in the stone, showing me my sacrifice in sweat and tears will be answered in flesh and blood…and it will be enough.

I know it, and thus, can relax into the blows, cushion my mind as Zelda did, arrange for comforts of the body, plan for soothing of the heart. The knowledge that my recovery will be accounted for through the Wisdom of foresight makes stepping into the trial possible. Praying for Courage after visiting Farore’s scion lends me the strength. Acknowledging and refusing to give up my own Power lets me raise the blade primed for the task and make the first cut on my exposed skin to open the way alongside my veins.

Line after line, column after column, all 365 points, 7 vortices, 3 pillars, marked, activated, and engaged. Spectral hands borne of the Silent Realm’s guardians assist for the spaces down my spine, across my back. The salt of my tears stings in a counterpoint of agony. Never once do I falter in my devotions. The spidery sensation of my skin parting beneath a sanctified scalpel is lost beneath the slippery dripping of my blood to pool on the stone floor, obscuring the painstakingly printed runes as they rush to fill my form, and I exhale.

It is done.

Floating in darkness, the steady thrum and beat of a living heart cradles me, and I drift. Success brings surety and with it, a peace I have not known for cycles. Somewhere, I fall into sleep, for the next moment of consciousness is spent waking to the soft hum of the Mistress of my soul.

“The measure of a man is what he does with power.” Her voice turns from music to speech, but it is not her voice, and when my eyes meet hers, they are all the colors of blue I have seen, and some that I cannot name.

“Nayru.” I breathe, and she laughs, neither confirming nor denying my naming, though her form swells to fill my vision in every aspect of azure, as soothing as rain and as devastating as a flood. It sweeps me away, filling my spirit with peace as I wake in the Chamber of Sages, surrounded by the Six, kneeling at the Seventh’s feet.

They are all here, and here is where the Hero will find his way.

“…despite being so unexpected.” Rauru murmurs, facing across the Chamber to Spirit’s place where Nabooru is standing, arms crossed, nose twitching, glaring at the Sage of Light.

“Do you still doubt the strength of a gentle heart?” Saria asks, but the Geru’do has noticed that I am awake as she turns to face the Sage of Forest, and grins.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.” Nabooru laughs, and though I am exhausted and wish nothing more than to sleep for a fortnight, I agree.

“That would be preferable.” Zelda scolds, her hand brushing my hair from my eyes and sticking, my skin tacky with drying blood, though the wounds themselves have been taken along with most of my energy as an acceptable sacrifice.

“Hanyana.” That touch is my undoing, to feel her so close, see her healthy, scent her skin. There is dust on the hem of her trousers, the soles of her boots. Her hands are stronger than last I saw her, though as soft as ever, and smelling faintly of beeswax. Before my relief overwhelms me entirely, I grasp her hand and squeeze, unable to stand, unwilling to even try.

“Why did you let him do it?” Ruto. Imperious as ever, though her voice has deepened
enough with age to no longer be painful to listen to if one has a headache or isn’t focused. Zelda’s hands still, though she does not remove them from my head, and I wait, curious as to what they are speaking of and to my Mistress’ answer. It is a long time in coming, but when it does, her heart is steady.

“Sometimes, the best thing to do is to let those with passion, determination, and skill act. While I disagree with the method, the intention is compassionate, the process harming no one else, and so I will abide by Aein’s decision and actions.”

“But he…” Darunia begins, his voice a low beat countering Ruto’s shrill piping.

“It gives him hope.” Zelda, for the first time I can recall, interrupts not only another person, but another Sage. “We all need some of that, right now.”

“Truth.” Impa nods. “Which, I believe, is the reason we all came, no?”

“Walk on with hope in your heart, and you will never walk alone.” Rauru quotes the Book of Hylia, chapter three, verse nine, and smiles at me. “We walk with you, even when you can’t see us. Remember that, and you’ll be fine.” His piece stated, the Sage of Light returns to his tend his Temple in a flash of light that only warms the edges of my pathways.

“I believe in you.” The Forest Sage, at once so old and so very young, laughs, and is gone.

“You are a true friend to us all.” Warmth flares as Darunia speaks, already half returned to the Mortal Realm.

“You’re stronger than I gave you credit for. Don’t disappoint me!” Ruto, as blunt and refreshingly graceless as ever, follows suit.

“You’ve got heart, that’s for sure. I like it.” Nabooru leers, sending a chill down my spine at the heat in her gaze, but is gone before I can do more than blink in surprise.

Impa remains standing on the Shadow Temple’s link to the Chamber of Sages, arms crossed and frowning at the both of us, for a very long time. Zelda does not move, and I take my que from her stillness that she is waiting for her guardian to speak before anything else. The Sage of Shadow sighs, and drops her hands to her sides.

“When we asked you to bear Zelda’s message, to be her eyes, I did not anticipate this…”

“There were too many possibilities for even me to figure out, Impa, you can’t…you shouldn’t blame yourself.” Zelda, young for her age, still holds Wisdom’s portion.

“Emotion can’t be dictated or denied, only dealt with as it comes.” The older woman says softly, making the Book of Hylia a popular resource today, even though I agree with her. The Sage of Shadow, normally so stoically strong, looks as though she has aged twenty years in the last twenty seconds. “We are the last, though. Blocked from my power as the Sage, I am simply an old woman who will not have the strength to sing the soul of the last of my people to the Silent Realm. Forgive me if it is a burden I do not eagerly anticipate.” With most of her magical ability stunted and the other Sages unable to lend her their strength, I feel her leaving more so than the rest as she uses me to return. The pathways through my magic are raw from where I must have gathered the ascended in the first place, and her passage burns, leaving me breathless.

“I will make it right, Impa.” Zelda whispers once the Sage has left to the ever present rush of falling water. From here, the journey to Link’s resting place is closer than returning to the Mortal


Realm. Before I can begin the next step of my duty, my Queen’s hand tightens in my hair, locking me in place.

_Hanyana?_: I question, unable to expend the energy to actually speak.

“No.” Her blue eyes are furious as she looks down and forces my head up to meet her gaze. “I forbid it. You are exhausted, and I will not have you setting off that awful curse before it is absolutely necessary. Do I make myself clear?” Her grip threatens to pull the strands from my scalp, and it takes me longer than it should to even recognize what she is talking about, too long to formulate a response. “Do I, Aein?”

“It’s not a curse.” I wheeze out, appalled she would even think that.

“Of course it is! You will never have the peace you deserve!”

“I will, once you release me.” When she passes the First Gate, I will be by her side. Beyond that, we shall each return to our respective destinies.

“I release you then.” She hisses.

“That’s not how it works.” I swallow. “You must let go of your attachments before you can find the River. The…oh.”

I am the last Sheikah in Hyrule, the last _shiik_ in the dispersed Shadow Temple is old, and weak. Too weak to break any bonds that I have created. Impa can see them, but cannot touch them. There will be no one to help release spirits aside from the willing and the accidental by the time she dies. Zelda’s status as a Bearer of a fragment of the Triforce ensures she will move on…but not that I will be able to follow. I have made the bonds I hold to her permanent, and by their very nature designed to exist long after our physical forms cease to be.

My spirit will roam Hyrule for as long as there is memory of her.

“Yes, _oh_.” She growls, hand clenching once more in my hair before letting go and stroking my scalp as she kneels to embrace me. Weakened as I am, it is all I can do to remain upright as my arms rise to return the gesture. Her tears soak into my cowl, wetting my neck, as her breath warms the skin.

It feels good to hold her again.

It feels better to know that she will one day return to her place, ruling the land of the Goddesses’ departure and Hylia’s salvation with Wisdom and compassion.

A minor eternity of servitude to her memory and her bloodline is an acceptable price to pay. If Fi can bear the solitude between Heroes, then I can hold the distance between Incarnations. I must.

She holds me, and I her, until I fall into the sleep of the utterly spent.

The soothing rumble of Goron voices lifts me from slumber even as strong, broad, stone hands support me like a toddler slung over a shoulder and cautious with motion. The dust and slate scent comforts me, and though he is not my childhood caretaker, his coloring is familiar and his body is warm. The gentle rocking soothes me further, and it is only when the sound of shuffling feet change to clattering stone and the scent to clay instead of dust that I bother opening my eyes fully.

Elder Brother Daros holds me securely, while Darunia, Magetus, Link, and a Goron
whose coloring and pattern is unfamiliar follow us deeper into the Great Fairy’s Fountain. Daros wades deeper than I have dared towards the stylized dais, releasing me to float in the crystalline water.

“Great Fairy of Wisdom, give succor to our Brother.” Daros intones, the rumble of his voice agitating the water and sending refractions of ripples in the light to dance on the cavern ceiling. I watch, instinctively blinking as the heralding shower from the arrival of the Great Fairy spatters across my face. Once closed, I have no inclination to open my eyes again, the darkness behind my eyelids is a comfort. Simple. Floating, I wonder briefly what it would be like to sink, surround myself in the supporting liquid, to not have to breathe.

I’m so very tired.

Even after my body has received the blessing of the Great Fairy on behalf of the Goron Elders, when my bones no longer ache and all the muscle I gained under Hahron’s tutelage is firm and supple once more, I’m tired.

:Go to him:. My queen encourages. Suspended in the pure water of the fountain of a Great Fairy dedicated to the same Goddess that I have devoted myself to, I obey, leaving my form to drift.

The refuge Between is deteriorating faster than I had anticipated, great rents of distressed magic leaving gaping holes of distortion ready trap the unwary, sending every sense to the highest alert. I can see the glow of Courage long before I can locate its bearer, who sleeps deeply, curled about the Blade which protects him even now. The barrier is perhaps twice his length, three times his width with arms outstretched, easily holding his fairy companion safe. He lies on a stone dais, familiar and sacred.

There is still more than a cycle of the seasons before he is to wake to his destiny…if he wakes.

Fi’s magic at least is more stable than I have seen in over five turns, this close to her seal and the energies it holds. With the suseko atop humming loudly enough that I can hear it, it is no wonder that the light of the other three stones is clearly visible to me, and would most likely be seen as a pervasive glow to a Hylian or Human. The patterning is fascinating, reflecting ripples that not only overlap and interfere with each other, but merge and divide in a rhythm I cannot hope to master. Now that I rest Between, free from both the might of the Sages and the power of the Sacred Realm, I can see the joins that at once support and separate the distinct aspects of reality.

The Kokiri’s Emerald, Zora’s Sapphire, and Goron’s Ruby shield the Chamber, shield the pedestal from mundane threats, their gathering alone supposed to be a task of monumental proportions. The Gerudo Citrine, Sheikah Amethyst, and Hylian Quartz guard against less overt antagonism, and their separation is the key to true mastery of the Sacred Realm. As Keepers of History, the Shaekha’ri Hierarchy must know the Truth, even dispersed from the Land we guard, and have seen to it that this choice bit of legend remains occluded to all but the elite of the elite.

I shouldn’t be here.

Neither should Link…but I cannot take him with me, and even risking crossing the barrier holding me from reality gives me pause. I cannot see or sense any of the Dark King’s thralls, but that does not mean they do not see or sense me. I would hope that arrogance and pride keep the Usurper from allowing even supposed allies to access this place, but I cannot count on it. Hope has failed me too many times for me to cling to it with assurance. I can’t seem to completely let go, either, I have worked too hard to do so.
The repetition of one particular series of patterned waves at the juncture of dais and pedestal within the greater weaving of light and dark strengthens my tenuous grip on this ephemeral thing called hope. The magnitude of possibility it holds taking my breath away. To aid the Spirit of the Sword, secure Fi’s hold on his sanctuary, is a reward worth the risk. Citrine, Amethyst, Quartz. I know where the second lies, already attuned to me through my blood. I can gather the third, and request Zelda’s assistance in first cleansing, then purposing the stones. The last I have some suspicions, and will ask Nabooru once I have the other two, both for location and means of bestowing intent.

There is work to be done. Nayru knows, there is always work to be done.

It begins when I return to myself, buoyant under the watchful gaze of a Great Fairy and a Goron elder in the clear water of the Fountain and protected by Big Brother. I stir when I am certain of my form and balance, only to have Daros lift me from the water and cradle me once more like a small child against his smooth, solid shoulder. The heat of the Fire Temple dries me quickly, for though we do not linger, Daros’ pace is as steady as it is smooth, and it is with me in his arms that we go to the guesting quarters within the Goron City.

“Rest, Brother Sheik. A meal will be brought shortly.” The ancient Goron rumbles as his other hand brushes aside a curtain that has seen better days. It is not as though they entertain many guests any more, and the curtain still works to give at least the illusion of privacy. At least the space is clean, and dry, and warm, with a glowing mage orb for light. The sounds of the city filter through the threadbare fabric easily as it falls closed behind us, and I cling to him for a moment as he moves to put me on my feet.

It is a moment too long, for he notices what I had intended to simply grasp and horde against the coming deprivations I am to endure, and instead of letting me go, sinks to sit on the pilling rugs and lets me rest against his solid chest, hand draped over my shoulder and arm, holding me close.

“*Hei nah’habe den’ena, sheh hyli niahn.*” I am startled when the first lines of the Picori’s Paeon fall from his lips, for the Harvest Festival has long since passed and not many Shaekha’ri outside of the Tor would have reason to sing. Oh, all the clans have their own traditions, but the one that this particular melody comes from is very much Tor. Yoru will never sing it for Insu, unless Keiko wants my nephew to know it or he becomes a historian or bard.

Daros’ pronunciation is slightly off on some lines, but he has clearly been tutored and that means he sought Impa out specifically to learn, if not this song exactly, something much like it. The unexpected kindness and unlooked for consideration would have brought me to tears a cycle ago, now it is enough to still, and allow myself to be soothed. The last note fades from a rumbled hum to silence, and the Elder Goron shifts.

“I am afraid that is all I know of your songs, Brother Sheik, but I would not leave you alone.” His concern is clear in his posture and voice, and I cannot help but feel unworthy of it.

“Thank you, Elder Brother. Your company is enough.” I assure him. It is more than I have had in turns, this simple touch from a trusted companion. It satisfies a hunger deeper than the cold of the darkest night, though other hungers are tended to promptly with a boiled and spiced snail the size of both my fists together, and sprouted beans. I cannot place the spice, but I am glad that my mother taught me how to eat things that are very spicy at a young age, for if it were not for the fact that I picked it up with my fingers due to a lack of any type of cutlery, I would think it was still on fire. My tongue feels like it is, though Daros assures me my lips are only red, not swollen or cracked.
His own repast is a basket of granite, which tells me both of our peoples are making the best of what they can gather. I must assume the dodongos have returned, and with Impa unable to access the magics of her Sagehood, she cannot call on the Songs to move rapidly across the land. Staying in Kakariko for the winter is surely her best option, though it is not ideal.

The lack of visitors and fewer invited guests has left Darunia with a spoiling stock of items designed for non-Goron occupants of the City, and I am gifted that surplus after the meal is finished by Big Brother himself. Dried millet, lentils, barley, and beans, pickled apples, onions, and cabbage, salted fish, and a whole smoked goose are piled within my shadow, and with words of thanks muffled behind a sack of the grain, I trigger the moonstone that will bring me to my hidden shelter.

Storing everything takes less than a mark, and though I have time to pull out the whistle and get myself to Derinkuyu’s crystal cavern, I haven’t the time to sort through and harvest an appropriate crystal. There is time enough, however, for me to check the perimeter’s warding, prune the radishes that are a bit too enthusiastic, and heat a stone to put at the foot of my bed before sliding beneath the covers to seek my rest.

Chapter End Notes

The measure of a man is what he does with power. - Plato
Walk on with hope in your heart, and you will never walk alone. - Gerry and the Pacemakers
The Punishing Light

Chapter Summary

In the sand the sun is born, merciless and free.

Chapter Notes

This chapter doesn't contain warnings so much as things to look forward to. Things like: Rape Aftermath, Trauma Aftermath, Heterosexual Sex, Consensual Underage Sex, Canon Typical Magic, and of course, trials and tribulations.

The etchings of the Twelve clans marking the gate through the mists to the northern face of Mount Lana are nearly illegible after a mudslide some time at least two years past, but my fingers find the texture unerringly. Here is where my duty began, though I could not fathom the scope of it even in my wildest dreams. It seemed dream enough at the time to simply be within Hyrule’s unofficial borders. Wondrous, to walk where my ancestors trod. Fantastical, to touch the stone from the sky. As magical as my first teachers calling fire from their fingertips, before I began my own study of the arcane arts.

The Sheikah Eye stares back at me, as uncaring and inert as the stone it is carved in. As cold as the bite of the air, howling truths I cannot hear. I shouldn’t have strayed so far, it makes my scars ache anew. The emotional ones are by far the worst of the lot. Physical pain can be endured after all, I know that personally. I doubt I will ever see another Shaekh’ari aside from Impa again. It makes me melancholy. I shouldn’t be here, again. I can’t seem to stop returning.

Here is where my geas settled, formed into my very flesh. Virtue, Love, Measure. The whispers of divinity are stronger here, at the edges of Hylia’s Descent, than they are anywhere I have been outside of them. They are easier to hear, even for one of Shaekha’ri blood, because I am one of the handful of creatures larger than the violet man-like tree dwellers in the entirety of the caldera since Ganondorf’s agents flooded it with poisonous air in an attempt to kill my Queen.

They came too close to succeeding, and did manage to snuff out thousands of other lives, both large and small. I can only smell the smoke of their pyres in my dreams, the charred ash of that flame now vividly green and growing as I make my way back to the temple of the Three in the heart of the abandoned City of the Lost with the fruits of my foraging. Though early in the season, the small and bright greens form the staple of both my meals and my offerings, supplemented with salt from stores and dried grain and beans that haven’t yet turned to spoilage, though I am not abandoned to my own solitary table often.

The temple is far enough into the city that my steps still echo, the buildings stand plumb, and the only movement and heat come from the small fire burning in the furnace, the birds that perch on the roof, the rodents fleeing at the approach of a predator, and my Lady.

Fully blossomed into the beauty her youth hinted at, she calls greeting to me in my own tongue before heading inside to return to her work there. There is much to be done, though she has
weathered a cycle of the seasons already and gathered what she could from the surroundings to make this place a home. I could not bear to return to the shiik’s house we once shared, or any of the other homes I frequented, and I know she feels the same, for she has told me so.

In searching for the Amethyst to catalyze my casting, I have come home to the jewel of the Hylian royal family, and my vows to her still stand.

She has yet to ask me to fulfill them.

I am not certain if I can.

That richly violet gem gleams clear and smooth in the enriched Shadow of the setting sun, next to a quartz pillar as long as my hand and thick as my thumb that scatters prismatic arcs the moment I hold it up to the light. While the amethyst is bound in silver, the gold setting of the transparent quartz is definitely heavier, for the malleable metal does not retain its shape and therefore its purpose as easily. I had to use more of it for stability. Two full copper ingots rest nearby, waiting for me to find a suitable citrine and payment for the Goron mage-smith’s work and silence. Both stones are warm to the touch, echoing the power of their sealed brethren beneath the dais on which the pillar of the Master Sword rests. I have attuned both, and must seek the third.

“Aein. Sit.” Zelda chides me, most likely for the second or even third time, gesturing towards the mismatched bench and stool that at least are not intended to go with the table they are placed at. I hesitate, and then take the stool. Though we are of a height, the bench is padded, and the stool is not, and I have yet to voluntarily touch her this past fortnight. I don’t deserve her regard.

She sets a heavy earthenware bowl across the table filled with boiled root vegetables and pickled cabbage, then places another portion before me. Clasping my hands in prayer, I thank the Goddesses and those responsible for my meal, still slightly overwhelmed by the variety and quantity I have been provided with since coming here. My hips no longer protrude, and I do not need as much sleep. Compared with the thin, clear broth that sustained me through my hunt for the quartz in the Zora’s River gorge, this is a feast. Compared to the meals I shared with the 42nd patrol under Tao, this is an appetizer. I have changed much in the intervening cycles, and appreciate the simple fare far more than I would have when I was young and foolish, instead of simply foolish.

“Eat.” Simple commands, simple needs. I obey, though I am careful and slow in doing so, still uncertain that this is not all a vivid dream. Have wilted carrots always been this sweet? Turnip this earthy? Tea, this fragrant and bitter? The new shoots are toothsome and green, rich with the promise of the Sap Moon returning the flow and pulse of life to all Farore’s creatures. Soon, the rest of the world will begin to bloom, not just the remnants of the hot-house valley that once held the last of the Hyrulean Shaekha’ri.

“Eat, Aein.” Zelda reminds me, and I resume my interrupted meal and raise my spoon, but my mind flows ahead to my next task. The effort I require for such simple things as planning uses up the last of my strength even as I finish the last of my tea, and I sit and breathe while the avatar of my Goddess clears and cleans the dishes, leaving them to dry, and sets up more potatoes to roast overnight in the ashes.

“Bed time.” She tells me, and I lever myself upwards in the fading light, capable of standing and being guided to the low mat of blankets and rugs purloined from wherever possible. Scrupulous salvaging, scavenging the remains of a dead city, and a great deal of ingenuity have outfitted this house very well for one to live a hard but relatively comfortable life, as our neighbors have managed on either side and across the road, but it was not meant for two, and my intrusion into their lives has not been without consequence.
Weak as I am, I am as of yet unable to truly contribute, let alone earn my worth. And I will be leaving in the morning to return to the place of my ignoble collapse. As a warrior too long at battle, I simply do not have the resources to cope with the costs I have been called to fill. Were I still of and in the Federation, I would be sent to Ordona’s Hills to restore what ails my spirit. Since I am not, and there is no one who is not under the same yoke to relieve me, I simply say nothing to disperse my burdens on those who neither deserve nor look for them, and continue.

For no matter how I weaken, I cannot fail. Fi still needs a supply to replenish the vast expenditures of power she is using to keep the Hero of Time safe Between…what better, and more efficient, than the collective energy of the very peoples he is destined to save? The sword maiden is bound with the active suseko of the Gorons, Zora, and Kokiri already. I will simply tie the passive shield of the Hylians, Gerudo, and Sheikah to her directly, rather than through her master, who hasn’t the knowledge even if his will was conscious and capable.

He was so very still when I last checked, though it was not the stillness of death. It was the stillness of waiting, like a hunter with an arrow knocked, as if he might rise and draw the sacred blade before his next breath. My offerings of food and water and clothing were received alongside what magic I could give and the strength from my body. Were it not for my lady’s intervention, I am certain I would have lain on the dais insensible for days, or until mandrag Ganondorf discovered my intrusion and murdered me on the spot.

I may even let him, once my purpose is fulfilled.

My lady clucks her tongue and adjusts the topmost covering, a much patched and well-loved quilt of rags and remnants. It is warm and heavy, if not soft or plush, and I am grateful for it.

::Sleep, Aein-ah:: Zelda’s mental tone is stern and firm, and I do not recognize her spoken words until it is far too late to resist the influence of her magic as it overwhelms me entirely. The Light of her casting blinds me, and is replaced by the noon-day sun. I do not remember sleeping, or my dreams. From the dried sweat on my skin, I should be thankful for that.

The fire has gone cold, and that makes me reluctant to emerge from my bedding, though it hasn’t been out long enough to do more than leave a hint of ice in the flavor of the water in the pitcher. Cramming my feet into my boots but not bothering to lace them, I drape the rag-quilt over my shoulders in a makeshift shawl and drink, eating the slow-roast potato skin and all in a better breakfast than I could hope for, and pick up the single moonstone bracket that I have used to traverse Hyrule in more safety than any of her residents can claim.

I must find a significantly sized citrine of a similar vibrational pattern to the one the Gerudo claim as their spiritual stone. Logically, that means travelling to the desert. I sincerely doubt any of the women I am likely to encounter will tell me the secrets of their people and the magic of their stone to aid my efforts in overthrowing their King and banish them back to the barren foothills and deep sands of their traditional territories. That means, logically, I must speak with Nabooru. That means returning to the Temple of Time, and following the well-worn path I have made that is as much a part of me as I am of it, in order to reach the Chamber of Sages.

The sooner I leave, the sooner I can go, and the sooner I can return. I do not know when Zelda will be back, and so make no effort to either heat the small house or prepare any food in anticipation, though I do take some of the carrots and cabbage in the earthenware bowl to leave as an offering to those I would aid Between, since I will be passing by anyway.

The small whistle has lost none of its luster for all it has been through, and as I raise it to my lips and bring forth the Prelude of Light, shaping my intent for my destination, I make sure to hold onto that small meal tightly. The azure blue of my Wisdom touched spellcraft leaves me standing in
the oppressive silence of the physical portion of the Temple of Time, at the epicenter of the bridge between realms. My clapping to rouse Fi’s attention is no longer hesitant, for despite the possibility of discovery by the dishonored dead, I will be gone long before their shuffling gait could gain them the stairs.

“For the Hero, that he may persist.” I intone, and the Master Sword shimmers with more than the afternoon light even as the bowl and its contents fade from this world. Despite the cold, I sit against the stand that holds the corporeal Goddess’ Blade, and bring my mind in and up, out and down, to that place where there is no in, up, out, or down, and thus holds as sanctuary for both mind and form.

Reflection on reflection echo back in on themselves, and I angle myself to abjure the station of Spirit for audience with the Sage. From previous interactions, I know she will not look favorably upon pleading or whining, and will simply ignore any attempts at self-abasement or undeserved praise. It is best to be direct, honest, forthright, and sincere. The last is my very name, and I do not feel that I have changed so much as to have to alter that. I am, perhaps, more solemn than my parents could anticipate, less inclined to draw attention to myself than Yoru could know, but I am still sincere.

“Nabooru! I need to talk to you, and ask you some questions.” I call out to the endless ripples falling upwards and project myself as best I can, expanding the patterns of my weaving to their greatest girth and putting my intent in the place of foremost prominence. I cannot extend my energies beyond the central pillar, but I do not need to.

“What, boy?” The Sage of Spirit coalesces in her station as quickly as I have ever seen a summoning occur, like stepping from one room to the next it is almost instantaneous. She is… translucent. Not in the same manner that ghosts, spirits, Poes, or other corporeally challenged individuals may be, but waning, as if she hasn’t left this place to reconnect to her form in far too long.

“Advice on where to find a citrine large and clear enough to resonate with the one buried in the dais of the Master Sword.” If my time with her is to be fruitful, brevity in my need gives the greatest benefit to us both.

“When did Nayru cast you aside, and Farore pick up the remnants? You would die.” She sneers, obscuring the worry so well that anyone with lesser awareness of the complex prism of a soul would not see, and be offended.

“All things die, Nabooru.” I let my amusement reach my eyes, but no further. The Sage of Spirit’s mouth quirks a touch at the corner.

“That they do. You’ll need to take several precautions to avoid that, if you want to attain what you seek.”

“I’ll sacrifice a goat in your honor should you describe what those precautions may be.” I return dryly, though from the flare of interest I get in response to my sarcastic tone tells me to follow through with that promise. Food is good for grounding, and the energy may help stabilize her sense of self. Now I just need to find a goat.

“First, bulk up a bit. You’re almost as thin as the Seventh. Dress as the deep-desert dwellers do, carry only water, travel at dawn and dusk, sleep during the high sun and dark of night. Four days beyond the Gerudo sands lie the Subrosian salt-flats. These must be crossed after dark before the dawn, for the light of the sun raises the wind, and the salt is so fine no clothing can protect you from its scour. Fortunately, the journey is only a mark and a half of a walking pace. Rest in the
garden there, and should the well remain sweet, rinse your clothing of the salt it collects, for it will burn your skin as surely as acid. If not, go naked to the north and use the black sand to scrub yourself clean. The Shattered Temple lies beyond, and there you will find what you seek.” Nabooru instructs, having me repeat her directions until I can recall them in whole and in part, in order and out.

“Satisfied?” I ask, weary.

“Oh, darling, not for years.” She whispers, the flare of specific intent unmistakable as anything but lust, and suddenly I am no longer tired, but frightened. Shock blossoms plainly on her face before being replaced with a frown. Subdued, she waits for me to breath steadily again, before bowing her head slightly. “My apologies, I didn’t realize. You hide it well.”

“Thanks.”

“It wasn’t a compliment. Have you spoken with Zelda about it?”

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“This isn’t a compliment. Have you spoken with Zelda about it?”

“Of course not. She knows.” The words, meant to be a snarl, come out as something akin to a sob. She has been in my head, experienced my feelings. Talking about it is useless.

“Are you deliberately being stupid or are you just naturally daft?” Nabooru snorts, her presence solidifying as she calls on her power as a Sage.

“It hurts her as much as it hurts me.” I drop my eyes, wishing to crawl into the stone beneath my feet. It hurts her so much. I know it does. I have been in her head, experienced her feelings. I can’t bear the thought of opening that hurt between us and damaging her as I have been… of breaking her, as surely as Ganondorf wishes to do.

“And so you wallow, picking at the scab and spreading the scar every time you see blood.” Scorn colors her every word, though I can see the truth in them.

“We bind it, cushion the wound, and hope that time can heal what herbs and stitches cannot.” The cottony feeling of disassociation that has preserved my sanity so long covers me like a blanket.

“Din’s tits! Talk to me then. The Goddesses know I have enough experience, though you’ll have to bear with my lack of sympathy.” The nasal chuckle she lets out has no mirth in it whatsoever. “I think the years of having my body in the hands of Twinrova gives me the right to be jaded. Now, who hurt you so?” She asks, and she’s right. If anyone could understand, it would be someone else who has been through it. The breath I draw to reply is not as steady as I may wish.

“My own blindness. If I had…”

“Shut your mouth.” The words are hard and fast and startling. I obey. “You are not at fault. The only one who bears responsibility for their actions is the one who commits them. If Ganondorf set a servant on fire for serving him a dry date, is that your fault?”

“No, but…”

“No. No it is not. In no way are you responsible for anyone else’s actions. You are responsible for your actions, and the repercussions of those actions, regardless of your compassion or Zelda’s foresight. Now, without assuming anyone else’s part in what happened, tell me. What occurred to turn the young man willing to love Nayru’s Chosen in the most sacred place remaining to mortals into a trembling mess at the thought of touching another?”
“I’m not a trembling mess.” Not anymore at least.

“So you’ve stopped shaking. Good for you. Now, say it.” The Sage of Spirit demands. In the Chamber of Sages, my options include either fleeing, holding my secrets, or lancing the infection in my spirit. I am not resusangeul bi aiyuu, to conquer my fears so easily…but I can see the Wisdom in this. It is a point of weakness we cannot afford.

Hours later, hollow and tired beyond thought, I know I have not been cured of that weakness. I have, however, begun what Nabooru assures me are the first stages of clearing out the filth. It may not be my fault that the Usurper’s minions used both my emotions and my body, but it would be my fault if I let it stop me from doing all I can to keep my Mistress safe.

I gain strength as I stumble from the dais within the hidden city, stagger on the path past the temple of the Three, and shuffle into the home she has claimed. Too tired to do more than remove my footwear and cloak, I collapse onto my palate and am asleep.

“Sheik, are you there?” A familiar voice calls, and it takes me far too long to react. Brant has reached his own doorstep by the time I have straightened my clothing to something resembling presentable and opened the door. By the angle of sister sun, it is not yet noon, though too late to really be considered morning.

“Sorry, I was indisposed.” I apologize as five sets of small eyes watch from the yard. On his part, the aging uncle to those eyes back tracks to meet me with a smile on his face and a bundle in his arms.

“Payment, for services rendered.” He explains even as the bundle is thrust into my arms. I am not expecting the contents to shift as much as they do, but accept the package with a bow and what grace I can muster so soon after being awoken.

“Our thanks.” It feels like overly light rocks, and after a brief glimpse at the sky and discussion of weather in the coming days, I return to Zelda’s home and wrinkle my nose. I can smell the interior, and am suddenly grateful for not being fast enough to allow our neighbor to see inside.

Well then. If there is one thing I know from my frequent trips to the periphery of the joined calderas, it is where herbs have sprouted and water flows. I can produce all the fire I could need at will, and Nabooru did recommend bulking up. The aesthetics of deprivation are not attractive on anyone, and my body is the fuel for my purpose and the vessel, at times, of an avatar of Nayru. Nabooru was right, in more than that alone.

This time of year, lacking vinegar and alcohol, I must turn to less astringent antiseptics and repellants. It takes me the better part of a mark to gather and arrange the tools I need even with Daros helping with the heavy lifting. He is spry for his age, but unless they are rolling, Gorons do not cover ground even as quickly as Humans. He brings the last of the linens as I finish sealing the cracks in the limestone mix that makes up what is left of the animal clinic’s extreme barbering room.

The brazier lights with a thought, the hard, glossy black coal taking more energy than the lighter, browner type I am used to. As Daros said, however, it does burn, and very hot. The moment I am sure of the flame, I turn and, again with his help, set a special alembic the animal clinic had to making steam, which I filter through clean cedarwood to fill the space. It is a comparatively large room, but by the time I have the first of my layers of bedding drying, others have arrived to both help and use the space.

Wands of cedar further help to cleanse both fabric and bodies, and I need not haul water to keep the steam billowing. Racks and line are set up in the adjacent rooms and outside, and soon
every one of the seventeen residents who have sought asylum have begun an early spring cleaning of both body and home. I try to keep the door to the room closed as much as possible to retain as much steam and therefore as much cedarwood oil as possible. The faint light from the small brazier the only source of illumination. Every half mark, I make sure to leave the hot room to cool off and drink, alternating with those who wish to steam their own bedding, coverings, and linens to ensure the fire does not go out.

Shan, the former green-grocer of Kakariko, brings enough cooked-oat flatcakes for everyone, while the eldest of Johanna’s foundlings has had his way with a patch of chickweed. Green-needle buds from Sander, Brant’s birch bark, and dandelion leaves and roots gathered by Olivia means everyone has enough to eat, and enough variety that it turns into something as close to a party as this rag-tag bag of refugees has seen in far too long. By the time sunset has begun to touch the horizon, I emerge from the steam-room to find a bowl of stew thick with lean spring-hare, Hylian mushrooms, leeks, and cleaned nettle leaves.

Remembering Nabooru’s advice, but mindful of both the effort garnered and the size of my stomach, I eat heartily and heavily. The last of the glossy coal has been burning down, and the alembic is no longer even simmering by the time I finish, though it still has heat enough to sear skin. Burying the remains in sand in a ceramic jug ensures nothing will catch fire, and it is easy for me to see the way back to the city core despite the last torch having left while I was tending to the fire.

All of my bedding hangs on a line, clean and dry, but far too difficult to manage through my shadow. I cannot extend my reach any significant distance, though what I can affect is nearly at the peak of my ability. Strong, yes, but very, very personal in scope.

“Sheik.” My lady’s voice startles me, and I cannot contain the smile that breaks my features at the sound, for I am hearing her within my mind clearly once more, a pre-echo of the words she speaks. “Let’s go home.”

“Yes.” I agree, and follow her through the dark of night to the sanctuary of her home, her bed, and for the first time in over a cycle of the seasons, her arms.

Gracefully she sheds her tunic, folding it neatly and setting it precisely in such a way that the waning moonlight streams in to illuminate the smooth pertness of her youthful breasts. Her hands cup them briefly, nearly in their entirety, for she too hasn’t the weight to spare for excess even there. The rosy softness of her areolas darken at the stimulation, and faint shadow falling from her nipples grows larger. The concave plane of her stomach is obscured as her hands undo the buttons on her trousers and they fall to the floor with a soft whuff of sound, her small clothes following moments later.

Golden curls glisten with moisture as she stands bare before me, smooth skin pebbled in the evening chill despite the heat that radiates from her. I stare, wanting to meet her unasked query, unable to do so through my own fears.

“Permission to touch?” She whispers, husky and low. I swallow my hesitation to nod, still too anxious to speak, my stomach filled with fairies that seem to want to escape through my chest. Slowly, so as not to startle me, her fine boned hands rise to grasp my own, their texture as telling of her callouses as her eyes are of her heart. She wants, very much.

My own eyes cross as she moves closer, so intent on her face that the touch of her lips against mine are a surprise. Delicately she brushes that sensitive skin, breathing deeply, cerulean lidded in concentration on this. On me. Scenting the salt of my skin, the longing and trepidation contained within, she tastes with the care of a butterflies’ wings. I can feel the pressure of her breath as she speaks.
“You spoke with Nabooru today.” It is not a question. I need not answer, though I know I should.

“Yes.” I will be an active participant. Until I say no, I will say yes. She will listen.

“That’s good. You sound better. May I remove this?” She asks, tugging lightly on my hooded cowl, waiting for me to choose.

“Yes.” I have no need to hide from her, no disquiet over her seeing me. She knows. Even though she is cold, she will not rush me.

“I want you to be sure. Tell me to stop and I will.” My Mistress assures, waiting for my acknowledgement of her pledge.

I remove my cowl myself.

“And this?” My fingerless gloves.

“Yes.” My boots, her hair gleaming in the firelight.

“What about this?” My tunic falls to the floor with a lack of concern that reminds me of her desires, and I undo the button on my own trousers, but let gravity do the rest. Her fingertips rest on my forearms, cupping them, as she leans forward to kiss me once more. This time, I can kiss her back, our lips touching, but little else. This is not about passion, or need. This is caring, understanding. Love.

My undershirt follows my tunic, and her tongue tangles with mine for the first time, a slow greeting rather than a dance. Her fingers are cool as they trail up to grasp lightly at my shoulders. In turn, I draw her to me with the faintest pressure from my hands on her waist, her nipples hard against my chest. The scent of her readiness perfumes the air, and I breathe it in, taking surety and comfort in knowing that after everything, she truly does desire me. Her hands trace arcane symbols across my sternum and my blood follows as they continue down my stomach.

“And…this?” Gasped against my jaw, she brushes the cloth of my smallclothes, feels the weight of my reaction to her through the fabric.

“Yes.” I…do. I can…but I need help with my fears. She knows.

She is exceedingly gentle as she unlaces the front of the last barrier I have between us, tension hardening my frame to match the stiffness of my arousal. Not painful. Not quite, but close. I breathe deeply as I am exposed, even though I know she cannot see as well in the night as I, cannot see the scars, cannot see the wounds that ache, still. But she can feel them.

So she does.

“Oh, Aein-ah.” The tremor in her voice echoes through my skin and finds reverberation there. Mine is in my head. Hers is in body. It is too cold to be doing this as we are. Wise as she is, she does not protest as I move us to her bed and lay upon it to gaze up at her magnificence. Waiting. Wanting. She does not disappoint, seeing certainty in me and giving reassurance back as she snags up a thick quilt over her shoulders and straddles my waist.

The weight of her on my belly is comforting in a way matched only by the warmth of her skin. Cocooned in my queen. She covers me, shielding me from everything outside of the two of us in a curtain of her hair and kisses. Wetness smears across my skin where her hips rock, and I raise my hands to steady her motions. She pauses long enough to affirm my comfort. I respond by
fanning the flame that is warming us both, and find that small pearl at the junction of her, buried behind a cushion of curls and weeping with want. She gasps. I grin. She grinds.

“Aein!” My name is all she can cry as my fingers harvest her elixir and my heart swells to know that I can do this for her without taint or failure. The spasmodic shudders of her pleasure leave us open to the chill air as the quilt slips from fingers gone nerveless. I blame relief, rejoicing, and youth for her recovery, and Goddess given foresight for my response.

“I want you inside me.” She admits. “Will you give me that?” So careful. So kind.

“Yes,” I affirm. She smiles, purely happy, and reaches down even as her hips rise and her chest falls. Sliding back, she takes all I have to offer her in one motion, and it is my turn to cry her name to the night.

She is tight. So tight. Hot and damp and incredible. Too tight. She hasn’t stretched her muscles often enough, and I didn’t ensure she was relaxed sufficiently. It has to be hurting her. It’s almost hurting me.

“Ngh.” I freeze at the faint sound, not daring to even breathe lest she take further hurt. I know...I know...how bad that can be. “Haaaah...” Her breath warms my cheek, tickles the shell of my ear.

“H...Hanyana?” I ask as she remains still but for the faint tracery of her pulse around me, on top of me. She would get off if I asked. If I showed the least bit of uncertainty in my posture or my mind, she would.

:I would, love. I have missed this, though.: Her words that are more than syllables, more than sound indicating concept, echo in my head with all the ripples of meaning and every shade of intent she holds dear. I learn from that direct contact, barriers dissolved as though they never were, where she has been, what she has been doing, and exactly how much my presence inside of her aches. The fierce joy it brings her. The swelling warmth that is beyond the physical.

It breaks the fragile matrix of solitude and want I have built around myself, tears away the cottony cocoon that has kept me safe but not healing, and fuels an outpouring of my own fluids in tears.

She holds me. In her arms and with her weight, in her body and with her most remarkable mind. She is an avatar of a Goddess, and the complexity of her perception overwhelms me entirely.

The scent of her skin and cautious movement calls for me to return, the heat of her, the pleasure of physical intimacy without the burden of sharing our minds. I can respond, reciprocate. I find that, for the first time since Kinoko took, that I want to give.

“Welcome back.” She greets me with a smile that leaves me dazed with its brilliance.

“I...have returned.” The ritual phrase is a homecoming of purpose.

We love each other.

After, cleansed of the signs of our activity and safely ensconced in her embrace, we find our dreams together.

One change in the face of brother moon later finds me jogging through the streets and using the slow decay of the city itself to build the bulk of form that Nabooru required. Crumbling cobbles, collapsed stalls, and a proliferation of all things green and growing in the season marked by
cool dampness means I must be careful of my footing, aware of my path, and adaptable to change. My scars pull taught as grasp at the edge of a roof and heave myself upward to continue as the crows fly. I can do it, but it is not as easy as it once was. I am fixing that. I am fixing a lot of things about myself that I have neglected to exercise.

Calling shadows to cloak me at high noon is no more difficult than moving through already present ones, but it is a completely different skill set and one that I have no previous experience with. There has not been need, and I am not inclined towards the authority such effort requires. I prefer to move with, to go to and immerse myself in, rather than summon the element of my people. I work with the spirits normally, not command them to do my bidding.

I miss Chia. Any elemental mage would be able to help, but I knew her and she knew me. There is comfort in a familiar teacher, and I liked her. Zelda helps where she can, as do the other Sages, but there is only one who has mastered the Shadow, and she has her own problems to worry over. Bereft of all her Sage-hood outside the Chamber, Impa is trying to keep as many people alive as she can, regardless of allegiance. She has given me the tools, Nahdo’s home holds the manuals, but I must perform the training myself.

The spring sun in the mountains is barely a tithe on the glare of the Goddess of the Sand, and it dissipates my faint cloud regretfully quickly as I lose focus, trying to cast and keep on my path at the same time. The crows’ raucous laughter at my failure spurs me to try again. And again. And again.

Sweat soaked and nearly nauseous with the strain I arrive at my destination without success, but there is food and water waiting for me to restore myself before making further attempts. The large eggs of the guay are tough and bland, but double the size of a turkey egg and the guay themselves more prolific. Dried yellow-fruit, salted nettle-greens, and a small barley loaf are complimented by chill water and a moment of rest to process, and then I am back to the sun and the silence of an abandoned city with only crows for company.

It takes me a moon turn to hold the shadow steady. Trips to the Great Fairies every quarter, visiting the Temple of Time daily, and Zelda’s touch at night have done what they needed to.

“For luck.” Brant tells me as he squeezes my forearm as though his gift will adhere. Shan’s contribution lays neatly at my side. The incredibly neat and even stitching of my sleep sack will repel water, a help I do not deserve, from Dawn. Though we have yet to speak more than a handful of pleasantries to each other, she knows what is at stake. I will be worthy of her efforts.

“Thank you all, so much.” My queen says, bowing low to the few representatives left that she may call loyal. I am silent at her side, a tool to be used for its intended purpose. I will succeed. “Your trust has enabled us to reach this point. The awakening is imminent. The Hero will come. I have seen him, clothed in green, a shining beacon of light blazing forth from the darkened sky.” She continues, and I relax into the cadence of her speech, the honesty and forthright delivery of her visions no longer needing to win her listeners over, but steady them, comfort them, and drawn on the strength of their combined hope for this last cycle before Link will return and cleanse the filth from the land.

I will deliver the offering in the morning, the largest gathered in working memory, for once it is given to the spirit of the sword I will be gone for at least five days, unable to strengthen the Hero’s sanctuary in any way. He will be as alone as he was at the first, with Fi much weakened from her devotions. I worry for them both.
“It will be alright. You’ll see.” My musings have taken me from paying the strictest attention to Zelda’s speech, though the dispersal of the crowd was hard to miss. These people are no threat to either of us, though their leaving reduces my anxiety further still.

“Of course it will. Nayru’s blessing is upon you.” I can see it, barely, if I keep my eyes unfocused and turned inward. It crowns her in azure glory, a corona of Wisdom’s touch.

“The hand of Fate has not yet turned.” She chides me, and rises to brush dirt even I cannot see from her hem before heading in for the night. “We shall see which seeds will bloom.” I rise to fall in step beside her, slightly behind as the street narrows in growth and decay, and have to chuckle.

“Hmm?” Her posture inquires alongside her intonation, encouraging me to share the source of my amusement.

“Just, Yoru used to complain about my mystic babblings and I didn’t really understand his frustration. Now I do.” I grin at her, and receive a huff of laughter in turn.

“I…sorry. There’s just no other way to put it in to words.” She admits, and I know exactly what she means.

“There really isn’t.” I agree, and send the complex mix of awe, trust, and devotion I hold her in through our bond. The wave of trust, affection, and sorrow I get in return is unexpected, and I stop in the middle of the street. “What did you see?” She, if anything, should be worried or uncertain if she had seen nothing, and either pleased with what she has seen or anxious and trying to prevent an unfavorable outcome.

She stops as well, lifting her face to the setting sun as though it holds the answer she should give me. I don’t want what she thinks I should hear.

“Aein-ah.” Taking my hand in her smaller ones, she brushes my knuckles against her cheek. “When did you stop remembering your dreams?”

“…There you are.” His skin is the color of steeped black tea and his eyes a startling shade of green, his thick, wavy hair flowing loose as a maiden’s and as dark as blackened oak, and his hands touch my bare shoulder even as his lips meet my own and…

…”Bind his hands, idiot, unless you want him using his magic.”

“I’ve been fucking him daily for more than a month, it’ll fit.”

“Sweet Farore, he’s tight.”

“You’re just a monster….”

…Bongo-bongo-bongo-bongo…

“When they started to hurt more than I could bear.” I admit, letting the scent of her skin soothe me, keep me from drowning in memories.

“Do they still pain you so much?” I am unsure when I closed my eyes, but opening them again to find her before me is no bad result. I find I can smile, for her.

“No, they don’t. I’m still here.” I remind myself…and my queen. I have lived through the worst of the nightmares and tragedies I have been presented with. “I’m still standing.” Still whole, if not undamaged. “That’s how I know I can withstand whatever is to come. I don’t need to
dream it. I can do it. I am myself proof of that.”

She is silent for a long time, looking at my face and listening to me breathe. Judging the truth of my words and the strength of my spirit. I see her inhale, open her mouth to speak, and change her mind in the twilight. Whatever she was going to say doesn’t matter, she can tell me once I have returned.

Taking my hand in her own, she leads the way to the sanctuary she has built in the rubble, and I think that alone says enough.

One by one the lights wink out in the city of the lost, leaving only the stars to watch as I tend the furnace and she sets dried oats to soak for the morning. Brother moon’s face is nearly dark and I soak in the shadows he calls to strengthen my magic.

“Aein. Come to bed.” Zelda calls.

As always, I obey.

The raucous cawing of the crows that flock around me calls me from slumber and bid me to rise. With a groan, I stir, careful not to disturb my sleeping queen as I slide out from beneath her thin arm. Immediately she latches onto the rumpled bedding instead, curling in and seeking warmth, making me smile. It is brisk, still, in the mornings, and I grab up a shawl to wrap about my shoulders over my night gown and go to stoke the fire.

Even though I am leaving by noon, I still add some Farore’s lace to the oats before putting the kettle to the flame as per Zelda’s explicit request. Though my oath to her is binding, hers to me is not and cannot be. Hylia’s line must continue with a worthy alliance and a proper father, not someone of Shaekha’ri blood. Once she has been restored to her rightful throne, those of appropriate station can make their suits, and I will step aside for the necessary time.

She will make a wonderful mother once she chooses to conceive.

Until then, the citrusy seeds will prevent that from happening and continue to add some flavor to otherwise bland and gluey breakfasts. Stirring vigorously, I leave the kettle to cook and take up my basket to make the quick dash to the bathhouse for the block. Being the first to use it means I must light the fire there as well, but being what I am means I do not need to wait for the large boiler to heat in order to get my bath.

Fire comes easily to my fingertips, and spreads to warm the tub filled with chill mountain run-off to an acceptable temperature for my most sensitive skin. I take the time to both clean and comb my hair, binding it up in a tight, stub braid, and trim my facial hair. Scrubbed pink all over, it feels right to slide into the battle-suit my queen has provided. To use the dodongo hide boots and cuisse from Impa. To wrap my forearms in the bindings Johanna has knit over the winter months. Nabooru taught me how to wrap my face and head in more of the same to protect from the dessert winds, and Brant’s knitting is just as fine. Shan’s quiver rests at my hip for an easy draw, and Liah’s bow slides over my tabard comfortably.

I leave it resting against the table to breakfast with Zelda, who takes the opportunity of my exposed mouth to kiss me thoroughly, cleaning the last trace of oats from my teeth with her tongue.

“Fly.” She tells me while I am still recovering, and I nod.

“With the songs of the wind.” I agree, and cover the offering with my shadow before raising my whistle with a Prelude of Light.
The Temple is silent as I arrange the gifts to the Hero and Spirit of the Sword, magic humming beyond my hearing as it is accepted and fades. Soon, with a citrine in hand, I will not need to risk so much coming here. Soon, they will be supported by contributions from all of the people in the lands of Hylia’s Descent. The sooner I go, the sooner I can come back.

The Requiem of Spirit is a song I have not had much cause to play, for entering the homeland of the Usurper is not high on my list of desirable activities. Fortunately, he is not waiting for me beneath the gaze of the Goddess of the Sand. No one is, and the entrance to the Great Fairy’s Fountain is blocked off. I drink deeply at the oasis, ensure my water skeins are full, and step into the howling sands.

Illusions are easily seen through, but the sand itself is not, and I find I must raise a strip of the bandaging to cover my eyes and offer them some protection relatively quickly. The temperature rises sharply, and I must move quickly to avoid the levers and scorpions who hunt while the sun is still bearable. Soon, it becomes less so, and I call the shadows to me in a place where shadow does not belong.

Even if I could keep moving during the height of the day, the oppressive heat forces me to stop, which in turn allows my summoned darkness a chance to cool the sand beneath my feet and hands. I stay there, resting but not truly sleeping, for three marks, and move on.

Drinking sparingly, eating less, I stop twice more before darkness falls to tend to the needs of my body, though there is not as much to tend to as I had anticipated. I am loosing moisture to sweat instead. Nabooru warned me of it, but I had not thought it would be so much as all that. The road and bridge into the dessert are milder, for all their own ferocity.

As hot as the day is, the night is twice as cold, and I must keep moving in order to stay warm despite being so tired I miss three shots and ruin one arrow in doing so. Brother moon is but a sliver, and tomorrow will have hidden his face entirely, so I use the stars to travel the path the Sage laid out.

I abandon the first skein a mark before dawn, confident that the creatures of the deep desert will take care of any trail I may leave beyond the care of the shifting sands. The water inside tastes of warm leather, but I am careful now to not grow thirsty, for at that point it is already too late.

Sister sun shows her face, and brings with her a return of predators of the day. My lack of success in the night and inability to carry much in the way of food stuffs means that, should certain types approach at the sound of my footfalls, I will take the shot. My second arrow at the celadon shaded leever is a clean kill, and I take the time with the butchering, avoiding both the acid sacks and barbed hooked teeth on three of the four sides.

Its gullet is empty of all but sand, as promised, and the thin strips of meat resemble the flesh of cacti more than creature. Once I have all I can garner from the corpse without contamination, I pile the remains together and use the broken arrow to puncture an acid sack.

It’s surprising how fast the flesh dissolves beneath that liquid, though even this early in the day the steam from the lot is barely visible before it dissipates. I thread the meat onto the longer piece of my broken arrow and move on.

Another few marks of travel and even the levers disappear. Tired from being awake longer than a full day, I call my covering of shadow earlier than I did yesterday and set the slices of meat on the sand to cook before falling into an exhausted sleep.

True to form, Nabooru’s advice proves prudent, for by the time I wake late in the day the
slices of leever have shrunk and cooked to an almost moss green. They are tough, but remarkably tasty, and I am careful to ensure I drink enough, but not too much. The summoned shadow is truly a blessing, though I am already as tanned as I ever have been after just more than a day beneath the gaze of the Goddess of the Sand.

The small dune that formed against my back slides down to join the rest of the sand once I stand, and I move on at least somewhat restored. The night of moon dark sleeplessly guides me with the stars, and the morning brings no hunting to my path. I am forced to use the small sack of mixed ground grains and some of my precious water to cook a round of flat bread for my meal while I sleep during the heat of the day, and I wake nauseated and dizzy.

I haven’t been drinking enough, and vomiting would be counterproductive, so I roll the flat bread and sip slowly at the third skein as I travel, foregoing food entirely for the remains of the day. The second night of the Sprout moon leads my feet out of the loose and into hard packed crusted sand. It makes travelling easier, though the air is so very, very dry, and retains heat even well into the night.

At dawn I force down as much of the flat bread as I can, finish off the fourth skein, and head towards the nearly blinding white light in the distance that is the sunlight reflecting off the Subrosian salt flats.

I must stop moving two marks before Sister sun reaches her zenith or be cooked where I stand, for I can smell the scent of baking stone and my boots sizzle where I step outside of my summoned shade. I wait one of them before sitting on the still hot rock, unable to move, unable to rest, but within sight of my goal.

Four marks after noon, I can bear the heat well enough to continue. One mark before dusk, the wind picks up as the heat rises from the land itself. I have made better time than Nabooru anticipated, for as the sun sets the blackened sand gives way to liquid fine salt that rises in gentle puffed clouds with each step.

Move too quickly, and those clouds rise up to choke me, burning my skin wherever it is exposed and rattling my lungs. I dare not cough, but instead stop moving long enough for the poisonous dust to settle, and drain my fifth skein before replacing my wrappings and making sure to cover my eyes once again.

I do not drop the empty leather sack for fear of raising more of the salt dust than I can handle, even protected now as I am, so I carry it with me. Stepping slowly and cautiously, I would sweat with the effort had I the moisture to spare. The salt shifts beneath my weight, sucking at my feet and tugging at my boots. My hands itch as it works its way through the tightly knitted fabric. Then they burn.

I am certain that the green before me is an illusion brought on my strain and dehydration right up until I crest the hill protecting an expansive valley and stumble over the edge to slide into what can only be a palm tree.

So this is the Subrosian garden Nabooru spoke of.

I made it.
The Dreams that May

Chapter Summary

“You should reach the limits of virtue, before you cross the border of death.” Tyrtaeus

Chapter Notes


The winding valley is a gaping wound in the salt flats, peaked edges keeping most of the dust fine powder from blowing into the oasis itself. My entrance has silenced what wildlife calls this place home, though a lack of larger predators has left the goats incautious and they only stare briefly before returning to their grazing.

The rising welts on my skin determines my course of action for me, and I strip to the skin. Bundling my clothing with my bandages, I carry the lot away from my body with the unstrung bow and make my way deeper into the greenery.

Compared to the Kokiri Forest, the plants are sparse, low, frail, and thin. After days of little more than sand, sand, more sand, and salt, this place is lush and verdant. Detritus from foliage covers the ground, slowly turning the sand to earth as it decays, and the smaller plants are nourished from it. I follow the path gravity leads me on, for even here, water will flow downward.

I can smell it before I hear it, and hear it before I see it, gushing from a crevice deep in the rock, perhaps nine, perhaps ten man heights beneath the rim of the valley walls. Some few floating plants shelter the fish I startle when I jump into the pool, but the water is clear and clean and sweet and so deep I cannot see the bottom in the middle. The edges are steeply sloped, the angle hard enough that I must crawl out or risk losing my footing, but it feels so very, very good on my seared and chapped skin.

I spend longer than I should in the pool, swimming and floating and generally making a lot of noise, and only emerge once the skin concealed beneath layers of clothing starts turning as tan as the rest of me. Cleansed of the caustic salt, I take the time to wash my clothing. Staking sturdy branches in the sand on the banks of the curiously even pool, I tie the woven fabrics to the sticks and let the current drag the salt from the fibers. Wood and bone and metal I dip and dry. Leather I wipe clean with cloth, then return the cloth to the stakes. With the rough skin I have from such brief contact, I cannot risk wearing any of it if the least of that salt remains.

Spreading the lot to dry over rock and branch, I gather some of the abundant date fruits
partially dried and ripened by the sun. Dried gourd husks yield two suitable for my purposes, and there is dried leaves and sticks in abundance. For all the green, there is no one to clear the fallen foliage, and so what isn’t shaded to rot dries quickly, like my skin. A mark before sunset finds me with a camp filled with creature comforts. Shielded on two sides by the valley walls, screened by shrub, my fire pit blazes merrily as my skewered goat cooks. The larger muscles I grill over the open flame, while the smaller meats simmer in a thick stew inside the gourd shells. I roast the bones under the ashes, and dedicate the kill to the Sage that led me here.

There is no recompense for the other things she spoke of, though I will owe her for the rest of my life for it.

The hide of the goat serves to protect my hands as I pull the bones from the fire and crack them open to cool the marrow. Come morning, I will shred that skin to leave for the foxes whose tracks I have seen, along with the brain, kidneys, liver, and other offal. I cannot clean it properly here, to ensure it is safe to eat, so I will offer it to the proper predators of this place instead.

There is more than enough meat for me, a surplus of food with the dates and new fronds. More than enough for breakfast and lunch tomorrow. I should bring some with me when I return, if only to give Link a taste of something different.

More palm fronds than I care to count make a sturdy bed, and after filling my stomach with food and water there is little else I could want for. The soothing oil of the cooled goat marrow on my salt and sun burned skin is a relief, though I must remain nude to not ruin my clothing with it. At least the warmth and shelter are sufficient for the temperature and place without them. I have the presence of mind to bank my fire for the night, and drift to sleep to the song of fronds and sere grasses rustling in the wind.

I bathe once more upon rising in the morning, cleansing my skin of fat and oil and the sand that clings to both. My fire is cold, and two gourds full of water ensures that even a stray spark could not reignite the flames. The meat of the goat bundles easily into the bag that held the mixed flatbread flour, and once I have donned my clothing and armor, I turn north to seek the Shattered Temple and the citrine I may find therein.

The further I travel in a vaguely northward direction, the clearer it becomes that this valley is what has naturally become of a very unnatural structure. If the dwelling I found and wintered in was made by my ancestors and the Gorons as shelter for both our people so long ago that I can barely recognize the writing, then this place is even older than that. How old, I cannot fathom a guess. Before the Descent, surely. Possibly before the Ascent. Ancient beyond understanding.

The only truly telling signs are the regularity of the corridors, circling in a radial pattern from the perfectly circular center. Twelve paths of varying depth and breadth lead out again from where I have come in from the south-south-west. Shards of dead time shift stones litter the tops of the few remaining walls, and finely corroded metal stains the ground in places.

A tenth of the lower right side of a door frame tells me that people made this place, but not who or when or why. It serves no visible purpose, there is no glyphs or symbols or even sharp corners left on the remains of what may have been brick. I…must have travelled outside of Hyrule’s borders at some point in my journeying. The Great Desert to the west has been impassible for centuries, only three patrols on the north and two at the south venture into it during the course of a full cycle.

If the Geru’dō belong to the Goddesses truly, so far from Hylia’s influence and the sacred lands…why does this place exist? How…how are my people any different?
Is our self-imposed exile of shame not borne of divine will at all, but mortal folly?

Does it make a difference in my purpose in coming here, to question everything I have been taught about being who and what I am? No. Not particularly. Link still needs support Between. Fi requires aid in helping the Hero. Zelda must remain safe. I have to find a citrine large enough to resonate with the power of this place in order for all these things to happen, and standing around staring at the crumbled remains of an ancient people does nothing in achieving that goal.

I move on. Exploring the pathways, both deep and shallow, in a sun-wise pattern shows me that the southern path and the south-south west path are impassible. The south-west branch leads to the remains of the south-south-west’s terminus. The western branch is filled with water. It is only once I reach the north-north-west that I see any signs of the formation of stone, and only dropping into the eastern branch’s secondary level do I find what I am looking for in general.

Golden and gleaming, every shade of yellow from nearly transparent to deep ochre orange, most of the stones are too small for my purposes, and the flaws in others would cause them to shatter the moment the energy from the Geru’do Citrine itself is linked to it. Sore from the search, I rest as the mid-day sun heats the air beyond comfort and makes my breath labored and uneven. Calling the shadow to me eases enough of the scorching heat that I can drink, and eat a little of the roasted goat even though after the first few bites it sticks in my throat.

Safe here even from the small predators of the oasis valley, I doze until a good three marks past noon. Sister sun’s light has set the citrine to sparkling and humming with energy, and even though I can’t use it, I can compare it to what I have grown familiar with in the Temple of Time.

Inspired by the thought, I hum the first few notes of the Prelude, and am able to focus better on the patterns the stones give off. It doesn’t take me long to find a fist sized honey toned citrine that is clear and without flaw, fairly pulsing at my touch with the sheer volume of power it can hold. It’s perfect for my purposes, and requires some fine handling to remove, but comes free of the cluster without incident or damage.

Regretting having to leave this place with its buried secrets and forgotten mysteries doesn’t stop me from tucking the citrine safely in my pouch and taking up my weapons and water skeins once more. I stack the bunch of ripened dates on the bundle of roasted goat and raise the whistle to my lips, letting the Prelude of Light carry me to the dais of the Master Sword.

Clapping once to gain Fi’s attention, I place the bunch and bundle at the base of the pedestal in the center of the gate to the Sacred Realm.

“For the Hero, that he may persist.” I intone, bowing over the offering to the master of my heart. In a little more than a cycle of the seasons, he will wake to fulfil his destiny. Vanquishing the Usurper King, cleansing the Temples of corruption, freeing the power of the Sages to keep the balance between peoples and places. My offering fades from reality as it is taken between, and acceptable contribution to Link’s continued health.

I clap twice, acknowledging Fi’s presence and thanking her for her acceptance and care of Farore’s Chosen. Through her, the Goddesses have made his future possible. As Nayru’s servant, mortal, fallible, being allowed to aid him is a blessing I am still not certain I deserve. Despite my own uncertainties and fears, Farore has allowed me a glimpse of the courage I need to act with virtue. Din, for all my discomfort, has let me have the power I need to complete my tasks, many of which still remain. It has been a long day, and my mistress awaits my arrival with the last piece of Link’s support.

:I’ll be there soon:. I promise her.
.:.Aein…?:. As I do not wish to go to the Chamber of Sages now, my bed and Zelda’s arms calling me ferociously, I step back from the pedestal and into the trap waiting for me, hidden by powerful spells as well as my own weariness and the complacency that comes both from familiarity and from anticipating rest.

.:.No!:. Zelda’s cry echoes in my mind even as my muscles lock in pain and shock and bitter, bitter cold.

“Stupid boy!”
“Foolish child!”
“How did he ever manage to defeat Kinoko?”
“Kabocha was a fool.”
“His death overdue, yes.”
“Kinoko was as smart as he was handsome.”
“So handsome.”
“So smart.”
“Silly Sheik.”
“You have the stone.”
“It calls us.”
“Calls our Sage.”
“We have the Sage.”
“Idiot.”
“Buffoon.”
“What a thoughtless moron.”

“But Ganondorf will be pleased.” One of the nearly identical voices comes from an old hag with literally flaming red hair floating in the air on what appears to be, of all things, a broom.

“Very pleased.” The other voice belongs to…another old hag, virtually identical to the first, but for the frosted hair and different colored stone on her forehead.

Twin Geru’do witches, allied with Demise’s Oath made flesh.

“Koume and Kotake Rova.” I rasp, the ice holding me in place a stronger version of the spell the Geru’do carry on their arrows. I cannot dislodge myself quickly or easily, the matrix of crystallization far more complex and secure than true ice could ever be.

.:.Aein, I’m sorry. I promise you, I will make it right!:. Zelda whispers through our bond, sending me the vision she has had of the future from this point onward.

It leaves me stunned, breathless with fear, for a brief moment in time.
“Sheik.”

“Aein.”

“Zelda’s dog.” The flame decked one cackles.

“Our prisoner.” The frosted one shrieks.

.:I will not betray you.: I tell her, my own visions from when I first sought the best path in taking up this duty returning. I am as good as dead either way. I have…seen it before, walking the Umbral Lines. My choices, my action, inaction, and interaction have all culminated in this moment, and I would not change a thing. The Hero is coming. I have faith. I go willingly and without regret…and sever as much of our bond as I can.

This way, Link has the best of all possible chances, and so does she.

“Vengeance will be mine!”

“And mine!”

Their voices mingle into an unholy cacophony of screeching and hooting, and I hear the doors to the Temple open and the moaning of Redead approach. The Twinrova have too much power over the dishonored dead, for the desiccated corpses move as one creature to carry my prison out of the Temple and into the empty streets of Castle Town.

Through the abandoned Market Square, beyond the homes of the wealthy and noble, past the last partially standing pillar of the old Castle, they push, pull, and drag the ice holding my limbs. Every step they take, the ghosts of the dishonored dead, the violently murdered, the innocent and the guilty sacrificed on the altar of a false King gather and grasp at me, seeking the Silent Realm to cease their suffering. Beyond screaming, they wail in silence, mouths gaping and dark. Opening that path inside of me as widely as I can, I welcome their fragmented spirits to flee.

Some, some, are ghosts so true to the forms they wore in life I could think them corporeal still. Some are the remains of guardians, familiar spirits, the ancient and ignored. Others have been worn to orbs, weakened to mere arcs of light. Some are nothing more than a scent, a whisper, a blur. Those bound to form leave evidence of their passing. The Gibdo collapse in ones and twos, the ReDead in handfuls, the Poes by the dozen. There are always more to take their place. The fire of my calling is consumed in them, leaving nothing to touch the ice that holds me still.

Still, we march onward. The witch of fire calls forth a bridge of pure power to cross the wounded earth, still bleeding from the damage Ganondorf has incurred, and into the stronghold of my enemy, my Queen’s enemy, my people’s enemy, the enemy of all who hold Hylia’s duty in honor.

There are three landings of stairs before we meet with the mechanical guards, their unblinking eyes focused on us but otherwise dormant. A gate, and we are in the audience hall. A pillar in the center throbs with corrupting rancor, and I look around as much as I can, knowing that my Queen is watching through my eyes. I can no longer call to her, but it seems she wishes to let me know she rides me still.

The information I can glean from this space may make the difference between victory and defeat for the nascent Hero awaiting summons.

To the left, the warm tones of Spirit and desert glow softly, pulsing with the essence of a young Geru’dó. To my right, a sealed chamber throbs with the life of a Kokiri child…the one
Kabocha slaughtered, if my sight is at all correct. She weeps softly, unaware of everything outside the shell of her spirit's prison. It will take the power of a Sage at the heart of that spell work to undo the malicious magic allowing the corruption of one of the Temples to feed the Usurper King, anything less and the attempt would kill the caster, draining them to nothing. Saria can no longer access that portion of her power, not with her Temple debased and overrun with the minions of the Evil King.

Deku Baba tremble in their pits as we pass, and still the dead come. For all I am encased in familiar ice, my hands burn, from fingertip to elbow, blistering with the force of desperate spirits clawing their way to freedom. I see the fairies, trapped by their own desire to offer aid. The Gorons, hauling the necessities of an army. The Humans, cleaning what the Geru’d women dispose of and fighting over the scraps. I see them all, and through me, my Mistress counts for the reckoning.

Down a level an empty chamber awaits, and I am carried beyond and up once more. There is a door here, with the sigil of the Shadow Temple dark and empty above. The raw stone and packed earthen floor inside are somewhat of a surprise, but the instruments they hold are not. My guess confirmed, I pray to Farore for courage in my coming trials.

There are no other Shaekha’ri in Hyrule, and Impa abandoned her power to save Zelda. The Temple has already fallen. As evidenced by Spirit and Forest, all Ganondorf needed was a life to fuel his tainted magic, a life of one of Shadowed blood.

That life…my life…is all he will gain, however. I have thwarted his ability to take any of my spirit or my power for himself. My spirit is Nayru’s. My power will go to Zelda. Link will awaken. He will cleanse the temples. He will free the Sages. He will kill the murderer of thousands. I take what comfort I can from that, and look my captors in the eye as the Redeads leave and they approach.

“What sweet nightmares plague you, boy?” Koume, circling me sun wise.

“What terrors haunt your dreams?” Kotake, roving in the opposite direction.

“What is it like, to be the last of your kind?”

“To know you failed?”

“She will be ours.”

“Her portion ripped from her cold, dead hand.”

“And then the boy’s.”

“We will find where you have hidden them.”

“Our illusions are as strong as yours.”

“You may see the truth.”

“But we can smell a lie.”

“We found her once already.”

“We can find her again.”

“Easily, now that we have you.”
“You cannot fake her trails.”

“You cannot carry her scent.”

“She is lost.”

“Hopeless.”

“Bereft.”

The hags natter on, and I find it easy to ignore them. Ignore their words. Draw the cottony cocoon around my mind and let them chatter. Slowly, the ice melts, freeing my skin to shiver and my clothing to part beneath shriveled hands and ragged talons.

“Here it is, Kotake.” The white haired one mutters, pulling the warp whistle from my pouch.

It is inert, dead to their touch, and I am fiercely glad.

“You found it, Koume.” The red haired one agrees. At least now I know which witch is which.

“I wonder what other jewels we can find.” Her fingers trail down my sternum, brushing my skin with a callous touch and calling up the nauseating fear of contact Vidkun’s betrayal culminated in.

“What other treasures we can plunder.” I can’t help but flinch at her words, but with my body’s shaking, I don’t think she notices. Vidkun…Kinoko’s words echoing from deep in my memory, and all that happened then. Though it’s been years, I still cannot bear to recall the events following the death of two of Lord Throri’s guard. Iza and Oren’s names has been entered in the records Zelda keeps. She was there with me, helping me though our bond, then.

She is not here now. Only my prison, the words of the witches, the flare of their spells, and that hand. Touching me.

Somehow, instead of being trapped in slowly melting ice, I am once more bound to the bench upholstered in Elydis colors. Thick chains wrap tightly around the solid wooden legs, and my wrists have been tied to those chains so tightly I can barely flex, let alone move. Blood trickles down my face from the split lip courtesy of Kinoko’s boot, but the thick coppery scent that fills my nose is from what is left of the guards.

I am naked, and I am afraid.

There is a cushion in addition to the padding of the bench beneath my hips, raising them ever so slightly and leaving me exposed to the room. Despite the dryness of my mouth and the air, I know the feeling of oil coating me between my legs, and know what that means even before Kinoko presses himself against my back.

“Hello Aein.” His breath is hot on the base of my neck, the stiff length of his penis damp and hard between my cheeks. He lets me know his intent by brushing the tip of his manhood against the oil, and even though I know I can’t escape it doesn’t stop me from trying.

Impa, Hahron, Nabooru, Taoki, Enzo, even Alma have spoken about the things done to the vulnerable. The abuses they may suffer. I have seen the consequences in the weavings of the Loyalists and some of those under the Dark King’s banner. Rape is a thing of power, and those who
flock to him crave that above all else. Knowing that doesn’t make it any easier to bear.

I keep Kinoko from penetrating me for a few seconds, the give of the padding and cushion enough that I can at least manage that much. But where I am contained, he is free to move and intent and achingly hard.

Two short thrusts and I can feel his hips press against my own. I know, too, that he takes pleasure from my cries as much as from my body, but I cannot seem to contain them.

Before, when I thought him a lover, he was careful, cautious, and gentle. Always, always being certain to stretch me thoroughly, use plenty of some type of lubricant, he would let me find that place where it was good to have him move inside me.

Not now.

Now, he barely pauses to realign his hips before starting a driving pace that leaves me gasping and grunting between tears. Drool joins the blood streaming from my lip as he shoves himself into me as hard as he can.

The rough fabric of his trousers is abrasive on my most intimate skin, rubbing me raw outside as he forces his way in. My body knows him. I know him. He knows my limits, and is doing his best to break them all.

Voices murmur and his pace relents for the space of a small conversation. I’ve been unable to focus on the grunts and mumbles that spill from Kinoko’s mouth, in too much pain and denial to pay attention to such trivialities until his dick is no longer a hot stabbing intrusion throughout my lower body.

“Fucking shit. Take it.” Kinoko grunts out, and I feel my muscles relax, unable to maintain their resistance against him any longer.

“Yes.” Fyer hisses as I feel when Kinoko uses that give to go deeper still. The tongue on my cheek makes me shudder as Kinoko licks away one of the tears staining my face and uses the forward motion to drive his entire body weight behind the penetration, leaving me breathless and gagging on air.

“I’m gonna come inside you.” He snarls. “Gonna come so hard you fucking taste it.”

“Gonna fuck you through his come.” Fyer moans, stroking himself, and Kinoko grinds against me, making his cock move inside me with no help from his hips. I don’t…

“Keep it inside, you’re gonna need it.” Mukesh rumbles from my right, and I turn my head enough to see him stroking himself, nude and massive. He can’t…

“I’ll make…sure to…leave a big…one.” Kinoko grunts out between full-length thrusts that make me mewl in pain. “You’re so…tight and…hot and…I fucking…hate you, you…little BITCH.”

He bears down hard, and I feel him twitch, feel the moisture inside me spread, feel his stomach on my back as he slows his breathing from the rapid pant of exertion to a more relaxed pace.

I feel stretched open, raw and hollow, even as some of his deposit seeps out to dribble down my thighs.

My own breath turns to hitching sobs and soft sniffling even as my body relaxes to sag
against the cushioned bench. I know it takes him at least a quarter mark to recover, so I have that long to shore up what strength and defense I can muster. Mukesh is still stroking himself, but Fyer’s disappeared from sight.

The heat of Kinoko’s body has barely faded, his seed still leaking out of me, when that warmth is replaced.

Narrower hips, a warmer body with a small overhang of tummy, and the eager sound of Fyer’s voice grunting and moaning like I haven’t heard since the poor idiot got a second slice of apple pie. His hands grasp at my waist as he thrusts himself between my thighs, through the come remaining on my skin, against my hips. I’m not expecting the sharp teeth on my back and shoulders as he bites down, hard.

Warmth floods my skin when his teeth leave, and I know that at least some of the marks have drawn blood. I press my chest into the bench in an involuntary attempt to get away from his mouth, and that is a mistake as it raises my hips up in turn.

It’s bad. A bad angle, bad timing, and Fyer is so very, very hard. He’s bigger around than Kinoko by a significant margin, but not as long, and it doesn’t matter. It hurts. Had I the breath for it, I would have screamed. As it is, a strangled squawk echoes through the room over even Fyer’s eager grunting.

With no other example to follow but the malicious earth wizard’s, the idiot simply ruts forward and back with no technique and no discernable rhythm. I can’t anticipate, can’t brace myself for it, can’t even move with the rapid thrusting to try and get it to hurt a little less. I can’t even stop the small sounds that fall from my lips with each tear that leaks from my eyes.

My childhood teachers, Yoru, and Hahron all told me to relax into a coming blow to soften it, and experience in fighting and fleeing have taught me that it works, at least a bit. All I can do now then, is relax into the graceless humping and pray that it ends, soon.

Kinoko, cleaned off and dressed once more, kneels in front of me and grins.

“That’s it. Relax.” He encourages as Fyer grunts in pleasure, the warmth of his mouth on my neck moistened by his tongue. “Take it deep. Take it all.” His hand on my skin sends ripples through my system and I can feel as he feeds off of my pain, using his magic to exhaust my own.

“Take us all.” Mukesh confirms my fears, and moves out of my sight lines even as Fyer’s teeth let go of my throat.

“Fucking bitch. So hot. You like my dick?” It’s not a question. I don’t respond. It doesn’t matter. He speeds up, shudders, and stills, gasping in air as he empties himself.

The slurp of him leaving my body pulls some of the evidence of his pleasure with him, and Kinoko leans forward to watch, replacing Fyer’s penis with four of his fingers and pulling me open wider still. He’s careful to angle himself so I can’t bite him, can’t even hit his leg with my head hard enough to be more than a firm rub. His fingers have more strength and motion. They rub, playing with the oil and semen he finds. I can feel myself spasm as he pushes the liquid back in, can’t help the whine as heat looms near and Kinoko chuckles.

My thighs are bumped against, brushed, and someone rests their arm along my lower back.

Mukesh’s grumble of displeasure makes me freeze in terror, even as he lifts himself away
again to adjust. His legs shift to the outside of mine instead of trying to squeeze between. The weight on my back moves with them, and I know, I know, that it’s not an arm. There’s no hand at the end.

That blunt, rounded nub slithers wetly down my back even as Kinoko spreads the globes of my ass with his hands, leaving barely enough room for a firm, heavy organ to rest, pressed hotly against the opening to my body. Even after both Kinoko and Fyer have had their pleasure, Mukesh is too big. He can’t possibly…

White hot pain sears across my vision and I choke on a scream. I can’t breathe, every muscle in my body flaring with the agony of being pushed beyond my limits.

I feel it as even that last barrier buckles under the weight and strength of a man twice my size and taste blood as it burbles from my throat.

There is still more. I strain. Burning anguish rips through my spine even as I am torn, the chains and bench preventing me from curling inward in distress.

He stills. I can’t breathe. Can’t think. All I know is the torment of his heat, the pressure of cruelty spearing me open and pinning me down.

“Mm.”

He moves. Only a little, but it is enough for my diaphragm to remember how to pull in air. My lungs burn. He returns, and I know that I will not die from this. At least, not right away. But oh…it hurts.

The small rocking of his hips against my own dictate the rhythm of my breaths, small mewls escaping with every thrust. The sheer size of him lifts me ever so slightly, knocking the legs of the bench against the floor, a steady scraping to counter the wet squishing I refuse to contemplate.

Kinoko plays with my buttocks, squeezing them inward and pulling them out even as he drains the energy my violation is producing. It makes it difficult for me to care, impossible to refuse. He laughs, watching Mukesh as he penetrates my last reserves of denial and shatters them completely.

Trembling beneath him, his strength is enough to push small hiccups of sound, hitches of breath and faint whimpers alike from my mouth. Low moans and the occasional soft rumble of sound roll over my back as my face is driven further into the cushioned seat and the bindings on my wrists tear at my skin.

They don’t bleed much, already gone cold as my body attempts to deal with the more grievous injuries it has recently taken.

Unlike Fyer, Mukesh sets a steady pace early on and maintains it, I haven’t the energy to struggle, and simply learn the best rhythm to accommodate his pattern of rocking thrusts. Breathing when I can, choking back tears when I can’t. Kinoko leaves off his siphoning long enough for me to regain the will to whimper as I grow accustomed to the weight of the massive organ pressing against my insides.

“Sweet Farore, he’s tight.” Mukesh grunts out as he transfers his hands from the bench to my waist. It’s not like I have anywhere to go, but the bench stopped moving a while ago. The thrusts aren’t any slower, still deep enough that things inside of me are…moving. Accommodating. I feel ill. Feverish from the pain. Dizzy and nauseated.
The skin of his balls sticks to my own, only to retreat with a sticky pull and a rush of relief. Steady. Soft. Merciless.

“You’re just a monster, Mukesh.” Kinoko is amused at my suffering, and I turn my face from his rapt gaze. He’s not looking at my face regardless. I don’t want to see what he finds so entertaining.

Whatever it is, it does keep him from draining me further, even as Mukesh growls low in his chest and thrusts through his orgasm, filling me to the brim and beyond. Fluid seeps out down my cheeks, balls, and thighs before he has recovered enough to move, and pours out after. I can feel it pool in the bend at the back of my knee, and know that most of it isn’t blood. The metallic scent of it is merely an afterthought to the thick musk of sweat and sex.

With my face turned from the conductor of my brutalization, Fyer passed out on the floor next to him, Mukesh withdrawing, and Ryon and Pergie in my line of sight, I don’t understand why there are hands on me still. Unfamiliar warmth presses between my legs, and I cannot place the voice.

Whoever it is, he’s much smaller than Mukesh. Quieter too. He moans as he pushes through the sloppy mess and slides in deeply enough that he can go no further. Small murmurs of sound, a kiss over a bruise from Fyer’s teeth, and tacky, wet gushing noises call a few gasps from my lips as this man, too, takes his turn.

He’s gentle in his own way, simply using my body in a milder manner to attain his peak, and Kinoko doesn’t find as much power to pull from me because of it. Less power means less to give Ganondorf, and I could almost be thankful for it. Were it not for the fact that I don’t want any of this, I hurt everywhere, and he is using me that is. Still, his regard for my spent form is almost, almost kind. Almost.

I recognize the scar on his left hand as it lifts from my shoulder and falls to tug at my hip, pressing my buttocks together for more friction, a tighter grip on his dick. Lukan, merchant and informant. Compared to Mukesh, he doesn’t hurt my body at all. Compared to Kinoko, the damage to my heart is nothing. Still. I don’t want him. He takes me anyway. The rhythm of his movements eventually speed up enough that I know he’s close, and I see Ryon stand and drop his trousers. He’s been stroking himself steadily since I looked, and Pergie is nude and erect. Soal is still mostly clothed, but his excitement stains the front of his pants. That they will be taking their turns taking me has been obvious from the moment Fyer was allowed to mount.

Lukan is on the verge of spilling his seed, and has gained in volume along with speed. He presses in hard. His taught balls dance against me. His penis jerks once, twice, even as his hands dig into my hips, his nails breaking bruised skin. Already thoroughly saturated inside, when he finishes there is nowhere else for his contribution to go, and it follows the sticky trail of blood and semen down the inside of my legs.

When Ryon doesn’t immediately mount me after Lukan withdraws I am confused. When he loosens the chains holding me to the bench, I am baffled. Weak, dazed, and in pain, that disorientation translates into simply waiting to see what he is doing. If I could run, there is nowhere to go that I wouldn’t be immediately caught. I can’t run if I can’t stand, and the muscles of my legs from the tips of my toes to the crest of my hip are numb and unresponsive.

I can still feel when he kneels between my legs and spreads me open to examine the trembling orifice at the end of my spine.

The lips on my tailbone are a surprise.
The tongue slurping at the rim of my aching ass is a shock.

The semen slipping down my legs is mostly ignored, but everything else is cleaned quickly and thoroughly by Ryon’s active tongue and lips. He is careful to keep his teeth from even grazing against me, sheathing them with his lips as his tongue tries to reach the same depths Mukesh managed to place his seed.

My thighs draw upward to assist his endeavors on their own, and he dips a finger inside to make certain that he’s retrieved everything he can. Then his entire face presses against me as his tongue delves and twirls.

He sucks and swallows and gasps out his enjoyment, pulling away only long enough to breathe deeply before returning for more. Open mouthed kisses cover both cheeks and I had no idea how fast he could be.

Ryon is longer than the very longest stroke of Lukan before him, longer than Kinoko, longer than Fyer. Maybe even as long as Mukesh, but thinner. Faster. He’s crammed himself into my relaxed body quicker than I thought possible to rise from a kneeling crouch to covering my back with his chest.

His hands stay on my hips as he holds me still so he can fuck upwards instead of forwards. He won’t stop until he’s done, and he’ll be done faster if I let him do what he wants. Bracing myself on my hands I move my knees slightly further apart, arch my back into his thrusts, and let his hands decree the angle of thrust and withdrawal.

His soft chuckle and a kiss on my back is my reward, even as Kinoko’s hands land on my shoulders and the pull of magic starts again.

“What a good little bitch.” He whispers, softly enough that I’m not certain I heard him, but the violence of his fucking eases. I’m not…I hurt less, to let them fuck me like they want. Ryon at least enjoys my submission enough to stroke my chest and stomach, teasing at touching me, running his fingers over hip and thigh as he rocks his dick into me. Just…a little less pain, if I don’t…

He enjoys my body enough to stay inside it long after his penis has stopped twitching, though his grip bruises me further with the spasm accompanying his orgasm. I can feel it, sodden and viscous as it dribbles out, see Kinoko’s eyes widen and hear Pergie’s impressed groan at the quantity.

He’s obviously next, and I rest my head on my arms and wait for him to mount. If submission means less pain and even the possibility of some pleasure, then I will submit.

Pergie is not Ryon.

Despite having my head down, ass in the air, waiting for him to take his turn, he is not gentle in the least. His fist meets my anus and he attempts to get his entire hand inside me, and I cry out in shock and pain. My cry means he takes his fingers and the first part of his palm out and slaps me, hard, across the back of the head, knocking my face into the floor. I fall forward, and thus avoid most of the second slap. The third makes me see stars. The fourth leaves me dazed. The fifth and sixth follow in rapid succession.

Sprawled out it’s easy for him to line up and slam his hips into the junction of mine, penetrating and pinning me down in one motion. Bright bursts of muted pain from the immediate ache of his fists flash behind my eyes. The dull throb between my legs seems eternal. The hands on my throat make my vision grey, then fade to black.
The scent of ammonia and Soal’s odd giggling return moments before I see his face. He kisses me. I am on my back, head aching, and he has my knees over his shoulders and grins brightly before I feel him slide into me. I groan and my legs tremble. He kisses me again, and starts his turn.

Already inside, there’s no point in protesting as he lifts me up and tilts forward, encouraging me to stay flat on my back as he fucks into me. There is no point in protesting, only more pain. I don’t… I don’t want any more. No more. Just… stop. Please. Stop.

I go with his lift, letting my hands fall from his chest where they have risen in a reflexive attempt to get him to still. To not. He laughs in pleasure at my surrender and ruts in earnest. I can’t really feel him move, just how I’m rocked in response, at least until he shifts over me to lie on my chest.

With my legs up like this, hips opened to his and bellies touching, every thrust of his dick rubs his stomach against my own, against my trapped manhood, and I feel myself respond. The scent of sex is thick in the air, and I prefer men to women to begin with, but I don’t want this. I don’t want to watch the way our bodies move together. Don’t want to see his knowing grin as he reaches between our bellies and does his best to stroke me to hardness.

Kinoko seems to appreciate it, and I close my eyes since I can’t look away from everything at once.

“Roll over.” He demands. Soal grunts in displeasure, but obeys, shifting us both without stopping his hips so that I am lying on his chest, unable to sit without taking more of his penis into my body. I don’t want any more.

“Fyer, did you have a good time?” Pergie asks. I refuse to open my eyes and look, something about the other man’s animalistic humping seeming almost pedophilic despite me being much younger.

“Good! I liked it a lot.” He responds, childish enthusiasm for a decidedly unchildish activity.

“Do you want to do it again?”

Please, Mokara. Welcome me in your arms.

“Yes again!”

No.

“Come here, then.” Kinoko calls, and straddles my back to pin my arms even as Soal grabs my hip. “Come again.”

The sudden pull on the lines of power throughout my body leaves me dizzy and nauseated, and it’s more effective in keeping me still than anything else could be at this point. I don’t know which way is up, only that I want to get away.

What I want doesn’t matter though. I’m not sure it ever did.

Thanks to Soal’s efforts and Kinoko’s oil coated fingers, I’m soon stifling my dry sobs into the skin of Soal’s shoulders as he and Fyer move in counter point. When Fyer pushes in, Soal pulls out. Neither of them ever truly leave my body, for when it looks like one of them is slipping Kinoko holds them steady. When he can work a finger in as well, he does.
Alternating penetrations, Soal continues to stroke me and keep me caught against his stomach. Fyer bites at my back, following his own urges and not really cooperating. He has more range of motion than Soal does, so his thrusts are longer and faster, but Soal can’t really clear the way. Soon Fyer manages to catch up, pressing in before Soal can get clear and expressing his approval by doing it again.

And again.

The second time while I’m still gasping in pain and denial, Kinoko crams his semen slick fingers behind my teeth and fills my mouth with his penis. It’s definitely been more than a quarter mark, and he’s as erect as I’ve even seen him.

Bitter, salty, and slimy, I gag on him as his foreskin slides along my soft palate, choking around the organ but unable to bite down around the fingers keeping my jaw open. Fyer fucks in. Soal goes up. Kinoko slides down. Stuck between the three of them with saliva running down my face I pray for death for myself for the first time.

But it’s not the first time.

This is a memory, nothing more. I lived, and my torturers did not. They are dead and gone.

All of them.

Twinrova, though they wield both fire and ice magics, specialize in the mind.

This is a memory.

I am not here. I am there, in Ganondorf’s Tower, with the witches.

“He’s broken out, Kotake.” No longer pressed between three aroused men, I’m cold.

“Impressive, isn’t it Koume?” I’ve been cold for a while now.

“We’ll have to try harder.” The red sigil of a powerful casting flares bright behind my closed eyes.

“He’s gonna come around again eventually.” The white one isn’t as strong, but is sturdier.

“Come on, just a bit deeper and….” The red pulses, and the white matches it.

“I’m gonna come inside you.” Kinoko snarls. “Gonna come so hard you fucking taste it.”

“Gonna fuck you through his come.” Fyer moans, stroking himself, and Kinoko grinds against me, making his cock move inside me with no help from his hips.

“Keep it inside, you’re gonna need it.” Mukesh rumbles from my right, and I turn my head enough to see him stroking himself, nude and massive.

“I’ll make…sure to…leave a big…one.” Kinoko grunts out between full length thrusts that make me mewl in pain. “You’re so…tight and…hot and… I fucking…hate you, you…little BITCH.”

He bears down hard, and I feel him twitch, feel the moisture inside me spread, feel his stomach on my back as he slows his breathing from the rapid pant of exertion to a more relaxed pace.
I feel stretched open, raw and hollow, even as some of his deposit seeps out to dribble down my thighs.

No.

The pressure of my weight is on my back and wrists, not my chest. This is wrong. Kinoko is dead.

Kotake and Koume are alive, and toying with my mind.

“He is awake again sister.” Koume. Witch. The Tower.

“Quick learner then.” Kotake shifts. I cannot see either of them, surrounded by arcs and whorls of opposing elemental magic, but I am capable of discerning their focus.

“His violation no longer serves best.”

“Find another or try again?”

“He has conquered it, leave it aside.” The ice flares as the fire meets it and becomes water…

:Conquer yourself.: A voice murmurs and I turn, trying to find the source of the words. Next to the tree, identical to me down to the least detail stands a construct of magic and personality assuming my form. It is beautiful, the skill needed to create such a being evident in the smooth motion of the water which shapes its body and holds it to motion. I reach out at the same time it does, to examine the spells used in its creation even as it turns the motion into a strike that scores three shallow lines across the back of my palm. It stings, and I pull back in shock, watching as drops of blood well up to fall into the water. Its eyes are red when next I glance at my reflection brought to life, and then the battle is on.

I am not a skilled warrior, my talents lie elsewhere. My likeness echoes this, dodging and darting about rather than striking at me, leaving openings that I dare not exploit. Rather, it dances about me, flashing first one direction then the next, striking out with makeshift claws only if I lower my guard or lose my focus. Like the Lost Woods, time has no meaning here, and to a liquid golem there is no fatigue. It is not long before my energy falters, and my reproduction manages to slash at my unprotected back, cutting deep over the mark of my geas, drawing blood to stain the divine sigil of Nayru. Wisdom. Zelda. I have killed for her, though not in her name. Every death on my hands is mine alone. My left hand aches as it closes over my dagger. The water-shade laughs, and draws its own blade from its form to rush in.

Letting go of the hilt I leave the blade sheathed and feel the impact of the golem’s in the base of my ribs. It burns, but so does the golem as I use my blood to bind it to me, forcing it to share my body and all its sensations in a way that Zelda will never know, the physicality of it less than possession but also so much more extreme. It does not manipulate my form as Zelda’s spirit can by my invitation. It does not know my body as a lover. It is my body, and no more than that. What magic makes it move dissipates as I absorb the knowledge it has of me, unflattering and starkly blunt though it is, all my failings and petty upsets, immature and arrogant suppositions exposed.

The gut wound burns with the dissolution of the echo’s substance pouring into my veins instead of rejoining the mirror on the floor. I would choke at the agony had I even the slightest ounce of breath or strength left. The test of the Temple pushes me from my form gently, and the pain no longer matters as it moves beneath my skin. Relieved of the immediacy of both physical and spiritual hurts, I seize the cords binding not only my self to my form, but those leading to the people I
love, and shove back. The seven vortices and three hundred sixty energy points in my body flare with the strain of two spirits attempting the same vessel, but as the golem is the one truly present the action interrupts its action more than mine. It is a negative version of me, and I must conquer it.

That does not mean defeat. To conquer is to take control, to master, or to overcome.

I have overcome this already. Cycles ago.

There is no Reflection of my darkness here to test me.

Only the Twinrova.

I am not soaked to the bone, in the space of the Water Temple’s final challenge.

I am in Ganondorf’s tower, chilled and stilled by the ice that encases me, at their diabolical mercies. Is this truly the best they can do? Take moments of my past, barely altering them, to throw at me? I’ve…learned. I’ve changed. I am not my memories alone. Standing here…I can withstand. I’ve overcome everything they’ve done so far...

“Koume!” Kotake shrieks as their illusion shatters, their hold on my mind falling to pieces. Again. Faster, this time. I’m learning…

…I will overcome them, too.
The End

Chapter Summary

And the end is a beginning.

Chapter Notes

So here it is, the last chapter of this massive piece of fanfiction. For those who have made it this far, thank you for sticking with me on the journey! It's almost over, but not before we have:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There is a pulse of light to my left, and then darkness. Not the darkness of a cave or enclosure, but the dark of a moonless night. That means we have an hour at best, and I am among people who are not overtly hostile, but could not be considered friendly under any circumstances. Our mutual purpose is all that allows them to tolerate my presence, their body language and reactions have made that much very clear.

Everything that I am revolts at using another intelligent being as a tool for a dangerous task without their full knowledge and cooperation. The Goddesses I serve above all others would erase my existence for betraying them so completely.

All that I am, have been, and will be, for over a hundred others.

“Grace is the small orb of white light, her affinities only potential. Keep a close eye on it.” I tell whoever will listen as loudly as I can, and reach for the barrier with both hands. Thinking of those I will be abandoning, those I will be freeing sense the disturbance of their cage that is already searing every nerve I have and flood towards me in a rush. “Please, forgive me.” I whisper, and touch the magic directly to open the way…

…back to the tower. Back to where Twinrova have been consistently finding and failing to hold my mind in unpleasant episodes of my memories in an attempt to break me.

I’ve been shattered so many times I know they will never succeed, for each fracture has healed stronger than before, and all reliving the experiences has done is remind me of who and what I am.


I carry the balance between.
“Hold it!” Kotake cries frantically.

“I’m trying!” Koume wails in return.

“What about….” Their magic flares.

The crystalline grotto is silent and nearly dark but for the inherent magic present, barely enough for me to make out the boundaries of the space and causing me to stumble more than once on the way to the stairs. Then running into a wall where a wall should not be.

The earthquake must have jarred the ground into collapsing.

I search for any sign of any passage leading to the surface, cutting my hands on the sharp shards of quartz and amethyst and not caring. My Lady, Queen of my soul, is weakening. Unconscious. Suffocating. Beyond the ability to think, she is in pain. So much pain, burning as her muscles all cramp and spasm even as they fail. Including her heart. I fall to my knees, gagging and choking at the agony, and scent it.

Foul air, like the bottom of an enclosed sinkhole, seeping into the Chamber from above. I cannot breathe the gas itself, but it is a way and I have the will. Standing in the last of the clean air, breathing deeply, I throw myself into the narrow path of shadow that carries me to the surface and through the untenanted parts of the Forgotten City. Up, then, as high as I can go with even a hope, I emerge clinging to a pennant stand on the Temple of the Three and take a gasping breath. The mortar fails a moment later, too weak to support my weight, and I rush back to the hidden paths even as the metal clangs in otherwise silent surroundings.

There is a mist, thick and cloying, of the quiet killer sitting over the city. I can barely see it, and know that no one here would be able to. Their older eyes either never attaining the acuity I have, or simply unable to perceive it by virtue of their Goddess given limits, not being Shaekha’ri. No one. Not one.

I rush as fast as I can to reach the Temple of Nayru as quickly as possible. It takes me twelve breaths, and the last is nearly useless, barely out of the fog. But I see her, crumpled on the floor before the altar.

She is so small.

Her lips are blue and she is limp in my arms as I lift her from the stone floor and cover her in my magic. Cold, as my whistle is warm on my lips and the last of my breath leaves me in a Nocturne of desperation. Spots dance in my vision and I stumble on the warp pad just outside of the Shadow Temple and I fall, curling about my Lady to try and cushion the blow, my own muscles failing, taxed beyond their strength.

“Sheik!” Impa calls as I cough, convulse, and cough again. I think I hit my head on the stone, but I am not sure. All I know is she is too still.

Oh, Nayru.

Please.

Mokara, not yet.

Strong arms take her from me and I hear shouting, see more feet than I can count, gag and choke on air, gasping. The Sage of Shadow kneels to keep my head from knocking against the stone and my coughing productive. The spots fade as I suck in clean air, though my vision is swimming
still in tears when I can see Zelda again. Treesha and Marc’s second are alternating breaths through her lips while Torisu and Lian pound on her chest, and even I can hear when her ribs break. She does not cry out, I do in her stead, and scramble to my knees.

“Zelda-hanyana, please, please, no….” I mutter frantically. I came as quickly as I could. I can’t have been too late.

“I’m sorry, Aein-ah.” Impa murmurs into my hair. “She’s not there.”

She’s not there, and neither am I.

I am in Ganondorf’s tower.

Kotake lies still on the hard packed earth floor, Koume moaning weakly next to her.

It is dark despite the light thrown from two torches marking the stone doorway, and I cannot see the third person in the room clearly. I’m having some trouble focussing on the here and now, having been pressed into visions of the past for what seems like years.

With my connection to Zelda dropped so they could not follow and find her, and my connection to the spirits of this place blocked by malevolent evil thick enough that even a Human could see it, I have no idea how long it’s actually been.

I’m neither hungry nor thirsty, but I am dry, so it has been at least half a day if not more. It’s been long enough since I broke their last attempt that I know they won’t be trying again any time soon. I blink dry eyes and my vision blurs.

“You’ve cost me much, Sheik.” The dark figure speaks, his voice low and accented with some tongue I cannot place, diverting my attention. “Kabocha and Kinoko both. I will not allow you to touch Koume or Kotake again.”

“I didn’t ask to be touched.” I remind him, dismayed at the soft rasp that is my voice. I wanted to sound sarcastic, strong…not mewling, not pathetic.

“Oh, but you did.” He growls, stepping towards me and into the flickering light of the torch. “The moment you took her into yourself, you became my prey.” His armor is marked with Geru’do stylings. Narrow hips. Thick thighs. Broad shoulders. Muscled waist.

Skin molted an almost olive green, showing the sickness of his spirit for all to see.

Bright red hair, like a fresh spray of arterial blood, capped with amber and citrine jewels.

Malicious, hate filled eyes a glowing a poisonous gold.

“Ganondorf.” I whisper.

“King Ganondorf.” He corrects with a roar, lunging forward almost faster than my eyes can track. My head snaps to the side with the force of the blow, splitting skin, cutting the inside of my cheek on my teeth and making my vision swim.

“Oath of Demise.” My words are slurred as blood fills my mouth. Salty and metallic. Spots dance like fairies before my eyes, if fairies came only in brightest white and deepest black.

“Precisely. I am the Promised One, and you will show me the proper respect.” His hand glows and Darkness borne of rancor gathers, searing the air.
I don’t know when I was transferred from the ice to leather shackles, but they hold me still as the crackling ball of Din’s Wrath corrupted with his own ire collides with my chest.

It sizzles on contact, and all I can do is spasm as it lances across my nerves and seemingly directly across my brain. Ears ringing, I would vomit if I could exhale. I have no breath, having spent it in a scream. My skin is on fire, my bones ache.

It stops. My chest aches as though I’ve been kicked by a horse. His fingers flex, another burst gathers.

“You can demand courtesy but you have to earn respect.” I cough out from the Book of Nayru.

“Really?” He questions, yanking my head back an up by my hair, tearing strands out by the root and exposing my throat for his fingers to caress, to squeeze, wrenching my shoulders but not disjoining them...barely. “Then give me your courtesies, if you can.”

His fingers tighten, and warmth floods just below my jaw as the tissue bruises. The black sparks of Power mingle with grey before my eyes.

“My Lord, we still need him.” Koume rasps from the ground, too weak to sit. The spots fade when he lets go, but the sparks grow with his frustration.

“I need no one.” He snarls.

“True, of magnificent one.” Kotake groans.

“I meant no disrespect.” Koume murmurs.

“His magic will make the construction of the Pillar easier.” Kotake, shaky, manages to roll, but cannot do more than that.

“All will bow before you.” Koume’s whisper is a prelude to her lapsing once more into unconsciousness. My own dazed vision is clearing. I have weakened them both.

Good. Now to weaken him.

“Hard to kneel when you’re pinned to a wall.” I cough out when I can breathe again, and I am more satisfied with the snide arrogance in my tone this time. “Or perhaps no one truly need kneel before a false king.”

The second ball of Wrath is bigger than the first, and I lose consciousness for a while because of it.

It was worth it, though.

My cut cheek and split lip have stopped bleeding. I can still taste blood. Twinrova have recovered enough to stand, their magic still weakened enough that they cannot fly. I take pride in accomplishing that much at least. Every blow I can deliver before they kill me is one that Link will not have to. Every attack I can take one fewer for Zelda to avoid. I wait, and watch for the next, finding instead the means to flee.

Ganondorf has moved my bonds closer to the ground, leaving my arms spread wide…but I am kneeling. I am also closer to the torches, and that is his mistake.
The shadows they cast are strong enough for me to ride, and they welcome me into their embrace like the silken sheets of a soft feather bed. I slide through them towards the door and run into a wall of pure rage two steps away.

When I killed Kabocha, I simply tore his spirit from his body and severed the threads holding them together, then shoved what remained down the River to the First Gate. Ganondorf is no shiik, no suurin, to be able to do the same. He simply has the limitless power of the Triforce of Power to do his bidding.

Incensed at my attempted escape he hits me with three volleys of Power in quick succession, knocking my spirit from my mortal form long enough that the recoil of my bonds churns my stomach. I aim the resulting vomit at his boots.

With an enraged howl he attacks, foregoing years of martial training and mage craft to use his fists and his feet.

I am mostly bare, protected by cloth and a little leather. His gauntlets are metal.

My left eye doesn’t stand a chance.

In the moment before the pain arrives, when the skin has split around the socket, I can feel what remains slide down my cheek, thick and viscous. Then sensation comes bearing pain, and bringing friends.

A second blow, beneath the first, and I choke on bile and bits of my teeth as I inhale reflexively. Exhaling is difficult, but a blow to the gut helps. The dull warmth that follows spreads with each breath after.

Each breath is matched by the red lightning of agony as new and different nerves are reminded what it is to hurt. Split skin. Bruising. A deep, throbbing ache. Hair torn from my scalp as my braids dissolve beneath his grasp holding me upright long enough for his foot to descend. Arm dangling, useless, collarbone not where it should be.

My knees have been broken before. That is a familiar pain. The feet are new. The warm throb of torment as my hands are crushed is close enough to the pain of conducting the trapped spirits of Aversa Keep from their prison that I feel them comparable.

There is no poppy to dull the hurt this time. Only more pain.

With sufficient injury, even the concept of pain loses meaning. I can’t feel it as my ribcage collapses beneath his boot, only know the hot taste of blood when I exhale. Inhaling again takes too much effort. The scent of ammonia and bile, blood and hot meat make the wet grinding, the moist thwacking that I hear make sense despite the ringing pervading in the background.

He grabs my head with his gore soaked hands and wrenches, and I have a second to see my back with my eyes before I am seeing my mangled corpse from a few fulms away as a spirit. The silver thread holding me to the pulped mess fade quickly, most of it torn out at the root.

The energy of my death though, slips through his fingers like so much water, intent on restoring Zelda to her power completely. My attachments to life for hers, the price is met, the bargain made. The weak and malleable ends joining her to life adhere and stick. Strong. Vibrant. Beautiful.

I regret nothing.
Though I can no longer feel any of it, mandrag Ganondorf is not finished. His boots will never be the same. The smearing fluid and...pieces...that he kicks a handful of times cannot respond, but he apparently feels the need to ensure my death. Either that, or mindless rage compels him to go far and beyond any possible use he may have intended with my remains.

Even the fairy Kotake produces only returns the shape of my body to rights, though it cannot recover what is gone entirely. My teeth. My eye. Nor can it call me back to inhabit the limp, lifeless meat sack once more, especially if I am not willing to go.

The berserker rage fades from Ganondorf’s face and he stands, panting, over the messy shambles on the floor, still partially dangling from crude leather ties. He wipes at some of the spatter on his face, smearing further blood and fluid over his lips. Koume hands him a towel. He clears most of it from his mouth.

“Clean it up.” The order is growled, and the Usurper King stalks from the room.

No longer bound by any physical barriers, I follow.

He doesn’t go far, barely making it beyond the door before returning to soak his hands in my already drying life blood. The witches wait, silent, as he scrawls an unfamiliar script across the doorway, inside and out, then plunges his dripping hands into the sigil for the Shadow Temple above the frame.

It bubbles beneath his touch, pulsing to life as the two women once more in a wobbly flight drag my body from the room. When he pulls his hands out, they are clean, and the seal over the Shadow arcs to join with the central pillar. I can feel the pull of the spell trying to keep me caught up in it, but I belong to two other bearers of the Triforce first, and that willingly. Power alone will never triumph while Wisdom and Courage guide and guard. I don’t have to stay.

I can return, however, and I shall. For those who remain, unwilling, I will return. For now, I follow the Oath of Demise, to see where he will go.

There are hundreds of stairs upwards, and I know now how Ganondorf maintains the thick musculature of his legs while being grateful that I don’t require the same. We pass through barracks and dining halls, training rooms and armories. None of the residents interfere or glance at their ruler until we reach what is clearly a room built for his pleasure and not that of the numerous ladies lounging within.

They are all nude, and present themselves to their King as he enters. Most of them have the red hair, golden eyes, and large noses of the Geru’do people, but not all. There are a few Humans, half a dozen Hylians, and even one Zora. All of them are thoroughly groomed. All of them are at their monthly peaks of fertility, their patterns fairly screaming to anyone who can see that their bodies are ready to make babies.

One Human woman with cinnamon brown eyes, light brown hair, and small but mature breasts seems satisfactory. On his approach she kneels on a cushion to receive him. The two women to either side unbuckle his codpiece and one of them unbuttons his trousers long enough to extract his organ. They ignore the blackening blood staining it entirely. Once exposed, they use their mouths to slick both their King and his chosen partner.

“Enough.” He grunts, and they withdraw to present themselves as well. With no further preamble he grasps the woman’s hips and pumps himself inside of her until he has had enough. With remarkable control he clasps himself mid-orgasm and transfers his release to the woman on his right, making sure to finish as deeply as he can. The third he takes while still stiff and leaking. With
a sigh he wipes himself dry on the third woman’s thighs, and she tucks him neatly back into his clothing.

She will not bear his child, but the other two might. It is too soon to tell for certain, but if this is his regular practise, he must have hundreds of children by now.

Zelda is all that remains of Hylia’s pure line.

“Thank you, you Majesty.” The women murmur, and the refrain is picked up around the room as he makes it clear he is finished with them for now by continuing upward. The stained glass windows are nearly transparent, telling me it is late in the day for whatever day it is. The lack of outside illuminations only make the prolific spell work adorning the walls more pronounced. He stops before an ornate door and presses his hand to the large ruby adorning it, and it swings open beneath his hand.

I get the impression of gold and red designed to awe, and scents of terror made with malice, but am stopped short from entering by the wards he has placed around his chambers, and then the door closes and I am alone.

The three women are gone from the…breeding….room when I pass through it unseen. The armory quiet, the training halls empty. The barracks are filled with women and men bedding down for the night, patrols scheduled and assigned. For every three rooms of women there is one of men, and those men share the same inclinations I do, if their evening activities are any indication. No one to interfere with the King’s claim on the females.

The very concept makes me ill and wishing I still had a stomach to vomit. My discomfort is not so easily borne now that I have no physical reasons behind my symptoms, for the physical remedies do not apply. The dull throb of the pillar of anger this place is built on aches, and I hurry downwards to the main floor.

I am not as strong as a spirit as I was embodied, but I am more directed and focussed. It still takes much more energy to sever the Kokiri girl’s bonds imprisoning her in the Forest Barrier than I needed to slip from the Shadow Barrier, but, as I have no corporeal form, I needn’t worry about doing anything worse than exhausting myself. Once she is free, I haven’t the strength to open the way to the River, and must rest. She brushes ephemeral arms over my face before going under her own power. Even the captured fairies present can do nothing for me, their magic that of life and living things alone.

Dawn comes, the day passes, and evening falls before I regain enough strength to attempt the Spirit Barrier’s captive. The Forest Barrier remains strong, fuel already allotted, but at least the tormented spirit behind it is free. The child of the Spirit Barrier dissipates before I can say good-bye, but either I am growing accustomed to existence as nothing more than memories, will, and aether, or I have become more able in my work.

Opening a fissure in the weavings of greed that surround this place is still a matter more of timing than strength, for there are Barriers yet to join their power to it. Water. Fire. They let me fulfill my promise to the Great Fairy in freeing her lesser kindred, and that leaves me with the Barriers that are active.

I saw Forest and Spirit on the way in, my blood called forth Shadow. Yet those three are not the only Temples to have their Sages bound and restrained. The Light Barrier too, is active and engaged, and the patterns of the weaving of the spirit caught up in it are a recognizable amalgamation of familiar patterns.
Johanna’s sacrifice of her sight must have been an attempt to save this tiny one, a blend of both her and Heinrich, still young enough to not have distinguished itself as an individual when its potentials were taken.

A boy, perhaps, though still much too young to tell, maybe only three months old. There was not enough recognition of his form before his death to be certain. A head, a body, barely limbs, and none of it assured. He is more than many of the ghosts I freed on the way in, but not by much. They lived and grew and learned and became stronger for it. He just…wanted to live.

I want to weep, but again, I have no tears, no body, no means of shedding my emotions. I can only work with them, and use that strength to restore myself and focus.

His immersion in the opposing element to my own makes it take me much, much longer to free him from the seed of the Light Barrier’s creation. Only the recently learned ability to call upon the shadow for protection enables me to shield myself from his brilliance. Like fluttering wings it covers me, defensive shades embracing me, and I reach into the tangled knot of abusive magic to scoop him into my hands.

My palms sear as the metaphysical burn of the passage of a soul burns them, but I have him safe and warm in my arms. He is free of the Light Barrier’s incarceration, and he is the last of the souls not here by at least some portion of their own choice. The places for Fire and Water stand empty, there is nothing more for me to do, and I do not need rest the same way someone with a body does.

I do need rest, and take it, but it is…different. Then I can solidify my intent and purpose and take action.

I carry Johanna’s infant from Ganondorf’s Castle, across the chasm of lava with an outgoing patrol, to the rubble of Castletown. Beyond the broken draw-bridge where I can see a lyric of Poes have begun to gather. Up the stairs. Through the streets of Kakariko, emptier than I have ever seen them, and to the Shadow Temple.

I know what lurks here in the dark, of the Dark. I know the way to the River. No physical trap can harm me, no illusion confuse me, no magic hold me still.

The ship has been overtaken, corrupted by the evil that has invaded this sacred space, and I walk on. The first Gate waits for me, waits for us both, and when I release the spirit of Johanna’s child to the waters he is a triumphant flame of glory. Exultant and free.

It takes everything I have not to follow him.

But I made a promise, and Nayru has plans for me still.

Having never approached Derinkuyu from Hyrule on foot, it takes me three turns to find the appropriate pathways and valleys for the feel of the City of the Lost, though I cannot locate it immediately. I must rest during the day and the darkest nights, for shadow is strongest in twilight. Though I severed my connection to Zelda, hers to me remains, and in the twilight the Umbral Lines throb in time with her pulse. I can see her attachments to me clearly, our weavings so intertwined that grasping them is as easy finding myself. They give me direction and purpose and hope, all at the same time.

I may be doomed to wander for as long as memory remains, but that means I still have a lifetime at her side. I will see Link awaken. I will watch as he cleanses the Temples. I will be there, when together they defeat Ganondorf and restore the Triforce to the Sacred Realm. I can see them
grow old. Have babies, make families, live. Then I can do the same for their children, and their children’s children, until even they have forgotten who they are. Then when I answer the River’s call, it will not reject me as a liar and oathbreaker, but welcome me and give me succor.

I remember the call of the Songs of the Wind, but have no breath to sing them or instrument to play them. It surprises me then, when one of them lifts me from the earth to ride upon its music as I march towards the terminus of Zelda’s cords. The notes are familiar, and feel like coming home.

Zelda, holding rian liahr, is strumming a soft melody that calls to me, begging a response.

I have never been able to deny her. I cannot hope to start now.

She rests in her second home in Derinkuyu, far from the destruction and death that ended the first, with an empty bowl and an empty bed. Books cover most of her table, reports litter the bench where I used to sit. She is not reading any of them, head bowed and eyes focussed on nothing as her hands dance along the strings.

It takes me a long time, too long, to notice that she is crying as well. Silently, without regard for her emotion, but steadily. I go to her, kneel before her, try to touch her knee, her shoulder, her arm, anything, but am too weak to manifest even the barest brush of pressure. She is no Shaekha’ri, despite living amongst us for years, to be able to See me. She is a Hylian through and through, of the purest, of the direct line of Hylia Herself. Perhaps she can hear.

“Zelda-hanyana, why do you weep?” I ask, my hands passing through the hair hiding her face from the lantern light.

“Sheik…” She gasps through her tears, the song ending on a jagged discordance from an awkward strum.

“Yes. I have found you again.” I tell her, putting all my effort into changing the very air around her so that she may know. Without a body to fuel my magic, there is little energy to use, and it fades quickly. I won’t be capable of trying again for marks.

The sob that bursts from her lips is muffled by the graceful hands she raises to her face, rian liahr falling to the floor, and she curls in on herself to shudder and shake. I hover near-by, unable to soothe her and unable to leave her to suffer alone.

“…I miss you so much.” She sniffs, sounding as young and alone as she truly is.

I did not mean to leave her so soon. I will not leave her again. Not until Death takes her from me where I cannot follow. Night descends upon the collection of homes the few residents of the Lost City that remain before she has cried herself out, and I wonder what has brought this particular spate of tears on. I have been dead for moon turns, she is certain to have known almost the moment it happened…would have known before it ever did.

She rises from her chair to pump cool water and cleanse her face of the signs of her crying and I take the time to explore what has become of the place we briefly shared. It is still neat and tidy, organized by task if not by tool, and appears clean and swept. I cannot smell to be certain, but there are no visible crumbs or dust on any surface that I can see. Her bed is unmade, but a basket filled with neatly folded linens explains that easily. She must simply have left the bedding until last and run out of time.

The books are all instructional texts and histories, no fantasy or fiction to be seen, not even
poetry. The reports, though plentiful, are organized by location, author, and date. The bowl from her supper is the only dirty dish.

The amethyst, quartz, and copper for the citrine are gone. The notes folded into the book next to the bedstead are all my writings on my intent once I had procured the last stone.

She is more than capable enough of having completed that spell work on her own. In doing so, she would have finished the last thing I set out to do, and that lead to my capture and death. If she did it today, that would certainly be cause for her memories to stir and her heart to ache anew. No wonder she ran out of time for laundry.

Sighing softly she shakes her head to clear her mind and dresses for bed. Banking the furnace for the night is followed by extinguishing the lantern, and despite the dark I see the last piece of the puzzle of her tears.

She draws my shirt close to her face, breathing deeply for any vestiges of scent, and covers herself for the night. I stay and watch as she drifts off towards dreams, guarding her sleep and whispering words of comfort she cannot hear. It doesn’t help her at all, but it does help me endure the silence of the darkness with only the sound of her sleeping tears for company. I rest, but I do not sleep. I have no need.

Had I required any further evidence that Zelda completed the casting needed to keep Link sustained for the last of the seven years, her actions upon waking with the dawn after preparing for the day would be ample proof. Though waving acknowledgement to those who see her pass, she leaves for an area of the City that is unfamiliar to me, near the northern outreaches, far from both the western edge where I first entered the place and the southern quarter where she now resides. Beyond the Temple of the Three, even, through the heart of the buildings and roads, and far enough out that I have to wonder if we are to leave the city entirely.

We don’t, but only because the lowly shrine that is her destination has a series of outbuildings that shelter it from the wildlands of over-grown fields. She rests there long enough to eat a small meal before kneeling before the Goddess statue in a rough-hewn alcove. I circle as she prays, watching for both wildlife and indicators of what she is doing. The Goddess statue is crude and so ill-defined it takes me a moment to recognize the form of Nayru’s handmaiden and Zelda’s ancestor.

Hylia.

Though I have often prayed to and honoured the Goddess of Life’s half-sister Mokara, and been grateful for the gift of Zelda’s life, I have had little occasion to actually kneel before the one responsible for her existence.

I take the time now, joining my queen a step back and to her left in deference and respect to her closer connections to this particular face of the divine. Offering my supplication to Zelda’s penultimate ancestor is only proper, especially as she now guards the three stones that sustain Link even as the suseko shield Fi. The Goddess of Life preserving life. It is appropriate, if not exactly what I planned. Better, I think, for Link is Hylian too. She has always favored them.

The offering of strength that the active and cognizant Triforce of Wisdom allows Zelda to sacrifice is impressive, setting the three stones alight with her power. They glow brightly enough that I must look away, and even then it takes some time to recover, dazzle flashing across my sight.

The thickly woven wool cloth my mistress has brought covers the stones completely, curtaining their radiance from a casual glance, and once the inexpertly carved altar is back in place
with the offering plate holding a small and slightly shrivelled winter apple, there is no sign of the greater magics at play.

I am expecting her to return to her home and clean her bedding now that Link will last another quarter moon at least, but she turns from that path to tread towards the Temple of Nayru instead. I have been apart from her long enough that her patterns have changed without my knowing, and that brings an aching sadness down to cover me like a cloak.

“I’m sorry I was not here.” I tell her, and she slows and glances around. The pain of losing our relationship is entirely mine. She did not instigate it, she did not participate in it, nor did she complete it. I did. My actions caused her pain and mine.

Emotion still gives me strength, provides power enough that perhaps, this time, she has heard.

“Hanyana.” I call, hope blossoming as she turns. Her eyes move past me, but she is searching. I see Wisdom as it aids her in her call for assistance, light shining brightly and inadvertently pushing me away with a force like a physical blow. I stagger back, singed but whole. Wisdom will not intentionally harm me, though it will protect its bearer as needed.

She senses something, then, but does not know it is me. I admire her caution even as it frustrates me, for that will help her survive. Even the grief she carries, the weight of responsibility resting so heavily on her shoulders, helps her survive. Hyrule depends on her…and the rest of the world depends on Hyrule. It is a difficult burden to bear.

She searches for some moments still, the small weeds emerging from the cobblestone already looking more lush and greener than they were on our arrival, before continuing on her way. The massive doors are opened only wide enough for a slim woman to pass, and I follow easily. As soon as she is inside her pace changes from a leisurely stroll to a brisk, purposeful walk, but there are only two rooms in the section of the Temple she is heading to, the library and the ward-circle. The second is enclosed within the first, both for protection and so that experiments can be conducted in a safe location quickly after inspiration strikes.

She does not even glance at the books and scrolls, pays no attention to maps and tomes, but heads directly into the sealed space in the center where all the wards are active. Someone is already inside, casting powerful spells of an uncertain outcome. There is no reason for the ninth or twelfth seals to be active otherwise.

“Zelda-hanyana, wait! What are you…” I call after her, but she darts inside before I remember that she cannot hear me.

When the wards do not keep her from doing so or push her out immediately, I follow cautiously, uncertain of what to expect but knowing that whatever it is, it is experimental, probably unorthodox, and most likely not particularly safe.

I am correct, in the sense that it is both unorthodox and experimental, and I’m not at all certain of her safety. Being a ghost of my former self, staring at the still form of my former self, I’m also not comfortable with whatever she is doing, either.

“Hanyana, what is this?” I know she cannot hear me, or at least not understand what I am saying, but I need to know. It is one thing to share my form when we both live, and both body and spirit are intact, but this skirts dangerously close to violating the very laws this place was built to study.
She has, somehow, retrieved the bier from the Shadow Temple that we used to maintain her while she fought to restore the damaged, stretched, and thinned silver thread binding her to her body. There are similar threads of purest gold between her body and mine…and they have been forged of the portion of the Triforce she carries. I can see them, and though they are not…normal…they work as any natural bonds do. Like transferring a cutting from a tree, the dormant stock will eventually meld with the host.

She needs to eat more than she has been if she expects to be able to maintain two bodies at once, and rest frequently, and move between them often or they will atrophy…both of them, making the sacrifice of my life meaningless.

“Why….why?” I murmur to myself even as I watch her lay next to my corpse, resting calmly with her arms at her sides. I…look remarkably well, for someone who has been dead for almost a season. Clean, for one, as when I last saw my body it was soaked in the ichor of a beating that killed me. The fairy did set the bones and mend the skin, but…that was all. And now it looks unmarked and…fresh. As though I’m simply deeply sleeping, without dreams. Or breath.

I shudder in revulsion. This is…unusual to the point of being just this side of unnatural. Yes, there are techniques of preservation that enable one to preserve a body for days and even weeks. Spells of stasis and ice that can slow decay to a nearly imperceptible pace. And there is a spirit attached to my…the body. It’s not mine. Not anymore. This is too close to the reanimations of the Gibdo and Redead for my comfort though. I don’t like it, not at all.

I like it less when Zelda stills and…Sheik…inhales. Sits up with a groan. Beneath the shroud my…he is nude, at least from the waist up. Carefully he stretches, working the smaller muscles first before progressing to larger and larger groups. Swinging his legs over the side of the bier away from Zelda…Zelda’s body, he…she…stands carefully. Goddesses.

The stretching process begins once more, this time including some balancing and reflexive motions. Testing reach and reaction, flexibility and spatial relations, for the left eye is gone entirely. I am…was…not much different from Zelda in height, though I…the hips are narrower, shoulders broader, there is a different center of gravity. All he…all they wear is a simply cut set of small clothes that preserves their modesty but allows for little else, and I hadn’t realized exactly what my exercise regime that last moon had done to my physique.

Having no extra fat certainly contributed, but I certainly can see why Zelda would have been taking me to her bed so regularly. I am not a vain man, valuing personality over appearance, but still…I would have been bedding me as frequently as possible.

I still blame Kinoko and the other traitors for their actions completely.

Nabooru taught me that much.

I watch as they dress, fitted trousers, fitted quilted shirt beneath what little armor there is, bandages to support the musculature and joints. Thick boots soled with dinalfos skin for strength and traction. When they go to tie up their hair, a carnelian red eye, paler than mine ever was, meets mine.

“Aein.” Sheik breathes, and reaches out, their hand passing though my insubstantial form.

Of course.

“Why, Zelda?” I ask, using her given name without any honorific to convey my displeasure with her actions. Her…their eye blazes, and they open their mouth to speak harsh words in the face of my scorn, then think the better of it.
“I had no other choice.” She admits, sitting down on the floor with her back to the wall and gesturing for me to do the same. Wanting an explanation, I acquiesce.

“Tell me.” It is not a question. I must know if I am to allow this to happen. I already know how to pull a spirit from a constructed form as a ghost, and if she does not satisfy me with her reasoning, I will do it. This…must be necessary.

“Why did you allow me to use your body in the first place?” She asks in my voice, but with her diction. It’s…strange. Even while possessing me, my form retained some signs of my existence. Those subtle indicators are gone. All that remains is her.

“You needed to be protected and remain hidden so Mandrag Ganondorf would not kill you and take Wisdom, but needed a voice for your people and a source of information from them as well.”

“Has either of those needs changed?”

“No, they haven’t. Yet I am dead, Zelda.” It is a point in her favour, however. She still needs to be kept safe and informed.

“Who aside from Ganondorf knows that?” She asks.

“Kotake and Koume certainly. The Sages I would assume. Anyone who saw them drag my body from the Tower. Anyone any of them chose to tell. Certainly most of Hyrule by now, given the size of the bounty on my head.”

“Ten people know. Eleven if you include yourself.” She tells me. “At least, that’s what the reports I’ve received indicate.”

“Ganondorf, Twinrova, the Sages.” I count the obvious ones. “How?”

“Those who saw you dragged and pinned to the last remaining pillar of the old Castle also saw you rise from it less than a quarter mark later and disappear on the Songs of the Wind.” She says, holding up my whistle with a grin that falls rapidly. “It was difficult, but my link to you was still strong and I had to do at least that much. I couldn’t leave you there, displayed like some macabre trophy.”

“That body isn’t me.” I remind her.

“I’ve been speaking at every meeting of the Loyalists for the past three months.” She tells me brusquely. “In this form. Sheik is the voice of the rightful queen, just as we planned you to be.”

“Not just as we planned.” I huff, frowning and crossing my arms in annoyance. She is right, though. Sheik is the voice of the queen.

“No. Not as we planned. Nothing has really gone according to plan.” She whispers, bowing her head. “Not from the start.”

Not since she sent the boy from the Forest in search of the Spiritual Stones to stop the man with the evil eyes from attempting the Triforce. I search desperately through my memories for something to break her melancholy, for her emotions in my body are affecting me as though I were feeling them and this guilt, regret, and misery is overwhelming.

“If everything had gone according to plan…” I whisper softly, forcing her to listen closely instead of letting my words pass by. “…I would have never met you. Surely that was something
good?” Surely I have brought her at least a little joy?

“Of course!” She insists firmly.

“Good.” I smile at her. She is right. This is necessary…until she takes her rightful place, this is necessary. “I have always been an instrument for your playing.”

“I haven’t taken very good care of you.” Again, she attempts to touch me, and again her hand cannot connect. She leaves it to hover instead, resting a hair’s breadth from my chest.

“I disagree.” I tell her cheerfully. “Your care has seen us this far. You saved me from the Darkness. You brought me joy. The Hero will awaken, cleanse the Temples, awaken the Sages, and defeat the Evil that smothers the land blessed by the Goddesses. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. You gave that to me.”

“When it is all over, I will make it right.” She promises.

“You will.” I believe in her. In them. Using the energy I have gathered I focus as intently as I can to brush my lips against hers, hoping that if she can see and hear me, she can feel me too. From the way she gasps, she can. Then she bursts out laughing.

“That...has got to be the weirdest form of masturbation to ever exist.” She snorts, gasping in air at the force of her chuckles. My face goes slack in shock, and then I can’t hold in the laughter either. Kissing her while she is in control of my body is...absurd in the extreme.

“Keep that out of the history books, please,” I ask when we have both calmed enough for her to be merely amused and I can only be embarrassed.

“Maybe.” She grins, and brushes her hand down where my side would be, growing accustomed to my lack of physical form.

“Hanyana, please.” I beg, and she relents.

“Alright, as long as I get to write at least a paragraph or two on what a spectacular lover you are...uh, were.”

“Fine.” I grind out, doing my best to supress the fact I just kissed myself. She grins at my discomfort, but rises to finish tying Sheik’s hair back and up, leaving enough of a fringe to disguise the empty socket, then covering her face with a mask and cowl.

“I have to be in Elydis in three days.” She tells me. “Can you accompany me?”

“Play that song to call me, and I will be where you are.” I assure her.

“Song?” She asks.

“The one you played last night.” I tell her. “It called me to your side. I...watched you weep.”

“Oh.” She whispers, and tears fill her...eye...once more. “I...couldn’t bear to play if before. It’s, I called it aein insa, because that’s what it is. A sincere prayer.”

“For what?” I ask. It was beautiful.

“You.” She tells me.
“Oh.  I…it’s lovely.” If I could blush…

“Let me get my lyre.” She says, and fairly runs from the room. I follow at a more sedate pace, knowing where she is going immediately and where she will be later, until she sweeps me off my feet with the power of her song.

Standing before her in her home, in our home, I smile.

“It works.” She grins.

“Then let’s go.” I toss my head towards the Kokiri Forest and the land just adjacent to it where her people await her.

“Together.” She insists.

“Yes.” I agree.

Together we cross the land on the Songs of the Wind and with the hidden sanctuaries. I recruit the Poes of fallen loyalists to guard each one while I stay by her side, regardless of the form she wears. She learns to hear me even when she is herself. I learn to touch her whenever I can. A whisper of sound, and breath on her skin, the faintest brush of ephemeral warmth.

The days grow longer, and wherever she goes the fields respond better, orchards bloom and fruit, herds begin multiplying once more.

The days grow shorter. For the first time in years there are stockpiles of food, firewood and coal enough, light breaks through the clouds. There is hope.

Ganondorf knows. His rages become daily occurrences. His women leave, his soldiers begin to desert him. He compensates with summoning creatures of the dark. Lizalfos. Moblins.

Drawing on Din’s Portion, he unleashes Volvagia, a giant fire-serpent, on the Gorons, who flee as best they can to the surrounding mountains as Darunia sacrifices his Sagehood for their lives. Many of them pass through Derinkuyu. Some of them stay.

Zora’s Domain freezes in the deep winter on the darkest night as it usually does, but it does not thaw by what would have been my twenty-fourth birthday. We go, freeing Ruto from the ice itself. She leaves her power behind to sustain her people.

Early in the year, as we are presenting our offering to the resonating stones at the base of the Goddess statue, Fi tells us it is time.

Zelda delivers me to the pedestal, and flees upward to avoid calling the Redead that still roam to the sight of the Hero’s rebirth.

I reach. Beyond the Mortal Realm, through the Sacred Realm, and find Between.

He is ready.

Rauru awaits.

It is little more than a step to travel from the space Between into the Chamber, and I have pulled the Sages themselves there unconsciously. A man and a fairy are easier still, especially when I am trying, and he is welcoming and willing.

Rauru speaks to him as I carefully craft a passageway of pure magic, calling on all my
experience and knowledge, my hard earned wisdom, to make the transition as smooth as possible. The ancient Sage of Light gives the Hero his blessing, and it is again my duty and pleasure to perform this service for them both.

Shadows shield my hands as I put them into the light and draw Link from his seven year slumber through my power as suurin. He is different from the Sages, though he bears Rauru’s medallion. Stronger than the children I grasped from the Tower’s Seals. Pure.

Where Zelda inspires me, he fulfills me. Euphoric from his transition through me, I still. Zelda drops from her perch and stands tall even as Link turns, his reflexes superb and strong even though his face shows no recognition regarding my form.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Hero of Time…” She begins, and he takes a step forward.

A fitting end, I think, for my part to have.

Chapter End Notes

You can demand courtesy but you have to earn respect. - Lawrence Goldstone

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