Return and Remember

by webcomix

Summary

It has taken over one hundred years, but Calamity Ganon has been defeated. Link and Zelda are eager to discover their places in a very different world, to learn what it means to live freely without the burdens of prophecy and duty. They can watch Hyrule heal from a century of wounds at a cosy home in the midst of friends and the green, green hills — finally, a peaceful ending to all their trials.

Except... destiny has never been so lenient. Hyrule, raised on legends of wise princesses and courageous heroes, clamours for their return. It's a new conundrum, one that perhaps sealing swords and a Goddess's bloodline cannot solve immediately.

Notes

The Legend of Zelda belongs to Nintendo.
Link opened his eyes. It was dark.

He stood and stretched his arms and legs, then walked around the bed and peered out the window. For this time of day, it should have been dawn, when sunlight came to cast the shadows westward. Instead, there were only fat grey clouds. Through the blurry glass, he saw ripples dancing across the surface of the pond while the apple tree branches bent and swayed against the wind.

Link watched the rain and wondered if the skies had been listening in on his dreams.

Whatever the weather, he had made up his mind. Candles spat into flame as he walked down the stairs, lighting up the displays upon the wall. There was the slender carve of a great bow sprouting golden wings at both ends, and a heavy, enormous sword crafted from stone. Its shadow was all angles. Sparkling in and out of the light was a silver trident dangling with precious gems. And on adjacent walls, there hung a matching set of shield and scimitar, colourful and curved and wickedly sharp. These were among his most prized possessions. He wouldn’t touch them.

The rest of his gear and equipment had been tossed untidily at their base. Thunder cracked in the distance as Link squatted down and began to rifle through them. He tossed aside a green pointed cap for a bright blue tunic. It was soft to the touch. Link froze for a moment when he felt a thread threaten to snap when he tugged it over his head. Fear shot through him at the thought of ruining this shirt, but the Great Fairy’s magic held. He smoothed it down over his torso, touching the little bumps of embroidery along his chest. Somebody had spent precious time stitching this design by her own hand many, many years ago.

Link resumed sorting. His hood, of course. The climber’s bandana could be useful. Flamebreaker set, no. Zora armour? Maybe. He settled on strapping on a pair of ancient greaves, pulling taut the leather straps as the metal guard wrapped flush against his shin. A swirling design glowed orange on the cuffs of the tough welded boots. Shivers involuntarily ran down his spine at the sight.

It was getting a little lighter outside. The day before, he’d laboured over the cooking pot to prepare hardy, hearty dishes that could endure time on the road: mushroom skewers, roasted fish, quick and easy baked apples. Link stopped and picked up the bottle on the table from where it sat on a tray. He sniffed the soup inside. The smell of stewed radishes greeted him, and he took that, too.

Finally, Link detached a shield from the wall, one whose bold colours of shining silver and deep blue had not faded in a hundred years. He looked at the crimson wings and traced a finger over the three golden triangles. Then, he slung it over his shoulder, along with his bow and a full quiver hanging from the hip. There was a unique device resting beside it, flat and oblong, featuring an unblinking eye that followed his every move. Link was untroubled by its gaze, folding up a canvas and wood paraglider and sliding it along the strap on his back.

Just before he exited, he snatched up the purple hilt of a sword that had been leaning rather unassumingly by the door.

The rain had lessened to a sputtering drizzle by the time Link stepped outside. He turned from the wooden bridge that crossed the river, wet grass silencing his footsteps as he walked to the back fence. In one of the two wooden stalls erected there, a bay horse with white socks perked up at his
scent. She lowered her head for Link to reach up and stroke the star between her eyes.

“Today’s the day, Chase,” he said. “When we go, there’s no turning back.”

Chase gave no acknowledgment except to nudge Link’s arm until he dug out an endura carrot from his pocket. The horse crunched on it in satisfaction as her master busied himself with the saddle, then climbed on.

Link glanced back behind him. Smoke was coming out of the chimneys that topped the red shingled roofs of the village, and the white sails of the windmills were tilting back and forth lazily. He hoped that when he returned — if he returned — he wouldn’t be alone.

A gentle dig into Chase’s sides, and they raced down the hill with the sun at their backs.

They rode all morning, and the journey was uneventful. Pleasant, even. Link listened to the sound of Chase’s hooves striking the earth with his heartbeat matching its steady rhythm. The wind whistled past his ears, setting any loose hairs tickling the back of his neck. Chase was warm and solid beneath him, and breathing hard as she galloped around the cliffs. Link was glad for the company in this wild, wide world.

He had awoken to it in darkness, cold and wet and confused. After a few painful knocks on the knee, Link had managed to clamber out of the basin that had been his resting place. Staggering to his feet, he looked around the enormous but enclosed chamber around him.

There had been a voice, but from where?

The floor was ridged and uneven under his toes. Link glanced down and noticed the swirling path. He followed it clumsily, discovering the Sheikah Slate (the name popping, automatically, into his head) and threadbare clothes to dress his shivering body. When finally he managed to activate the pedestal, Link stepped back as the sound of gears grinding and locks unlatching shook the walls. The gate slid open to reveal blinding, brilliant light that shot into the dark chambers so fiercely that Link had to shield his eyes.

“Link. You are the light — our light — that must shine upon Hyrule once again. Now, go…”

Before Link could place its familiarity, the voice began to fade. He suddenly realised he didn’t want that. He rushed forward in vain, bare feet splashing through stagnant puddles and fingers clawing at the clumpy earth of the walls. Link ran out of the cave in such haste that he almost dropped off the edge of a cliff, but managed to stop himself just in time. He squinted at a vision so vast and beautiful before him, taking his breath away even as he gulped down the sweet, fresh air. The land was a green carpet unfurled and unending, marred only by silvery ribbons of rivers and dark smudges for trees. Link felt the tall grasses around his feet brush against his legs and heard the hum of wildlife hiding below, above, and around him. The mysterious grey shadows of mountains in the distance filled his chest with a great desire, sunlight only beginning to peep over its edges. His mind felt as blank as the endless blue skies above him.

Link blinked away the memory as Chase burst from the cracked walls of Fort Hateno, weaving expertly around the rusted husks of ancient machines decaying into the earth. The world was beginning to wake now, with lizards and foxes scrambling out of their way. A red bokoblin had barely enough time to rouse itself from its lurking place in the brush, still fumbling for its wooden staff as Link and Chase flew by. People started to come into view. Link knew their names and faces, but he kept his hood up and head down, urging Chase onward before they could even say hello. He couldn’t stop. Not today.
A signpost at a fork in the road told him that a stone bridge to the right would lead to Kakariko Village. Even as he nudged Chase away from it, the penetrating stare of dark eyes set into a wrinkled, spotted face flashed in his mind. “You are Princess Zelda’s only hope,” Lady Impa had said to him, “and Hyrule’s as well. You cannot turn back now.”

“She calls out for your help.” The spectre of the solemn, sad King was thrown into sharp relief against the jagged ruins of the temple walls while ghostly lights burned around him. “My daughter. Do whatever it takes to annihilate Ganon.”

Link’s fingers tightened around the reins. He called out to Chase, who lowered her head and charged forth with renewed vigor.

They didn’t stop. They rode through the Dueling Peaks, following the water’s flow with a meandering crack of sky to guide them. They left the road and cut through the overgrown meadows of Hyrule Field once the river was crossed. Chase’s strong strides cleared the fallen remnants of old garrisons easily. Link steered her away from Riverside Stable, making a direct beeline towards the very centre of the country.

Link only slowed Chase to a walk when the battered stone silo of the ranch ruins came into view. They had spent the entire day travelling, the sun now sinking behind the highlands in the west, all shadows leaning east. Chase panted as her hoofs kicked up dust in the long forgotten racetrack that could still be seen around the dilapidated fence. Link swung down from the saddle, catching Chase’s bridle and running his hand up her neck.

“Stay here,” he said. “I… don’t think it will take long. By morning, I hope.”

She stared at him until he showered apples and carrots onto the grass for her. As his horse greedily munched away, Link turned north and headed towards the castle on foot. It glowed dangerously in the steadily descending night.

He had already been there before.

It was not without *complete* lack of preparation. The four Divine Beasts had been freed. The sword upon his back had been liberated from its hiding place in the Lost Woods. After witnessing just how many Guardians remained to patrol the destroyed streets of Castle Town, he had chosen to retreat across the moat, circling it until he spotted another way in. Despite his caution, Link had felt confident and hopeful. He had done everything else, so it was just this final task to fulfill.

But he had severely underestimated the size and scope of the castle. Link reckoned any of the villages could have comfortably fitted inside. By the time he had reached the second gatehouse, he found himself backed against the wall with the silver lynel bearing down on him, and not a drop of food in his pockets. Link panicked. Out came the Sheikah Slate, and in seconds he was standing in the darkness of Hyrule Field. The only sounds were crickets chirping in the tall grass, and leagues behind him, the castle remained shrouded in shadow.

For days afterward, guilt and shame dogged him. Link swore to return once he was sure of his strength.

So now, he notched an ancient arrow to his bow as he passed through the ravaged walls of Castle Town. The first Guardian to clank into his way received one to the eye, and it shuddered to stillness. He wasn’t going to spend more time or ammunition on these things than needed.

The royal banners were still intact and fluttering in the breeze as he walked up to the pointed
silhouette of Hyrule Castle. Skywatchers hovered around the entrance, their spotlights sweeping
the cobbles for intruders — for him. He paid them no mind, eyes trained on the gates. The Sheikah
Slate pulled them open.

Suddenly, the skies started to churn. His muscles tensed up on instinct as the moon, round and red
as blood, parted the dark clouds. The smoke and shadows surrounding the castle started to convulse
and compress, coming together to create a serpent that rose writhing and rippling through the air —
a demon monster that turned upon Link. Its gash of a mouth opened up to hurl wordless obscenities
at him. He did not flinch.

Then, golden light flashed from the heart of the castle itself. The Calamity shrivelled and screamed
in its presence, all attempts at taking shape exploding into harmless particles as it was forced back
into captivity once more.

For a few moments, Link was stone upon the threshold of Hyrule Castle. He forced his breathing to
slow, screwing his eyes against the sting of the ash-ridden air. He willed his nerves to calm before
setting off.

Link walked up the sloping path. A Guardian set its sights on him, drawing a bead upon his back,
but he just dodged and ran to the lee of the wall where it could not reach him. There was the black
and sticky substance they called malice blocking the road, so much that it had developed hornlike
spikes. Link had no time, or interest in removing it. He crouched down and closed his eyes.

“Don’t preen yourself just for doing your job,” a voice murmured in his ear as whirling winds
began to brew around his feet. “It is far from finished, you know. The princess has been waiting an
awful long time.”

Revali’s Gale shot Link high into the air, over the barrier. He spotted a bulbous eyeball cowering
behind it, glaring up at him in disgust. A sharp arrow dispatched of it quickly.

He landed upon an outer wall, practically on top of a Guardian turret. The Sheikah Slate helped
him freeze it in place before the Master Sword hacked it to pieces. Link straightened up from the
rubble just to be faced with a tall, thin tower that stood apart from the rest of the heavily fortified
castle.

His previous attempt had failed not only due to lack of provision, but because of his own curiosity.
Once he had realised just how much the castle held, Link had taken his time exploring and
unlocking any secrets he could find, whether they were treasure chests, scraps of old books, or yet
another shrine. He fought monsters and claimed their superior weapons. The names of every room
and corridor stole into his mind when he entered them, without prompt and as if he’d known it in a
previous life. He had known them in a previous life, and that’s what he hunted: the shreds of the
past that the castle kept dangling before him, promises of gaining back what he’d lost.

He had no idea it was her bedroom until he was practically on the balcony. It was a dismal sight,
along with the smell of mould and moblin droppings defiling what had been her personal space.
Link stood in the centre and took in the rotted furniture, ripped curtains, and the fine layers of dust
coating every crevice. He didn’t remember but it still hurt to see. The papers pasted to the stone
walls were yellowed and curled, a century of leaking rainwater running the ink and blurring the
words together. Link couldn’t read any of them. He pushed aside the tatters on the desk until he
found the one book that wasn’t waterlogged and mulchy.

After meeting with the Champions, I left to research the ancient technology, but nothing of note
came of my research. The return of the Calamity looms — a dark force taunting us from afar. I
must learn all I can about the relics so we can stop it.
When he finished reading the diary, a long hour had passed. Link climbed the walls to reach the lonely tower. A halo of light in the middle of the walkway beckoned to him. He knew what it was and went willingly.

By the time he had found the flower blooming amidst the destruction, he was emotionally spent. Perhaps that was what had led to his downfall.

But nothing lay in there for him anymore. Link turned away and jumped down from the wall, headed towards the first gatehouse. Before he was even twenty paces from its entrance, the Guardians awoke. Link glanced down to see not just one, but two targets honing in on his chest. He started to run for the leafless trees at the side but their incessant beeping simply intensified. Link whipped out his shield, but he was torn between which one to parry as the red beams slipped past his defences and prepared to ignite at any moment.

Link held his ground as orange flames burst into being, the strands reaching to one another to construct a sphere of energy around him. His vision was nothing but explosions so hot that they burned white against Daruk’s Protection and ricocheted back to their begetters.

“Our century-old Ganon beat-down plan can finally go into effect!” Link could hear distant laughter as the Guardians shattered spectacularly. “Good luck, little guy. Give my regards to the princess.”

Link scaled the walls, the smell of charred wood and metal filling his nostrils. He looked down at the eastern courtyard. It was swamped with malice, no doubt flourishing under the influence of the terror who lay in wait ahead. The only clear way to it was the rushing waterfall that fed the pools of the royal gardens. Link slipped on the special armour that fit him perfectly before diving into the icy depths.

Something woven into the scales propelled him up the falling water. The dark of night made it difficult to see what lay upon the cliffs below, so it was almost too late when Link saw more bubbling malice. He stumbled and hissed in pain as he fell into the thick of it, disgusting slime up to his calves sucking the life out of him. Link forced himself to fight the poison, kicking his legs free and staggering towards a bare patch of land. Just as he reached it, he felt the last of his strength leave him and fell into the dry, dead grass.

Before his consciousness slipped away completely, a silver glow bathed him in warmth. He felt the pain receding. Link slowly lifted his head.

“My healing power would be wasted on me,” a whisper admitted. “We have our roles to fulfill. Save her, Link. Save Princess Zelda.”

The second gatehouse was open to him. Link strode right in. This was where he had failed before, but this time he would continue onward.

The lynel dropped from its predatory perch, snarling and showing off its gleaming fangs. Link rolled out of the way while it charged him, springing up to his feet to deliver a fierce blow to its legs. The malice upon the ceiling spat out floating stalfos that chattered gleefully as the lynel chased Link around the crumbling room. He felt his wounds restored by Mipha’s Grace aching once more as the lynel smashed down his weapon — no style or strategy, but a massive three-bladed sword that looked heavier than he was didn’t require perfect aim, just power.

Link managed to beat the monster down with several well-placed hits from both sword and arrow, but as his stamina drained, so did his patience. He scowled at the lynel, who still sneered at him despite its bleeding flanks, and took aim with his sword. With a shout, supernatural lightning
streaked forth from the blade to finish off all the enemies with Urbosa’s blinding, searing, Fury.

“I knew you wouldn’t let us down, Link.” This final voice was rich with pride as it rang out against the stone walls of the gatehouse. “We Gerudo have no tolerance for unfinished business. Now, take good care of the princess.”

The rest of his path was clear, or he easily made it so by shooting down malice and skywatchers. The sky boiled over with every step he took towards the top, steps that slowed when Link looked past the colonnade to the inner sanctum of Hyrule Castle. The clouds outside looked like they had been set aflame, casting a glare on the scuffed and stained floor from the tall, cracked windows. The balconies were broken and tapestries had torn, but a tarnished Triforce still hung over a single, remaining throne.

“Link… I’m sorry. My power isn’t strong enough. I can’t hold—”

The voice, so intimate and jarring and faint, was cut off as a ray of crackling energy suddenly pierced through, slashing effortlessly through the stone pillars and staircases around him. There was no method to the madness, just wild flailing and the sizzle of heat whistling past Link’s ears as they narrowly missed. He covered his eyes with his hands, daring not to move. The lasers melted the marble floor in jagged, red-hot lines, but Link managed to stay upright as he squinted up through his fingers.

The sac was steaming. It contracted violently, then burst in a flood of malice and gore with a gigantic object soaked in its juices dropping to the floor with a deafening THUD, followed by an ominous CRACK, and Link scrambled for purchase while desperately looking for a glimpse of long yellow hair but felt the stone tipping forward and giving way, so together they fell down, down into a chasm that was dark and deep.

And the fight would have begun, were it not for an interception. Link stayed his hand and glanced up. A barrage of brilliant blue energy was barrelling through the hole high above at incredible speed. It rained down upon Calamity Ganon, who howled with pain and dismay as the Champions’ revenge pummelled it soundly. Link could hardly move, his senses overloaded by the spirits of his friends vibrating through him, their bitterness, determination, zeal and satisfaction bringing him to tears at such intensity.

Soon, Calamity Ganon slumped over, dazed by their assault. Link reached up and unsheathed the Master Sword. He heard it hum to life as the blade began to gleam with holy light. He could have sworn that the sight of it gave Calamity Ganon pause, like it remembered its sting from eras long past, but it hauled itself up onto its legs. A mouth filled with brittle, rotten teeth opened in hysterical laughter.
Link held nothing back. He rushed in and gave his sword her first taste of Calamity in ten thousand years. He leaped into the updraft to rain all that was left of his ancient arrows at the colourless jewel embedded into its head. Silver and blue against black and red as he parried every blast back it sent his way, almost on instinct. And even when Calamity Ganon scuttled up onto the walls, Link simply summoned his friends to help him rise into the air, deflect the blows, absorb the pain, and bring it crashing back to the floor with a single electric smite.

He felt the sword singing with righteous vindication as he whaled upon the Calamity’s prone body. It had taken his life, family, friends, memories, and princess. Some were gone forever but he would take the rest back with force and the fear of Hylia in every strike.

The blade of evil’s bane remained pristine despite the malice that poured freely from all the wounds. The Calamity shivered, so pitiful and miserable. A gross facsimile of hands grasped at the floor as it struggled to pull itself to standing, with glowing eyes glowering at Link.

Link backed away as the shell of its body split apart, unable to hold the squirming innards. They began disintegrating under the floods of malice. Calamity Ganon was consumed with its own destruction, a hatred for the hero so great that it decimated the remains of its half-resurrected form to nothing in one mighty blast.

Release her. Link concentrated on this command as he watched the miasma flee up the shaft, an echo of wrathful wails ebbing away. Show me where she is.

He walked to the centre of the chamber, not caring if there was any malice left to hurt him. There were none — there was nothing at all. Just a cold, empty chamber. Panic welled up inside of him, along with despair. When he struck down the Calamity, did he also…?

You didn’t, a golden light assured him as he was engulfed by it.

Link came to yet again in a field of tall grass. The blades pricked at his ankles, tiny jabs of warning that things were not yet finished. The predawn sky was yellow, wan and ominous, a herald for an oncoming storm. The air was heavy and stale, suffocating him in an atmosphere that was uneasy and tense.

There was the castle in the distance, now abandoned by the shadows. Link turned slowly and his heart dropped at the sight of a maelstrom of black and magenta malice brewing behind him, more concentrated and thicker than he had ever seen.

“Ganon was born out of a dark past.” A voice suddenly spoke in his ear, as if she was simply standing next to him and explaining a fact about frogs or flowers or the inner workings of ancient Sheikah technology. “He is a pure embodiment of the ancient evil that is reborn time and again…”

Gigantic cloven hoofs materialised from the smog, sending tremors through the earth as they made their thunderous landing. Flames spread across a broad back, curved and wider than even the hills.

“He has given up on reincarnation and assumed this pure, enraged form,” Zelda cried as tusks emerged from the clouds. “If set upon our world the destruction will be unlike anything ever seen before!”

Link recognised the beady eyes, this time unfocused and unhinged, fueled by the simple impulse to kill, kill, kill. The beast lowered its head, growling through its twitching snout, sure to find its prey.

A loud whinny called to him. Link looked up and Chase, the best horse who ever lived, came galloping across the fields. Her mane was jet black against the pale sky, every lock rippling with
life and determination. Link threw his arms around her neck, reveling in her realness before clambering up into the saddle. Fear dissolved, he turned Chase around to face Dark Beast Ganon, and Zelda’s voice followed him as they began their final charge.

“I entrust you with the bow of light, a powerful weapon in the face of evil.”

The heavens parted to allow a shining bow of ivory and gold to descend from another realm. Link caught it even before the beast could notice, stretching his hand above his head. Warmth and satisfaction crept up his limbs from its touch, spreading to the rest of him. He heard laughter, and it was his own.

“Link.” His name in her voice was soft and delicate, emitted in a single breath. “You may not yet be at a point where you have fully recovered your power or all your memories… but courage need not be remembered, for it is never forgotten.”

He smiled for her as he held up the bow.

Link and Chase ran circles round the giant beast, dodging its stomping hooves and furious bellows. Link felt no fear or even a sense of danger as they ducked beneath the beast’s belly that roiled with malice and hate incarnate. Every arrow of light found their marks with barely any effort. Chase never slowed for a second, and Zelda’s excitement grew with each perfect shot. Her faith flowed through him, guiding his hand and filling his head with such a sense of delirium as they rode together around Ganon.

“Link! Look up there!”

He obeyed. The beast’s forehead split open with a single, bulging eye shot with fiery veins forcing itself from the malice. Chase reared as Link jumped off of her without a second thought, and he was buoyed upward not by a Champion’s ability but something stronger than that, a Goddess’s conviction raising him to such a height that the evil eye managed to lock gazes with him before he released his final arrow.

Dark Beast Ganon roared for the last time. Link was gently deposited back into the grass. He grabbed Chase’s bridle for support as his heart thumped wildly at the sight of a golden star piercing the dark skies. Even at this distance, he knew who it was.

Zelda floated to the ground, incandescent with sacred aura. Ganon had forgotten Link entirely, its boarish mouth agape with hunger as the Triforce filled the field with its power. Zelda was the vessel, and she stood patient as the Calamity coiled back into its serpent form, twisting and screeching before scrounging up the last of its desperation to dive towards her, a mindless mass of greed and envy.

Link watched as Zelda raised her right hand. Three golden triangles shone bright. He shielded his eyes from the brilliant light that emanated from her, spreading into all corners of Hyrule and cleansing it from the Calamity’s corruption. It could not escape her though it tried, a powerful radiance like the sun swallowing the remnants of its blighted existence until, finally, Calamity Ganon was no more.

Colour returned to the world. The scarlet clouds faded from the sky, being replaced with an unblemished blue as virtuous as the ancient Sheikah pillars that now protected Hyrule Castle instead of imprisoning it. A gentle mist rolled in, blowing away the acrid smells of burning malice to be replaced by fresh winds. All was green, from the trees to the grass billowing towards where Zelda was, standing with her back to him.
Link tried not to stumble as his legs, shaking with relief, gradually closed the space between them.

“I’ve been keeping watch over you all this time,” she said. Unlike ever before, her voice was quiet and timid, perhaps even bashful. “I’ve witnessed your struggles to return to us as well as your trials in battle. I always thought… no. I always believed that you would find a way to defeat Ganon. I never lost faith in you, in all these many years.”

You defeated it, Link wanted to say. I only…

“Thank you, Link.”

Her long, yellow hair slipped from her shoulders as she turned. The world seemed to brighten in the light of her smile. She was his dreams given breath, his desires given fulfillment, his memories in solid colour. She was Hyrule, unfettered and abundant and thriving. She was almost too beautiful to look at, like staring into the sun.

“May I ask… do you really remember me?”

She was blurring at the edges, a little bit.

“…Link?”

He found it hard to breathe properly in her presence.

“Oh, Link.”

He covered his face with his hands, but couldn’t stop himself. He had spent almost three years alone in the wild, running and fighting for a life that seemed not to have much meaning except for what others told him, people who claimed to have known him so well. But he had never felt a connection to them as strong as the one he had now. It was overwhelming.

“Link!” She had moved closer, enough that he could hear the breath she took before letting out a short, sympathetic laugh. It made his heart flicker. “Please, don’t cry.”

Fingers pried his away from his face, becoming wet as they brushed his cheeks. Link sniffed as he stared into green eyes that also brimmed with tears, but Zelda smiled at him before she pulled him into a warm embrace. She felt smooth and soft save for where grime still dusted her skin, solid and undoubtedly real. No ghostly apparitions this time. He clutched at her, aware how clumsy and childish it looked but beyond caring. He worried, for a moment, that she would buckle and collapse under his weight but she was much stronger than that, perhaps even more than he was. She patiently held him up, wrapping comforting arms around his shoulders.

“It’s over,” Zelda murmured, her lips soft and warm against his ear. “You did it. We’re finished, we’re done. It’s all over now, Link.”

Chapter End Notes

Hell yeah, we’re gonna start this show the same way we always have.

Hi everyone, welcome to sequelfic! The third in a series I’ve been picking at for most of this year, following **Hold Your Destiny** (set 100 years before the game) and its prequel spin-off, **No Regrets** (set… 117 years before the game, I guess?). This fic does
build significantly on at least the first story — not just in sequence of events, but emotions as well. Just a heads up!

Thank you for reading, and hope you stick around for the rest of it too!
Zelda opened her eyes. It was dim.

Her eyelids threatened to close again. Zelda forced them to focus in front of her. She was lying on her back. There were weathered wooden beams above her head. Light was soft and came from a source outside her scope of vision, but it was enough to show her the painted designs upon the walls.

She was in a Sheikah house.

Zelda relaxed a little at this and tried to move. Her limbs were like stone weights attached to her body. She concentrated on wiggling the fingers on her right hand but couldn’t be sure if they had done anything.

With great effort, she turned her head. The soft hem of a woolen blanket slipped from her shoulder. Zelda squinted over at the person beside her. A young girl with silvery-white hair so thick that it flowed out from under her topknot leaned forward on her knees, her fingers digging into her thighs and dark eyes round as the moon. Her bottom lip began to tremble as she and Zelda stared at each other.

“Hello,” Zelda whispered.

The girl didn’t move a muscle. Zelda tried to ask her what had happened, but then —

“Graaaaaaaaaandmother!” The girl bolted up and rushed away. Zelda could hear the stamp of each foot on wooden steps.

Without something to concentrate on, fatigue swept over Zelda again. Her head was unbearably heavy, sinking deeper into the pillow — or did she only imagine that? She lay there, fighting to stay conscious as indistinct conversation floated up to her ears. It was very difficult. Zelda was slipping away when a shadow passed over her.

“Princess,” murmured a quavering voice.

“Mmmuh,” Zelda mumbled.

“It’s alright.” A hand readjusted the blanket, then touched her cheek. “You’ve been vigilant for so long, it’s only deserved that you get your rest. We’ll watch over you.”

Zelda gave into dreamless sleep.

The next time her eyes opened, she felt much better. Zelda lay in the bed and carefully tested all her
limbs before trying to sit up. Her arms were sluggish and shook under the effort, but Zelda braced herself against the headboard until she could see a little more. The room she was in was very cosy. Small lanterns glowed on low tables beside stacks of string-bound books and plain vases. There were a few banners hanging on the wall, and a statue of a content, fat-bellied frog dozing in the far end of the room. More light came up the flight of wooden stairs in the centre.

Zelda knew this room. She was in Impa’s house.

The revelation may have been too much for her elbow, which gave and slipped her hand on the mattress’s soft sheets. Zelda yelped as her head smacked against the wooden headboard quite soundly, and she lay panting on the pillows as footsteps immediately hammered upon the stairs.

“Princess Zelda!” The girl from before hurtled in, creating shadows that stretched across the sloped ceiling. She skidded to a stop upon seeing Zelda awake and gasped before kneeling again. She lowered her entire body until her forehead was touching the woven carpet. Zelda watched in horror and amusement as the girl mumbled her next words to the floor.

“Plea… please forgive my overreaction. I’m so sorry. Are you ready to go downstairs? Grandmother has been waiting for you.”

The girl bolted up at once. The tear of her Sheikah forehead tattoo wrinkled slightly as she blinked rapidly. “Yes! Of course! Princess!”

She hurried over and offered her arm for support as Zelda lowered her feet to the floor. She was barefoot and still clad in her ruined ceremonial dress, though someone had thoughtfully removed all the accessories. Together, Zelda and the girl shuffled slowly towards the staircase.

“Thank you…?”

“Oh! My name is Pa… Paaa…Paaay…” The girl gulped and looked at the floor as Zelda reached for the banister. “My name is Paya.”

“Thank you, Paya.” Zelda felt a small shiver in the girl’s shoulders at the sound of her name. “How long did I sleep?”

“Oh! Er. I-I think Master Link brought you to us three days ago? No, four. It was near sunset. I’m sorry.”

So it was Link. Zelda’s heart constricted when she remembered him standing in the field looking so exhausted and uncertain. How he’d cried while she assured him that his task was finally done. It was all she could do then, holding him tenderly as he finally had his relief after what must have been a long and lonely trial.

When Link had finished, pulling back and wiping his eyes, Zelda dared look back at the castle. Instead of being consumed by darkness, she saw the light of the morning sun spilling out from behind its silhouette. Even the ancient pillars reflected the brilliant blue of the clear skies over them.

It had been her prison for so long. A self-made, deliberate prison, but a prison nonetheless, yet Zelda found herself drawn to it once more. All traces of Calamity Ganon had been erased from this
realm; she felt its hate and rage no longer. But something else was reaching out to her, something sad and serene and proud and regretful all at once.

Link didn’t say a word when she started towards it. Zelda couldn’t explain it to him and was grateful when he fell into step beside her instead. She felt the balm of the sun on her skin, the caress of the wind in her hair, slick and smooth grass under her feet as she walked steadily onward. She could hear birds from the trees yonder, and could smell the freshly turned earth as insects burrowed back into the ground. Hyrule was as lush as ever, wide and rambling and wild. Zelda savoured her senses. It was good to have them back.

In the ruins of Castle Town, the Guardians there waited docile and dormant once more. Link tensed at the sight of them, but did nothing when she simply walked on. The castle was a motionless mountain, empty and quiet. Zelda and Link paused before the old gates. Turrets were missing their parapets, walls cracked and crumbled from decades of deterioration. She searched the spires for any sign, straining her ears against the wind through the caved-in roofs, and tried to discern that feeling of familiarity that had called out to her. After a moment she was forced to concede that there was nothing left. Zelda lowered her eyes, feeling a little foolish for dragging Link all the way here. He kindly didn’t question her, turning when she did, and they went back the way they came.

Once they had crossed the moat, Zelda was seized with the compulsion to look back one more time. The castle was barely visible against the blinding sunlight. She felt something within her disappear, like a connection gently severed for good. The loss was so acute, tears welled up in her eyes even as she squinted into the brightness, trying to identify what it was. But it had already slipped away, and she would never feel it again.

Link was staring up at the castle, an expression of shock and confusion on his face. He had lost something too. Zelda thought she might break down until something brushed by her arm. She looked around to see tiny particles floating through the air all around them. Link held out his hand and a single pale petal landed in it.

A miracle was happening: spring. The season of renewal and rebirth. Link turned his head to the north, and Zelda saw the how the petals were flying in from the Great Hyrule Forest. An enormous tree in its centre was waving its branches in the wind, greeting her. She blinked away her sadness and smiled at Link, who let go of the petal so it could join its brethren twirling into the skies.

Finally at peace, they walked away. It surprised Zelda just how intensely it felt to let go, even if her hundred-year tenure with the Calamity had been bolstered by the Goddess’s powers. Every step became slower and heavier.

Link glanced over his shoulder at her just in time to see her trip, and she heard his panicked cry right before blacking out. “Zelda!”

Zelda stiffened at the memory, and Paya turned sharply in alarm. “Princess?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

The hall of the Sheikah was almost identical to what she had known before. Flat cushions had been laid upon the floor in rows. A book was open on the shelf in the back, no doubt filled with anonymous grievances. Zelda had once scribbled a few angry rants about her father into it when she was much, much younger. She regretted them now. Seals of good fortune were pinned to the rafters, and the ancient tapestry hung behind the seat of honour, a quadruple stack of cushions supporting the old woman who knelt upon them. She was tiny, but the great weighted hat marked her as the Sheikah Tribe’s leader.
“So,” a voice said, scratchy and thin, “you’re finally awake. It has been quite a long time, Princess.”

The brim of the hat lifted. Zelda saw a tattoo so faded it was nearly blue like the veins that showed beneath the old woman’s paper skin.

“I am much older now, but you remember me, don’t you?”

Zelda studied the Sheikah while Paya held her breath. “Impa,” she said.

A thousand wrinkles creased as a smile lit up the old woman’s face. She held out her arms and Zelda fell into them. She felt bony fingers stroke her hair, a strange but still comforting sensation. Impa had been only in her mid 20s when Zelda had last seen her, still the King’s most trusted advisor and one of his top generals, of calm disposition but a fierce fighter when necessary. That she had survived all these years to see her again was more than Zelda could have asked.

Impa cupped her hands under Zelda’s chin, wet trails visible on her spotted cheeks under the lanterns’ glow. “I know you might want to jump right into the next task, but Hyrule can wait a little longer,” Impa urged. “It has waited for so long, after all. Let us take care of you, Princess Zelda.”

“I won’t go anywhere,” Zelda assured her. “I want to know everything that’s happened.”

Impa laughed, an old woman’s cackle. “Canny and curious as always, my dear princess. We will indeed see to it that you are well informed. Though for matters outside our region, it would be better to learn from Link instead.”

“Where is he?” Zelda whispered, more to herself, but Paya heard.

“He… comes and goes,” she said. “We never know when he’ll be back. But!” Paya laced her fingers together to keep from wringing them. “He’s been here every day since leaving you with us, so I’m sure you’ll see him soon!”

“Agreed,” Impa said crisply. “Link understands that the princess needs recuperation. He’ll most likely arrive by dinner. It would be distressingly uncharacteristic of him to miss a good meal.”

Zelda laughed at this, which seemed to alleviate a little of Paya’s stress. “Princess,” she said, bowing again. “If you need anything, please let me help.”

“Well, she will continue sleeping in your bed for now,” Impa declared. “And she clearly needs a change of clothes. Go draw water for the bath, Paya, then fetch your spare robes.”

Being reintroduced to the tiny luxuries of life was too wonderful to pass up. Paya turned hotfeather red and averted her eyes when Zelda shucked off her ceremonial dress for the last time and sank into the bath. Seeing grime from 100 years melting into the steaming water was a satisfaction like none other. She nearly drifted back to sleep as Paya helped to wash her hair, her nimble fingers gently massaging. But it felt even better to dry off with a towel before slipping on the Sheikah’s silky robes. Paya blushed again when Zelda turned to her, smiling with the sheer joy of being clean.

“L-let’s go.” Paya skittered to the door and flung it open.

Zelda stepped out and breathed in the evening air of Kakariko Village. It too had remained very much the same, which was very comforting. From Impa’s porch, she could see the whole scope of the hidden valley, all the black thatched houses perched on terraces. The plum trees were in bloom, filling the air with their sweet and hopeful smell, one that mingled with the smoke from the torches.
that ringed the Statue of the Goddess. Its closed eyes and folded hands seemed kinder and more graceful to Zelda than ever before. Sheikah were coming out of their homes and down the slopes, waving to one another and calling out names she didn’t recognise. Two small girls rushed about, scattering cuccos and their laughter bright in the peaceful twilight.

Zelda did not see Link among them.

Zelda and Paya descended the steps. Two guards stood by, one of them thin and reedy and the other built like a buffalo. Both widened their eyes at the sight of her and dropped into kneeling positions.

“Princess Zelda,” murmured the first one. “You’ve returned to us.”

Zelda gestured for them to rise as Paya did introductions. “Cado and Dorian. We’re off to join the others.”

“Of course. Shall we assist Lady Impa, then?”

“Please.”

As the men politely excused themselves from their post, Zelda followed Paya to a deck where the villagers would hold their communal meals. People were already gathered there, some at the cooking pots and others waiting at the tables. Zelda felt their eyes on her as she sat down.

“Princess Zelda,” somebody said. Zelda looked up and an old Sheikah woman — not as old as Impa, but certainly elderly — seated behind her. The woman bowed her head, her saddle-shaped hat dipping forward. “Welcome back. My name is Nanna. I do hope that you’ll enjoy our humble fare.”

“I’m sure I will,” Zelda said. “It’s my first taste of food in a hundred years.”

Nanna threw her head back and laughed. “That only raises the stakes a little more, I’d think! Ah, my mentor did say you had a sharp wit.”

“Your mentor?”

“Forgive me for getting ahead of myself. My mentor works at the research centre far east of here, in Hateno Village. She always told me stories about doing extensive work with you, Princess.”

Zelda was stunned. “You mean… Purah? She’s still here, too?”

“Oh, yes. Very much so.” Nanna smiled, and Zelda tried to imagine what her dear friend looked like now. If Impa had become such a wizened old woman, no doubt her sister was absolutely decrepit. She couldn’t picture it.

“I was also told a great deal about what happened… during the Great Calamity. You have our deepest thanks.”

“I… I just…”

“You just protected us all from complete devastation.” Nanna patted her arm. “We owe our very existence to your dedication. Anything we may offer is paltry compared to what you did for us.”

It was Zelda’s turn to blush as Paya nodded vigorously. The Sheikah at surrounding tables murmured to each other and smiled at Zelda. She noticed, for the first time, how few they
numbered. The Calamity’s toll had been steep. Zelda inhaled slowly, trying not to let it daunt her.

Impa arrived in a sedan chair hoisted by Cado and Dorian. The Sheikah stood in respect for their leader, who settled down with Paya and Zelda. She raised her hands for silence, though there was little need for it.

“Here in Kakariko,” Impa said, “we dine together as one family, for we are one tribe. Nobody is left unaccounted for. The safety of our village is of utmost importance, where we guard the secrets and legacies of old Hyrule from those who would side with evil and corruption. We have stayed here in our valley for over a hundred years, patiently waiting for the defeat of Calamity Ganon. Tonight, we see that patience rewarded.

“But I am aware… there have been deep hurts along the way. Irreplaceable losses. Before we celebrate, let us take a moment to remember those who were unable to make it through the most difficult times.”

Impa’s voice gently lifted them from their reveries. “And with full hearts, we shall fill our stomachs. It is time for rejoicing, for our princess has returned to us. The scourge of the kingdom has been rid, and we have her to thank. To Hyrule, and the Goddess!”

“To the Goddess!” they chorused.

“Now, let’s eat!”

Another cheer went up at this. The sorrowful mood disappeared as bowls and plates were passed round. Impa and Zelda were served first. Nanna was correct that the dishes were quite simple, but they were energising, filling, and absolutely delicious. The Sheikah plied Zelda with juicy steamed mushrooms, fluffy omelettes, and their traditional rice balls packed with chopped carrots or wrapped in thin slices of meat. A pot simmered with sweet pumpkin until it softened into a stew. Paya had returned with bowls for all of them when there was a jubilant shout from another table. She looked up to see Dorian’s two little girls bounce off their benches, waving their spoons. “Link! Link!”

Everybody turned their heads. Zelda’s breath stalled at the sight of his blue eyes, bright even in the shadow of evening, and the grin that spread across his face when the children ran up to him. They shrieked with delight as they swung from his elbows.

The older one dropped down first, pawing at his tunic. “What did you bring me?” Link handed her a bundle, which she unwrapped at once. “Cane sugar? Hm… egg pudding!” Without so much of a thank you, the girl raced towards the cooking pots. Link lifted her little sister onto his shoulder. Then, he saw Zelda. His eyes widened, and he dumped the girl back into her father’s lap. In his haste to reach her, he crashed into a bench, knocking it over. The couple at its table waved him off even as he stammered out apologies. Soon, he was standing beside Impa, scratching the back of his neck.

“Welcome, Master Link,” Impa said. “You’re unusually late, considering how much food is involved.”
Link laughed. The sound made Zelda’s heart skip a beat. “Sorry.”

While Paya hurried to fetch more food, he sat down. His eyes slid across the table’s surface and climbed up Zelda's clothes until they reached hers. The smile melted off his face as he studied her. “Are you feeling better?”

“I think so,” she said.

Link nodded. Zelda grew hot under his stare, at a loss of what to do or say. Just a few moments ago, he had seemed at such ease with the others but now he acted hesitant, almost shy. She wanted to reach out and touch him, but there was this whole table, several dishes of food, and the intent gazes of Impa and Paya between them.

Link looked down. “This is yours.”

He unclipped something from his belt. It was the Sheikah Slate. Her Sheikah Slate. Zelda took it back, running her fingers over the grooves, admiring once again the glowing eye. When she turned it to the smooth side, it suddenly lit up with that familiar blue glow. Zelda gasped as text and images began to scroll across it.

“It’s a map! A map of the continent.” She brushed the side with one finger and started when the picture abruptly changed. “You can enlarge it. Oh, there’s a marker for where we are! And it’s so detailed, more than anything I’ve seen before. Even the individual houses are depicted. But how…”

Zelda looked to Link for answers, but he was already downing the stew like his life depended on it. He dropped his spoon, splashing bits of pumpkin all over himself. While Paya quietly gave him her handkerchief, Impa spoke up. “Link has shared much of his information with me. We can go over it together later.”

“Oh. Alright.”

As the meal began to wind down, exhaustion stole over Zelda again. It was much harder to fight when filled with discouragement. Link’s behaviour confused her to no end. He spoke little, but watched her intently all night. If their eyes met, his flicked away like a frightened animal. Whenever another Sheikah approached to introduce themselves to Zelda, he could look at them and respond in kind, but when she asked him a question, he was evasive and stumbled over his words. Finally, she gave up. They simply looked at each other in silence until Impa noticed Zelda nodding off and ordered Paya to bring her back to bed.

The following week passed slowly. It seemed that her body would need a while to recover from her century of fighting the Calamity, rendering her borderline narcoleptic. Zelda could only stay awake for a few hours before having to sleep again. Paya stayed by her side at all times, providing sweet companionship and support. They spent most of the first few days in or around Impa’s house. Zelda studied the Sheikah Slate’s map as she listened to the statistics and their explanations. It reflected Impa’s words, showing her ruins of former towns and the dwindled population. Hyrule truly had changed.

“Princess,” Impa asked one session. “If I may be so bold. Do you wish to speak of your own experiences during… during that time?”

Zelda went quiet. Even Impa seemed uncomfortable and slightly abashed for asking. Paya’s hand trembled so much that she dropped a teacup, shattering it upon the floor.
“I’m so sorry!” She knelt to clean it up. Zelda leaned over and helped her pick up the smallest and sharpest shards.

“Perhaps not,” Impa murmured, and that was the end of that.

The other Sheikah in the village were very happy to have Zelda with them. She received visitors almost every day. The farmers Steen and Olkin came separately, both bearing a bushel of swift carrots and fortified pumpkins, respectively, and claiming that regular consumption would help speed her recovery (after hotly warning her against the other’s falsities). Claree requested to take Zelda’s measurements so she could design a custom outfit for her. Zelda agreed, mainly so Paya could have her robes back. A woman named Mellie stopped by one day to give her a beautiful branch of flowering plum blossoms, much to Impa and Paya’s shock.

“But I found it to be a very thoughtful gesture,” Zelda said. “She told me how plums symbolise perseverance and prosperity, and that it was most harmonious that I returned in the spring.”

“It is.” Impa tapped her chin uncertainly. “But she actually gave you one, which means she had to cut it from one of the trees in her garden.”

“She has never done that before,” Paya whispered in awe.

Someone else had been leaving her gifts. They were only discovered when she woke up in Paya’s bed. The first was a small pile of wildberries on a handkerchief she recognised. But Paya denied any involvement, pointing out that one would have to travel all the way to the Gerudo or Hebra highlands to find such delicacies. Another time, a book was left by her pillow. Zelda could see right away that it was not Sheikah made, with leather binding and gilt edges on the pages. *The Book of Mudora*. She recognised it from when she was much younger. It must have taken a great deal of courage to rescue it from the monster-infested castle library.

She opened her eyes one evening and saw stars. Zelda laid beneath the covers and slowly realised that they were not stars, but sunset fireflies that had been let loose in the room. Zelda was filled with a sweet contentment as they floated over her, and she listened to Paya’s hushed voice on the stair.

“But why can’t you talk to her? …I’m sure she feels the same way, Master Li—”

The next morning, Dorian brought his daughters, Koko and Cottla, to see her. It was absolutely lovely to spend the day with them. Their energy was infectious, which Zelda very much appreciated when she watched the girls bounce around the room, touching artefacts on shelves and telling her all their stories and plans. Koko was going to be a chef when she grew up, and Cottla a spy. They gave her a honeyed buttered apple. The sight of it — round, red, and wrapped in wax paper — reminded Zelda of another distant memory.

“This was one of my favourite treats,” she told Koko, who beamed with pleasure.

“Link said you’d like it,” Cottla piped up.

“Did he?”

“Yes!”

Link still came by the village every day, but he had remained distant. Zelda was aware of his memory loss, and that he had recovered at least some of it. Such an experience would radically change a person. Zelda understood this. But every time she recognised some of his old quirks, it was like a shot to the heart: the way he diligently continued training with his sword, whether alone
or by sparring with Steen. The affection he always showed his horse, rubbing circles on its neck and whispering into its twitching ears. Of course, the sheer amount of food he was able to consume. Even the way Link stood idle sometimes made her think about their time together: spine straight and shoulders back like any good soldier would, head erect and thumbs hooked into his belt.

Since he wouldn’t talk to her, Zelda looked through the Sheikah Slate for clues. She felt his personality waving at her through the pictures he had added to the album. There was a beautiful, sweeping image of Hyrule from high above, possibly a mountaintop or one of the towers Impa had described to her. With the Lanayru wetlands in the foreground and Death Mountain at its back, even the faint canopy of Great Hyrule Forest could be seen in the distance. There was a shot of a massive, snow-covered stone sword and another featuring a group of singing Rito children, their feathers filling out the colours in a rainbow. Four in a row were just of his horse at various angles.

The most surprising of all was a picture of Link himself. He was mugging ridiculously for the camera while gesturing behind him towards a rampaging black lizalfos, all bug-eyed and lolling tongue, a boomerang raised in its claw. It made her want to laugh and scream at the same time.

Link had made so many amazing discoveries with the Slate, utilising functions she had no idea existed upon it. After a few experimental presses, Zelda found a long, long list of text. It was a detailed record of various people Link had met, their requests, and his opinions of them. Zelda felt a rush of excitement as she read through them, partially because how had he been able to input the letters? but moreso because it felt like he was finally speaking to her about his travels. Zelda tapped through each entry, eating up his descriptions of a stable hands’ demands, various animals, recipes, and strange statues.

There was one entry different from all the others.

_I finished finding all the locations in the old pictures. I remember everything I’ve been through with Princess Zelda. In my memories, she was always striving to complete the burdens put upon her…_

_Even if it’s just a moment sooner, I want to save her as quickly as possible._

_I want to see her smile again with my own eyes._

Her condition slowly improved. By the end of the second week, Zelda no longer randomly fell unconscious and needed only a few small naps throughout the day. It still wreaked havoc on her sleep cycle, however. She jolted awake one night to a steady rhythm drumming upon the roof. It took her a moment to remember the sound of rain. Zelda sat up very quietly. Paya was curled up on her mat on the other side of the room like a cat. She had similar senses and reflexes, but Zelda managed to sneak past her and down the stairs.

The clouds covered the moon, but the lanterns of the village kept burning brightly. Zelda hurried to the edge of the porch, her arms outstretched. She marvelled at the way the droplets broke apart upon impact and ran down her fingers. It was a childlike compulsion that would only result in having to change clothes, but she couldn’t resist. Zelda felt a grin creep across her face as she started dancing. It was very silly and undignified, but it felt so good to feel rivulets of water slinking through her hair, the thrill at how easily she could twirl upon wet floorboards, and how real the world was in the slight discomfort of cold skin.

When she finally saw Link staring at her from gate below, Zelda slipped and landed a bit painfully on her rear. Embarrassed, Zelda scooted to the edge of the stair and sat there as he hurried up. “I’m fine,” she mumbled once he reached her.
“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He was still a few steps beneath her, with his hood raised against the rain. There were three flowers in his hands. Seeing that she was awake this time, Link simply handed them over, no explanations or apologies needed. Then, he sat down too.

The Silent Princesses were the most exquisite specimens Zelda had ever seen. Each petal was immaculately curled, the deep blue of royalty fading perfectly into snowy white at its tips. The anthers in the centre were loaded with rich, golden pollen, sure to spread and germinate more blooms. The stems were sturdy and leaves waxy and tough, speaking to good health.

“They’re everywhere now,” Link said to her unspoken question. “Don’t worry.”

“Thank you,” she said, blinking against the rain.

He unclasped his hood and pulled it around her shoulders before she could protest. From this close, Zelda could see his scars far more clearly. His tunic and other protective gear had done a good job of hiding them, but a few were visible. Tiny scrapes scuffed his fingers and knuckles, fairly recent and easily dealt with. A shadowy line dripped down his face from temple to jaw, long healed. Zelda knew there had to be similar marks on his chest, sides, and leg — she had witnessed those wounds herself. The biggest one would be on his arm and shoulder. She could see it creeping past his neck, discoloured and uneven, like an unpleasant spill spreading upward instead of down.

Zelda tried not to cry or squash her Silent Princesses.

“You made me eat a frog,” Link suddenly said. Zelda was puzzled until he pointed at the flowers again. “When you told me about them. Then you found a frog and made me eat it.”

She smiled. “The frog escaped, actually. It was unfortunate.”

“I tried it.”

“What? No, you didn’t.”

“I mean, I tried it by myself.” The scar on his face rippled as he twisted his mouth into a grimace. “I cooked one. It was disgusting, and I didn’t get any abilities.”

Zelda laughed through her groans. “I’m so sorry, Link.”

“It’s okay.” He started to smile, too. For a few moments, they sat in silence with the rain pattering gently all around them. Zelda didn’t mind. This was already a far more enjoyable silence, one with warmth and comfort.

“I have a house,” he blurted out. Again, it threw her for a second, but she was beginning to understand. What did you say to someone who you barely remembered? And undergoing so many bouts of separation from society must have lost him some conversational skills. Nonetheless, here he was, trying. He was desperate to talk to her, but just didn’t know how to start.

“Where?” she asked.

“Hateno.”

That made her smile again. “You always said you liked that village.”
This was news to him, judging from his expression. Zelda hid her feelings and tried to focus on something else. “Do you see Purah often?”

“Yes.”

“I must go and visit her too.” Zelda rearranged the edge of the hood over her lap. It was a self-conscious action, not helped by the trail of Link’s gaze as he followed the movement of her fingers. “When I do, may I see your house?”

“Yes,” he said immediately.

“Tell me about it.”

He did. It was a good topic to begin with. Link explained the way he had found the old building and the friendly construction man who had lowered the price for him, then helped fill it with amenities and furniture. As Link started describing the grounds around his house, Zelda reached over and slipped her fingers around his. He was startled for a moment, but squeezed back tightly as he talked about the fish in the pond nearby.

Hearing about this new life he now had, seeing his eyes dart around in recollection, and feeling his callouses against her own palm filled her with so much gladness. Link looked down at their hands. Zelda waited for his next announcement.

Instead, he asked a question. “How different am I from what you remember?”

Zelda needed a few moments to think of her answer. He surprised her, constantly — not because of what he was doing, just how he did it. Besides, the stiff and serious soldier she had first met over a hundred years ago had mainly been a front. Once they grew closer, it had fallen away to reveal someone very sweet, warm, and authentic. Seeing the later Link as the default rather than his hidden side made her happy, not disappointed. Zelda caught the fear in his eyes and knew she had to make this clear.

“I think you’re very much the same person. Just uninhibited.” She thought about his pictures in the Sheikah Slate. “You’ve always enjoyed exploring Hyrule. It was our shared experiences in different lands that forged our friendship. You’ve always been good with animals and children, too. You’ve always been brave… and reckless. Sometimes to a fault,” she added.

He shrugged, sheepish but very relieved. Zelda remembered the long list of all the people he helped and the promise to make her smile again. “Something I believe will never change is your generous nature. Even before, you found it hard to say no to anybody in need. I can see it reflected in your relationships with the Sheikah here. You’re dear to them, and it’s not because of the sword. I am a little envious,” she admitted, “that you were able to do so much for them. Learning of all of their suffering and hardships, I almost wish I could have been the one waking up earlier to assist them.”

Link looked vaguely amused. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Then here.” There was a soft clink of metal as he unbuckled one of his straps. Zelda blinked when he wrapped her fingers around the purple and gold scabbard of the Master Sword, patted her shoulder, and got up. She stared numbly as he strolled down the stairs, waving back at her.

Speaking about matters of the heart under the falling rain. She with the sword, him walking away.
Link was nearly to the bottom when she burst into laughter. Zelda almost tripped on a step as she struggled to standing, still clutching the sword to her chest. The more she thought about it, the more hilarious it became. She could barely breathe. He rushed back up to her, excited at her reaction, but also utterly bewildered.

“Yes,” Zelda gasped. “You’re exactly the same. You’re definitely my Link.”

He lit up like the sunrise at her words. Zelda was cut off mid-giggle when Link grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him. She didn’t even have time to drop the Master Sword, feeling the hilt dig into her shoulder as Link held her so close and finally kissed her.

It was wet.

It was clumsy.

It was awkward.

It was even slightly uncomfortable.

But it was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

It took them roughly 103 years and 120k words to get there, but our dorks finally smooched!! <3

1. The cutscene where the spirits of King Rhoam and the Champions finally move on from Hyrule probably is the one that saddens me the most. Zelda and her father never get to have real closure, even with his century of atonement as a ghost. So here is the best that I could give them, and it still sucks. One of the real tragedies of the game, for sure.

2. Also, the Japanese translation of quest log = Link’s diary theory is the best thing ever, so of course we’re using it! It’s only fair, seeing how Link read Zelda’s diary too.

3. They’re bad at kissin’ because they’re huge-ass dorks with like, no experience. Don’t worry, they’ll be practising a LOT.

Now for some housekeeping. The reason why I posted a new chapter so soon was because A) KISS! B) I’m slightly weird in the fact that I like the symmetry of certain dates like 10/1 and C) the upload schedule will be different from before… every two weeks instead of one. My end of year is significantly more demanding with a vast assortment of events and activities occurring throughout November and December. But I’m also an impatient person who always wants to get the story out of my head ASAP, so this was my compromise to ensure that the updates will be regular, but not too taxing.

Thanks for understanding, and please take this very satisfying moment as my offering.
Relax

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Only when she broke away to, with a slight laugh, wipe the rainwater away from his cheeks did Link have the thought to move out of the downpour. They reluctantly disentangled to move towards the shallow eaves of the great Sheikah house, Zelda salvaging her flowers and Link taking back the sword, which he promptly tossed back onto the floor to wrap her in his arms again.

She was perfect. She was more beautiful than the glimpses Link had managed to remember, and better than what he had dreamed. She had called him hers, which he undoubtedly and absolutely was. The sound of her laughter had melted all his restraint, running down his skin like the rain as they kissed, only the start of making up for over a hundred years of longing.

Once their heartbeats finally slowed, Zelda succumbed to drowsiness again. She dropped her head with a sigh, snuggling instinctively into the crook of his neck before closing her eyes. Link smiled and picked up the now slightly wilted-looking Silent Princesses, gently threading them into her wet hair as she slept. Watching her at peace was far, far more preferable than joining her. He had already slept enough for a lifetime.

But somehow, he managed to doze off because there was a sudden BANG jolting him awake just after sunrise. Wincing in pain, Link lifted his head as Paya appeared in the entrance of her grandmother’s house, one hand splayed against the door she had just slammed open. Her eyes were wild and wet with terror. “She’s gone,” she squeaked to a vague audience of the lightening skies. “P-princess Zelda is—”

“Hi, Paya,” Link said.

She whirled around, silver hair twirling, and stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of the princess in his arms. Zelda chose the perfect moment to stir. Link could feel her eyelashes against his collarbone as she blinked herself to consciousness.

“Good morning,” she yawned.

Paya stared at them both. Then, she dropped to her knees, pointedly ignoring Link. “Princess, what happened? Are you—”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I have other clothes.”

“So do I. Claree has been more than generous. Paya, is it alright if I take an early bath right now?”

“Of… of course, Princess.”

“Thank you.”

Paya continued to stare as they got to their feet. Zelda rubbed her eyes and smiled at Link, who had to lean in and get one last kiss before she left him, even for a short time. Paya looked on in slack-jawed amazement until, once Zelda had gone back into the house, she snapped out of it. To Link’s surprise, the shy Sheikah girl furrowed her brows at him, making her exasperation clear.
“Finally!” Paya turned on her heel and followed her princess in, closing the door on Link.

It was only wise to stay in Kakariko a little while longer to ensure that Zelda would regain her full health. Link didn’t mind. The food was good, and Zelda was happy. It was a safe place to tell her more about how Hyrule changed, to prepare her for what was waiting out in the wild.

And she was very ready to learn. The first thing she had done after getting washed up that morning was to grab his wrist and pull him aside.

“You need to teach me,” she said, waving the Sheikah Slate under his nose, “what all these runes mean! They weren’t there before!”

“I got them from the shrines,” he explained.

“The shrines! Of course! They’re activated now.” She turned towards the cliff that jutted over the eastern side of the village. A squat, chimney-like dome could be seen glowing brilliant blue at the top. “How did you open them? What are they like? May I go inside? How many are there? Did they all have runes?”

Link decided that a demonstration was better than trying to string together an answer to all her questions. Zelda’s eyes were wide and green and trembling with excitement as they followed the shield floating around her head. Her hands shook just as much as she tried the magnesis rune for herself. The Korok hovering above the frog statues squeaked and dodged as the shield came flying at it without warning. It jingled in irritation, and Link had to mouth an apology over Zelda’s shoulder while he guided her hand back.

He was very proud of himself when he managed to catch one of Impa’s precious sanke carps off-guard with the cryonis rune. Zelda laughed and squealed when he climbed the ice block and tossed the multicoloured fish at her.

“Oh, the poor thing!” She tried to keep the frantic fish from flipping out of her grasp, but it slipped through her fingers and back into the pond with a *plop*. “Link, don’t do that again.”

He could make no promises, especially since it had brought such a delighted grin to her face.

Their rune antics had gotten the attention of many Sheikah, so there were plenty of people there to personally witness him stasis-whacking a rock into the fence around Cado’s house. The cuccos shrieked and scattered feathers everywhere. Link and Zelda spent the rest of the day recapturing the fowl that escaped through the splintered gap. Even after Link endured an armful of scratches from one particularly irate hen, Cado simply glowered at him and pointed at the roof of his house. Link had to hike up to the cliff and hop down to the remaining cucco. He tossed it into the pen, then opened up the paraglider to come back down himself.

He’d forgotten that Zelda had yet to see it in action until he landed with a slight bump before her.

“What is THAT?” she cried.

“A paraglider.”

“A para… Where did you get such a thing? Did you make it?”

When not disrupting the calm and tranquility of Kakariko Village, Link took Zelda to places where they could talk in private. Sometimes it was as simple as sitting on the porch behind Impa’s house, dangling their legs over the waters below where the carp drifted under the lotus leaves, but other times they would walk up to the shrine. Hyrule Castle could be seen in the gap between the hills,
now quiet and still. Zelda and Link lay in the tall grass as evening revealed the bright glow of the blue nightshade that grew thick in the area. He pressed his forehead against hers, and she listened intently to him recounting his travails. Link told her all about the Great Plateau and the way he stumbled through the shrines. He spoke of exploring Hyrule: the harsh cold in the highlands, the dust of the desert, the sweat clinging to one’s skin in the jungle, and Death Mountain’s scorching air. He described the new settlements and the friends he had made there. He relayed messages from her father and the Champions, wiping her tears away and holding her close until grief exhausted her. Link carried her back to Impa’s house, tucking her in and kissing her eyelids.

One morning, Zelda consented to sit for a portrait by the visiting artist Pikango. She sat beneath a tree while he gesticulated wildly with his paintbrush, splattering streaks of yellow onto the grass. His rambling voice came drifting over to Link, who had been commanded to repair the cucco pen.

“I’ve travelled the world in search of beautiful landscapes, and Hyrule has never disappointed! Really, I recommend so many places. Akkala is full of that old rustic charm with its famous red forests. Or down in hot Gerudo, where the cliffs are stacked like layers on a cake! The beaches near Lurelin Village have the clearest waters, such that you can see schools of fish swimming beneath your raft. Ah, and…” Pikango swept his brush across the canvas with a flourish. “The great menace of Hyrule Castle itself! No, I don’t recommend going near it at all, but it is a striking silhouette against the skies, don’t you think?”

Zelda soon grew restless. She had spent nearly a month in Kakariko Village, but the rest of Hyrule waited for her beyond the misty karst mountains. Even Link, who found it hard to ignore his impulses, had to dissuade her from taking his paraglider and leaping off the graveyard cliff into the Lanayru wetlands.

Finally, she announced her decision to depart the village with Link. With her appointed knight at her side, nothing could stop her from exploring her former kingdom. The Sheikah were sorry to hear of her departure, but also pleased to know she had made a full recovery. Impa was not surprised, simply requesting that they pass along a message to her sister. Paya helped Zelda prepare her few belongings — mainly the wardrobe Claree had designed for her — and listened dutifully to Zelda’s happy chatter about all the places she wondered about and the things she was eager to try. But as they said their goodbyes before the Statue of the Goddess, Paya burst into tears, covering her face with her hands.

“Oh, Paya!” Zelda hugged her friend tightly. “Don’t cry.”

“I’ll miss you, Princess!”

“You’d think she was leaving you forever,” Link said. “It’s a half day’s ride.”

Zelda shot him a look as she rubbed Paya’s shoulder. “I’ll miss you, too. We’ll be back to visit,” she promised her.

The sun sat high in the sky by the time they left Kakariko Village. Link said nothing, watching the mist roll across her braided hair and clouds reflected in her eyes as they looked up at the stone canyon around them. When he reached over to take her hand, Zelda turned and gave him a glowing smile.

They crossed Kakariko Bridge with nary a hassle. Zelda’s fingers squeezed his tightly as she took in Blatchery Plain for the first time in a hundred years. Rolling highlands surrounded the level, green marshes. Wild horses wandered between the ruins of old ranches, their small springtime foals huddling close. A few travellers and merchants could be seen ahead of them, all moving towards the Dueling Peaks Stable, which rose high above the trees. So nobody would forget its purpose, the
roof was designed like a horse’s neck and head, bunting on string fluttering down from it like reins.

When they drew closer, heads turned in their direction. Some recognised Link and went back to their own devices, but others paused to peer at Zelda with frank curiosity. Newcomers were few and far between, especially on the dangerous roads.

“Ho!” Tasseren the stable manager waved at Link as they approached. “Ah, Link. You’ll want Chase, right?”

“Actually, can I take out two horses?”

Tasseren eyed Zelda, then nodded. “Certainly. Hold on just a tick.”

He left the counter. His brother, Rensa, stood to the side, gloved hands on his hips. He greeted Zelda warmly. “Welcome to Dueling Peaks Stable! What do you think of the place? Pretty nice, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.” Zelda gazed around. There was a small hitch in her breath as she spoke. “My heart is so glad for it.”

Rensa arched one eyebrow. “So, where are you heading?”

“Hateno Village.”

“Ah, that’s on the edge of Hyrule. It was largely unaffected by the Great Calamity, so the people there are pretty easygoing. I hear they even have a research centre, but folks tend to avoid the weird scientist who lives there.”

Zelda laughed. “I can’t wait to see her. It, I mean.”

“It’s a little far to walk, but with a horse you’ll get there in under a day.” Rensa scratched his moustache as he continued to study her. “Say, may I ask where you’re fr—”

“And there you go! Thank you for choosing us for all your horsey needs.”

Tasseren had returned, leading two horses. One of them was Chase, who nickered to Link right away. He scratched under her mane, but turned to see Zelda’s face when Tasseren handed her the reins. She stared, frozen, as the majestic white stallion at the other end shook his head impatiently, making the purple and gold bridle shimmer in the sunlight.

“But how?” she whispered to Link.

“Someone tipped me off at Outskirt Stable,” he said. “Gave me the bridle, too. He’s probably a descendant, not your…”

“It doesn’t matter,” Zelda said, raising her hand to stroke the stallion’s neck. He shied away from her shadow, but she didn’t withdraw. “I’m sorry I startled you,” she murmured, keeping her movements steady and slow. “But there are so many sights I thought I’d never see again. You’ve given me a very nice surprise. Can we be friends?”
The stallion blinked twice, then lowered his head to give her a good sniff. Zelda giggled at the brush of a velvety nose against her cheek. Link watched them until Chase nipped hard at his sleeve. “Don’t be jealous,” he told her. She huffed at him until he found an apple in his pockets, then crunched it in a single bite.

“Does he have a name?” Zelda asked as Link helped her up into the saddle.

“Cloud.”

She laughed. From that high up, her yellow hair looked like it flowed from the sun itself, wrapping her entire figure in a halo of light. “That’s cute. I like it. Let’s go, Cloud!”

He obeyed her instantly, breaking into an energetic canter right from the start. Link had been worried about her riding skills, or at least the ability to bond with such a high-strung horse. But Zelda and Cloud moved as one. She sat in the saddle with her back straight and hair rippling in the wind, a gleam upon the horizon winking between the trees.

Rensa’s estimate was correct. The trip to Hateno wouldn’t take long, but they stopped frequently so Zelda could take things in: the glitter of a waterfall tumbling over a cliff into Lake Siela, the mess of a bokoblin camp in the midst of fallen foundations of old settlements, and Ash Swamp. When Zelda dismounted, Link followed quickly. He joined her in the ankle-deep shallows where the grass and wildflowers grew abundant. Moss had accumulated in the grooves of the old Guardians half-sunken in the mud. There were at least a dozen of them littered throughout the swamp in various states of decay.

Zelda didn’t move, even when Link put his hand around hers. “Do you remember when…?”

There was a faint ache in his left arm. “Yes.”

They stood there for a while amongst the corroded carcasses, not saying a word. A hightail lizard scurried over one of the old husks, leaving a trail of tiny, muddy prints.

Fort Hateno was within walking distance. They led Chase and Cloud to it on foot. “Is it smaller than before?” Zelda asked. “I seem to recall that there was more to this.”

“Only the wall’s left.” There were even more Guardians here, tipped on their sides or in pieces at the foot of the wall. Some of them had broken down mid-climb, their legs draped over the parapets. Squirrels skittered across them, and a bird’s nest peeped out of an empty eye socket.

They walked under the raised portcullis. Any remnants of the garrison had been overtaken by a thick wood. A man toting a large pack was shielding his eyes against the afternoon sun, studying the graffiti left from long gone soldiers and a century of travellers. He straightened and greeted them cheerfully.

“Hiya! My name’s Garill. Come to see Fort Hateno, I take it? It’s well worth seeing.”

“Is it?” Zelda asked.

Garill nodded. “Yep, Fort Hateno here was the last line of defense between Hateno Village and the awful tragedy all those years ago. Do you know the story of the warrior who fought here?”

“No, tell me.”

“So 100 years ago, we had these special warriors called Champions. The warrior who fought here was supposedly one of them. I heard the others all died in the big fight. The warrior, though. Some
say he gave his life here too, but others think he went into a deep sleep to prepare to fight another day. I wonder if I’ll still be around when he wakes up. I’d love to meet the guy.”

“Perhaps you will,” Zelda said, smiling slightly at Link.

“The more I see of this place, the more it hits me just how hard the old tragedy struck here. So many Guardians… it boggles the mind. That warrior must have been some threat to the forces of darkness, huh?” Garill gazed around with unveiled admiration. “If I’d been alive 100 years ago, I like to think I’d have fought these Guardians here, right at the warrior’s side.”

“That’s a brave thing to say,” Zelda said.

Garill grinned and scratched his chin. “Eh, it’s what anyone would do, I think. If not for Fort Hateno and the warrior, there’d be no such place as Hateno Village anymore. I’m alive now because of them, and I’ve got to make sure future generations know it!”

He trotted up the wooden stair leading to the top of the wall, bidding them good day and use of his cooking pot, which was conveniently located under a nearby tree. Zelda sat down amongst the roots, chin in her hand while Link made them a meal. They ate their fruit and mushroom mix deep in thought, the birds and bees filling in the silence instead.

“There was a princess, too,” Link said.

“Oh, that doesn’t bother me.” Zelda put down her plate. She watched a tiny ant crawl over to investigate. “But… perhaps I wasn’t as prepared as I thought I was. So much has gone. Necluda was the second most populated province after Central Hyrule. Now there’s nothing left except for the stable. When everyone said that the Calamity decimated the kingdom, I didn’t realise it had been quite so… literal.”

He wrapped an arm around her and she leaned in, resting her cheek on his shoulder. They both watched as Garill’s shadow came floating back towards them across the ground. He waved at them from above. Link raised a hand in return.

Zelda sighed. “He’s right. A tragedy happened here. And yet… the kindness, the generosity of everyone I’ve spoken to since coming back has been almost overwhelming. It seems that devastation only brought people together. It’s taught them to help anyone who asks for it, no matter what.”

“They had to survive,” Link said. “They needed to support each other.”

Zelda nodded. “Mother once said that Hyrule’s legacy was courage. Our origins lie in a goddess of wisdom and the actions of a selfless hero. But even in their absence, Hylians have managed to continue that legacy. Even as history gets muddled into legend, they’ve managed to make sense of a chaotic, abandoned world. I’m so proud of them, though it’s clear they don’t need me.”

“I need you,” he said at once.

She kissed his jaw. “And I you.”

They remounted their horses and moved on. The Cliffs of Quince cast long shadows onto the road as evening started closing in. Birds sailed high above, giving off a sense of serenity, but Link was beginning to get antsy. Despite the goodness of Hylians, the wild was still not a safe place to be.

Link managed to pull himself up beside Zelda. “We’re really close now,” he said. “Up for a race?
Winner won’t have to clean after the horses.”

Zelda made a face. “That’s hardly fair, seeing how you’ve made this trip multiple times. I’m still recalibrating my mental map with the current geography.”

“The road leads straight there. Are you afraid of a challenge, Princess?”

He was rewarded when Zelda smirked, flicking the reins. Cloud leaped forward, spraying dirt with his hooves as he flew down the road. Chase followed eagerly, pulling in annoyance when Link wouldn’t let her overtake the white stallion. He stayed on Zelda’s heels, carefully watching for anything suspicious lying in wait.

Sure enough, there was a figure half-hidden in the tall grasses just as they rounded a sharp curve. Zelda and Cloud raced by, a blur of white and yellow. Link saw the nameless traveller gasp in disbelief at the sight. He pulled down his bow as their eyes met, but they shot Link a sneer before disappearing in a puff of red dust and paper tags.

Zelda’s laughter floated back to him as she threw a playful glance over her shoulder. She saw his weapon and slowed down immediately. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Link said, putting the bow away.

“Then why—”

“Thought I saw a boar. It would be nice to have some fresh meat for dinner.”

She rolled her eyes. “Like you don’t have a larder bursting with food already. If you really don’t, I’ll eat the Sheikah Slate.”

Nothing else bothered them, and they made it to the village by twilight. The gatekeeper was pacing the small threshold of wood and stone. He froze when Zelda rode up to him, a breathtaking vision on Cloud’s back even as the sun set behind the mountains.

“Hey, Thadd,” Link said, leaning round to look.

“Hey, Link,” Thadd replied, still gawping at Zelda.

“Can we go in?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Thadd moved his pitchfork and stepped aside. Link knew he would be gossiping away at the inn that night and spreading the news that their strange scarred neighbour had returned… with a girl this time. He didn’t care. It was true.

Before them was Hateno Village at dusk. As the final rays of daylight faded, the worn cobbles of the main street became illuminated from squares of buttery light spilling from nearby houses and shops instead. Laughter and cries of goodwill echoed faintly from these buildings, along with delicious smells of home cooking on the breeze. Link saw Zelda’s shoulders shiver involuntarily as she listened and breathed it all in. The princess was back amongst her people, though they knew nothing of it.

They walked their horses up an incline. Three very unique structures were perched at the top, strongly resembling colourful blocks stacked upon each other like children’s toys. Zelda was intrigued, pausing to read the signpost that detailed, in neat script, where one could get a modern little house of their very own. Link waited for all of one minute before urging her on.
Home waited across a wooden bridge.

It was not much different than the other houses in Hateno Village: white plaster over a stone foundation, rusty-red shingles on the roof and a chimney rising from the back. The entrance was shaded by a wooden arbour that also assisted vines onto the walls. The bulk of Ebon Mountain shielded it from the humid breezes from the south, and the yard was filled with flowers and soft, spring grass.

Beneath one of the large, old trees lounged two men who looked up at the sight of them crossing over.

“If it isn’t our studly lad back from his grand adventures. Where do you go, anyway? I mean, this old house was slated for demolition due to neglect, so when we don’t hear from you in yonks one can only assume…”

Link had never witnessed the garrulous president of Bolson Construction at a loss for words before. The man stood up, narrowing his eyes while Zelda slid off Cloud’s back. She landed shakily on her feet with Link there to steady her. A smirk slowly spread across Bolson’s face.

“KARSON! Look lively! We’re heading back.”

The young man on the other side of the cooking pot seemed quite startled. “Now?”

“Yep.” Bolson winked at Link, an act with no subtlety in it at all. “Can’t be in the way. Okey-doo, you two kids have a wonderful night.”

Zelda glanced at Link, her brows knotted in bewilderment as Bolson sauntered across the bridge with his protege in tow. “What… was that all about?”

Link claimed to have absolutely no idea. He took Cloud’s lead and tried to persuade her to go inside first. Zelda refused, pointing out that the race had been a draw (and a distraction, but Link wouldn’t let her know that). It took a while to untack, water, and feed both horses, especially with the erstwhile princess learning as she went. But the task was eventually finished. She stepped back and watched the horses bend their heads towards each other, nostrils flaring apprehensively. Chase stared deeply into Cloud’s eyes before snorting into his face, an emphatic reminder of just who was in charge, here.

Link opened the front door. He had borrowed the Slate the night before to do a hasty cleanup. Shelves were immaculate, not a speck of dust or dirt upon the books, boxes, and other knick knacks. Two sturdy chests stood against the wall so that piles of clothes and armour were a thing of the past. And yes, he did in fact have a larder underneath the stairs overflowing with provisions. Flowers in an old jug brightened up the modest table set for two.

Zelda walked past all of this, her footsteps softened by the woven rug on the floor. She reached the end of the room, raising a hand to run the tips of her fingers through the gems dangling from the Lightscale Trident before they came to rest upon the burnished gold of the Daybreaker. Zelda turned her head to gaze over at the great Boulder Breaker, then to the famed Eagle Bow. Link could see a glimmer in her eyes and a tremble in her jaw. She didn’t move until he came up behind her and gently brushed her hair back from her cheek.

“You smell like horse,” he said.

Zelda blinked, then laughed. She retreated into the bath to remove said smell while he prepared dinner. They had an excellent meal cracking birds’ eggs over vegetable risotto, simple and filling
and delicious under the warm lantern light. Link sat face to face with Zelda, whose green eyes darted around in fascination, answering her questions and making her laugh.

Link took his turn to wash up. As he scrubbed, he wondered what she would think of the books he had collected for her, including her father’s journal. When he trotted up the stairs later all pink and clean, it turned out that Zelda hadn’t even glanced at the desk or bookcases. She stood by the dark window staring at a faded picture hung on the wall.

“I used to hate this picture,” she confessed when he approached.

“Well?”

“It… it’s embarrassing! Completely unplanned. Look at Revali, all in a flap. Poor Mipha nearly fell on her face, and even you look shocked…”

“I was shocked that you—” Link pointed. “—deigned to touch me.”

Zelda blushed. “Unintentionally! If Daruk hadn’t… and oh, of course, Urbosa is the only one who manages to maintain some dignity.”

They looked at each other and smiled. Zelda’s faded as she noticed the markings his thin undershirt failed to hide. The Shrine of Resurrection had unparallelled healing properties, but even it could not remove the worst of his scars. Link had become accustomed to seeing them streaked along his arm, the uneven thickness of hard, shiny skin, how it still remained angry and red after all the years. He waited for her to say something about it.

Zelda put her hand on his, feeling the rough, raised ridges under her thumb. She allowed her palm to sweep up to his shoulder so she could wrap her arms around him as they gave into another deep, passionate kiss. Link felt her fingers in his hair and a smile across her lips as she pulled him down into the bed.

Later when she was curled up around him, fast asleep with moonbeams in her eyelashes and yellow hair, Link tried to make sense of it all. He loved her so much. And she still loved him. Knowing that made him happier than he had ever been in his entire life — Link didn’t remember most of the first two decades very well, but was certain of this. It didn’t seem right that the Goddess had deemed him deserving of even this single day that had been so perfect and good.

But, he wouldn’t contest it, either.

Link pulled the blanket up, softly kissed her one more time, and closed his eyes. Peace at last.

Chapter End Notes

1. This chapter truly was just sweet indulgent fluff/setting up for later events/a chance for Zelda to reacquaint herself with the world at large. There’s just so much to introduce, compare, and practise in this Hyrule that’s altogether so familiar but different.
2. Also, so many NPCs to dig dialogue up for, Great Golden Goddesses.
3. For the record, the rating of this fic is never going up. But I fully acknowledge that these two are very young and touch-starved and living together completely unsupervised. >:3c
I haven’t really been responding to comments as much as before, but it’s only because I want to say more or less the same thing to every single one: Gah!! Thank you! You’ve been so sweet and kind. I’m very lucky to have y’alls around. There’s no better motivation to forge onward than knowing of your continued support. Thank you again!!
Link opened his eyes, and all was bright. Sleep still pressed upon him, so he lay blinking in bed while listening to the steady coo of the pigeons who enjoyed a rest on his roof. Dust motes swirled in the rays of sunshine filtering through the window. Link felt comfortable and content. He pulled himself up to sitting, the blanket falling off his bare chest.

He was alone.

Link leaped off the mattress. There was no sign of Zelda at all, save for the fact his clothes had been draped neatly over a chair. He grabbed a shirt and stumbled down the stairs, cursing slightly when he stubbed a toe kicking the door open.

All was tranquil out front. Firly Pond glistened pleasantly, and the yard was filled with the sweet aroma of wildflowers. Link skidded to a stop, heart beating fast, at the sight of the horses grazing outside their stalls. Cloud's tail flicked back and forth calmly as his mane was braided by a girl with similar styles in her long, yellow hair. Zelda took another bite of the apple in her hand and glanced up. She stopped chewing upon seeing the look on Link’s face, allowing Chase the chance to pluck the half-eaten fruit from her fingers.

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t think…”

“It’s fine,” he said, panic receding. “How long have you been awake?”

“All a few hours.” She came closer and hugged him in apology. Link buried his face into her shoulder, breathing in the clean smell of laundered clothes. She was dressed in a simple outfit of blouse and breeches, Hylian homespun that would blend in with the other villagers. It was a wise choice, but nonetheless a failure on her part. She was sure to stand out, especially with a green ribbon at her throat to match her eyes.

“You look pretty,” he said.

Zelda went pink, smiling as she ran her fingers through his hair, which was loose and falling round his face. “So do you, but I think your neighbours would much prefer that you put some trousers on.”

Once he was ready, they set out for the Ancient Tech Lab hand in hand. Hateno Village was a farming town, which meant by mid-morning the place was already in full swing. His prediction about Thadd spreading the news was confirmed: the villagers froze at the sight of them before resuming their daily chores in a far too nonchalant manner. Ivee, the grocer’s daughter, kept sweeping the same patch of dirt over and over as she pretended not to be sneaking glances over at them. Nack the farmer retreated into his row of crops, peering out only when he thought Link couldn’t notice. The children of the village didn’t even bother with subtlety, scurrying up from behind and whispering into each other’s ears.
Just as they were passing the dye shop, a shadow fell across them. A portly man in suspenders greeted them enthusiastically, an enormous smile plastered over his face. “Ahoy, miss! Is this your first time in Hateno Village? Need a lifelong resident to show you around? It would be indecent to hold back on a good, ol’ fashioned dose of Hateno hospitality.”

“Sorry, Seldon. Got places to be.” Link pointed up the hill to where a steady stream of smoke billowed from the lab’s furnace.

“Maybe later,” Zelda said. “I would love to take a tour.”

Seldon blinked at her and nodded. “I see, I see. Well, whenever you’ve the time!”

He waved at them as they headed up the path. But when Link looked back, Seldon had hurried over to two women huddled by a vegetable stand. The three of them bent their heads together, no doubt exchanging and comparing details.

It was a long walk to the top of the hill, long enough that clouds began to drift across the sun above. Link and Zelda quickened their pace, eager to beat the rain, but droplets were already sprinkling down as they passed the final signpost. Up ahead, the Hateno Ancient Tech Lab was lit up against the gloomy skies by the furnace’s bright blue flame. In bygone days, it had been a defense tower for the villagers, constructed with the same white plaster and red roof tiles. When Purah had taken the building, she had transformed it into what she claimed was a world-class laboratory. One hundred years was plenty of time to add a gigantic telescope facing west, still keeping a lookout over the town.

Link and Zelda rushed for shelter when the first thunderclap shook the sky. A familiar frog statue peered smugly down at them, already protected by an umbrella lashed to its side. Zelda pushed against the doors, and they gave.

The interior of the lab was a long, spacious room with wooden walls. It was well lit and warm from the activated Guidance stone humming by the door, lines of brilliant blue running round its flat surface. A dry, musty smell permeated the place; one of papers scattered all over the floor, parchment and leather from ancient books carefully lined up on the shelves, and elixir ingredients piled in baskets and bowls. The sound of pens scratching out notes and clinking tools gradually stopped as the lab’s two inhabitants took notice of Link and Zelda.

Zelda slowly crossed the threshold. Her face held so many emotions: disbelief to delight to recognition to remorse. She stood staring at this mess that was the passionate pursuit of knowledge. Finally, here was something that really spoke to her soul — her chosen identity rather than the one that had been assigned to her. She carefully stepped over the loose notes and approached the closest person, a very short Sheikah girl who remained absolutely still even as Zelda addressed her.

“Hello. I’m looking for Dr. Purah. This is where she works, correct?”

The girl stared up at Zelda with dark red eyes behind her round spectacles. Her hands were balled into small, shaking fists. Link hung back and braced himself for the inevitable.

“The director is in the back,” the girl finally said, her voice high-pitched but steady. “A terribly busy person, so please try to keep it brief.”

“I understand, but we’re old friends. I’m sure she’ll make time for me.” Zelda smiled politely, then walked to the door next to the bookshelves. After she stepped back outside, Link folded his arms and side-eyed the young girl, who winked at him.
“You didn’t tell her?” she whispered.

“You’re always saying not to spill the beans,” he replied in a similar tone.

She grinned with glee. It only took a minute before the door banged open again. “I don’t see her,” Zelda said, rain dripping down her cheek while she gazed around, frowning. “Are you sure? Perhaps she went to…”

“Princess,” the girl said in a loud, clear, and unmistakable voice, “I tricked Linky here because he’s, you know, Link, but I thought you’d catch on a little quicker. Or did you forget all about me in the past 100 years?”

Zelda’s eyes widened, and her jaw dropped. “Purah?”

“Snappity SNAP!” Hyrule’s smallest scientist hopped up onto the table and struck a two-fingered salute. “Forever at your service, your royal highness. My dear sister told me of your return weeks ago, and we’ve been waiting, WAITING for you to get here! Or has your appointed knight been a distraction?” Purah wagged her finger towards Link accusingly. “That’s very selfish of you, Linky.”

Zelda was flabbergasted. “But— you— how— what…?”

“Shut your mouth before you swallow a fly, Princess. There’s a lot of catching up to do!”

“Purah,” Zelda gasped, still reeling.

Purah sighed. “Yes, it’s me. Not a wrinkly old crone like you expected, I bet. The truth is, I look this way because of a failed experiment… Well, I say failed, but in some ways, it was a success. I documented the full affair in my diary, so we can tackle that problem later.”

Zelda blinked back tears. “Purah…”

She ran in and threw her arms around the diminutive director. Purah teetered back and forth under the sudden weight. She tried to pat Zelda on the back. “Princess! This, this is n-no time for…”

Then, Purah’s face crumpled too, and the two of them hugged each other and cried for a good ten minutes, bemoaning to the other of how dearly they had been missed. Link made eye contact with Purah’s assistant, Symin, over their shaking sobs. The men nodded awkwardly in greeting.

Purah was the first to pull away, sniffing deeply and grasping Zelda by her shoulders. “Alright, that’s enough. Back to the topic at hand! You must tell me everything. I mean, you don’t look like you’ve changed a bit in the last 100 years, but SOMETHING must have happened in all that time!”

Perhaps it was Link’s imagination, but Zelda seemed to hesitate before replying. “What about you? Look at this place. You must have had plenty of experiments, not just the one. Please, tell me all about them.”

Purah needed little encouragement. She hopped off the table and grabbed Zelda’s hand, dragging her around the laboratory like a tiny tour guide. Link trailed behind them as Purah babbled on and on about how she was able to extract information about the Sheikah Slate’s extra runes from carefully coded ancient texts, such that she was ready for Link when he arrived for needed upgrades. She had also intended to turn the tech lab into a school for upcoming researchers, but with so many Sheikah afraid to leave the safety of Kakariko Village, she had only been able to take on three assistants.
“So I take it that you met Nanna back in Kakariko. Jerrin’s up with Robbie — oh, we need to send for Robbie! — and this is Symin.” Purah walked up to him, rapping her fingers on a shelf. “Symin! Show some manners.”

The command was unnecessary as Symin bowed and expressed most courteously how honoured he was to finally meet the famed Princess Zelda. He began to describe his work on the Sheikah Slate’s sensor, but Purah rolled her eyes and dragged Zelda back to her desk, where a pile of notes were shedding gracefully to the floor.

“Now, for the biggest breakthrough I managed to make in the past century. Saving the best for the last, of course.” Purah produced a rectangular object from beneath the papers, one of a very familiar shape and size. “It took decades of tinkering, thousands of rupees, actually taking Robbie’s meddling advice, and nearly burning down the lab twice… but I did it. My very own Sheikah Slate!”

This was significant news, even to Link. Purah handed it to Zelda, beaming with pride. The modern Slate lacked a handle and the all-seeing eye was colourless and carved into the back, but its purpose was unmistakable. It still glowed Sheikah blue when activated, text running neatly along the smooth screen in rows.

“Amazing,” Zelda breathed. It struck Link at how overwhelmingly familiar the cast of blue light over her face looked. “This means that the Sheikah Slate can be replicated. Imagine this as a common tool all over Hyrule — information and records at your fingertips at all times, a way to connect with one another with just a simple touch.”

“You want to give everyone unlimited bombs?” Link asked.

“Of course not, but think about it. Though they remained dormant for thousands of years, the towers were able to retrieve data of how Hyrule is now within seconds of activation, down to individual trees and buildings. There must be some shared energy source they’re all accessing…” Zelda took a deep breath. “Purah, we know we needed blue flame from the ancient furnace in order to get your Guidance stone working. How it managed to remain lit over the years was always a mystery… that we simply chalked it up to the spiritual nature of the Sheikah and their devotion to the Goddess, much like how the Divine Beasts worked. But what if the answer’s more simple than that? What if the furnace is more of an access point — an open channel to this entire system? We can work on tapping into it from right here!”

Purah was scribbling feverishly in her notepad. “Instead of spiritual… access point…”

“It could still be both,” Link said.

Zelda turned to him, grabbing his hand and squeezing it excitedly. “Link, doesn’t the Sheikah Slate have this lab as a travel gate? That means it’s already connected to the network, somehow.” She gasped. “Wait! What if we were able to input the runes from the those shrines you unlocked onto Purah’s Slate? Or the maps from the towers?”

Purah squealed and clapped her hands. “Oh! I’ve MISSED this. Someone with their head on straight! Yes! We must investigate this. Gimme all those runes!”

He reminded them that the key to activating the towers and shrines had been on the Great Plateau. With Gatepost Town long destroyed, there was no feasible way to get up to the ancient seat of Hyrule short of riding upon a Rito’s back, or… Zelda held out both Slates to him.

“Use the travel ability to bring Purah’s Slate to the Great Plateau tower, upgrade it, and return right
away.” She hesitated, aware of how demanding she sounded. “Please.”

He accepted. “For you, Princess.”

Zelda’s smile was the last thing he saw before his vision dissolved into particles of energy. Purah’s cry just barely made it through the distortion. “And not for me ?!”

The Sheikah Slate’s teleportation function was very convenient, but not comfortable. Link staggered slightly after his body was reassembled at the top of Great Plateau tower. He much preferred riding Chase or walking on his own. Unlike the rainy hills of Necluda, Central Hyrule was dry, airy and clear at midday. The pedestal in the centre was smooth and sun-warmed when Link touched it. Purah’s Slate fitted into the awaiting slot with a satisfying click, and he backed away as the grooves lit up and spun around.

**Distilling local information… Regional map extracted.**

A drop of pure information trickled down the lit stalactite hanging from the ceiling. Purah’s Slate beeped triumphantly as he collected it from the pedestal.

But before he went, Link walked to the edge of the tower. With the added height of the Plateau itself, he could see practically all of the kingdom. Even bird calls in the distance seemed muted, the lonely whistle of wind quite faint. Hyrule Field looked like a soft blanket of green with rumpled hills and fuzzy lint trees, rivers and roads embroidered along the edges. Link watched as the lakes glittered, minuscule dots of wild horses roaming through the uninterrupted wilderness. The castle was a quiet shadow in the back, no longer a threat.

One day, Zelda would see this spectacular view for herself. She was the reason it existed at all. Link captured it on Purah’s Slate. Then, he flicked the screen over to East Necluda and pressed the symbol for the Tech Lab.

It was enough success and discovery for one afternoon. They spent the rest of it sitting on the balcony in front of Purah’s bedroom, talking and having snacks. Zelda read the Director’s diary out loud, giggling through her shivers as the high elevation brought chills around the tower. When Link wrapped a blanket round Zelda’s shoulders, Purah scoffed.

“Oh, just take a young lady’s bedsheets right out of her humble abode without asking. That’s perfectly fine, obviously okay!” Purah grabbed a rice ball from the dish and took a big bite. “Say, Princess. Are you staying with him?”

“Yes, of course.”

Purah stopped chewing. Zelda and Link watched, nonplussed, as she shoved her food into a pocket and marched away into her bedroom. They could hear her shuffling papers and mumbling to herself through the open doorway. Finally, Purah picked up a worn book and opened a cabinet where she snatched up several things that Link recognised were elixir ingredients. She dusted off an old bottle and pointed its base at them. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

She trotted down the stair with her arms full. When she returned, there was a clear, pink liquid inside the bottle. Purah handed it to Zelda, who was confused. “What’s this?”

“Contraceptive elixir.”

Zelda turned hotfeather red. “But w—”

“Oh, so you plan on making an heir to the throne immediately?”
“N-no.”

“Then take it.”

They took it.

In the days that followed, Zelda made herself at home in Hateno Village. She and Purah immediately began new ambitions to produce more modern Slates and connect them to the Sheikah towers’ vast range of information. Zelda soon got herself into the villagers’ good graces. It wasn’t difficult. She was eager for social interaction and had a natural inquisitiveness that endeared her to the locals who, though few were willing to admit it, were not above enjoying such rapt attention.

She greeted the two housewives who hovered by the general store every morning on her way to the tech lab without fail. Her affinity with the Sheikah scientists had first roused immediate suspicions, but even they couldn’t resist her friendly demeanour. Once their attitudes shifted, Zelda even began to stop and chat with them, earning the confidence of their gossip.

“It’s much better than skulking behind the vegetable stand,” she told Link. He learned, through her, that their names were Amira and Nikka, and that they thought he needed to wash his clothes more often. Zelda handed him a bar of soap before taking a sprig of cool safflina from his stores, saying that Amira was finding the early summer heat simply insufferable.

She refused to let Tamana give away all her eggs for free, first arguing with her, then settling on a barter system. It turned out that swift carrots and fortified pumpkins were something of an exclusive item this far east. Zelda was pleased to find a use for her remaining stock from Kakariko Village, and Link liked having fried eggs for breakfast.

She surprised everyone by spending an entire day with Sayge in his dye shop. People stopped by to peer in at them, both amused and bemused at the deep, genuine interest Zelda held for this niche tradition.

“I understand how it’s possible to change something to another colour,” she said, checking her notes. “But what do you use for stripping the dye away? There must be a very powerful reagent in the formula to completely remove it in so little time, but how are you able to preserve the original colours without damaging the fabric?”

The children of Hateno Village grew extremely fond of Zelda. She was one of the few adults who took their questions seriously, and the only one who always spared the time to respond to them. It didn’t matter what subject; she seemed to have the answer to everything.

“Zelda, why don’t those stones fall down?”

“Whoever stacked them understood mass and balance. They were able to centre the stones upon each other in a way that the friction of materials and force of gravity keep them in place.”

“Zelda, what’s that? Whatcha gonna do with it?”

“This is an octo balloon. I’m going to use it to test the durability of my prototype Slate. We’ll see which functions still operate in thinner atmospheres by trying to record temperature, pressure, and connectivity.”

“Zelda, why does Koyin keep a pile of poo from her cows piled up in the pasture? It’s poo!”

“Manure is rich in nutrients that are beneficial for healthy crops. Farmers will usually till it into their soil during the fallow season before planting. It’s also good for helping soil retain moisture.”
Down at the general store, Link overheard Medda complaining that he had caught his daughter with her trousers down in the garden patch with the nerve to insist that she was actually helping him.

The children followed her around the village, and she taught them all she knew. While fixing their toys, Zelda gave vivid description of old Hyrule like the hanging houses of Rito Village, rivers of lava in Goron City, the glittering waterfalls of Zora’s Domain, and the colourful, bustling market in Gerudo Town. She shared stories of ancient heroes and princesses who lived in the sky, travelled through time, and fought against a dying twilight.

She preferred not to comment on the princess waiting in the castle and her sleeping hero.

Link was happy to see Hateno embrace Zelda so wholeheartedly. But Purah was right — he could be plenty selfish. The best times were the ones where he had her to himself. She was too busy with her projects to travel too far, so he kept near the village. They collected truffles in the forests and hiked around the hills. Link even managed to convince her to leave the research behind for three glorious days, and they went down to the beach, making it past Deepback Bay to the hidden pool at Mapla Point. He was relieved to see that the talus he’d destroyed the week before had not returned. Come to think of it, there hadn’t been a blood moon in three and a half months.

Zelda splashed around in the shallows, picking up bits of shell and coral to examine while he collected crabs from low tide. They had roasted seafood for dinner with fresh palm fruit for dessert. The fire burned low as he pointed at Eventide Island in the distance and talked about the trials he went through there. The stars watched them sleep upon the sand.

Sometimes, they didn’t have to go anywhere special. They simply wrapped themselves around each other and stayed that way for hours. Link loved learning how to kiss her, discovering the shape of her everything, soft and smooth and sweet as the berries she had a severe weakness for.

And at night… he liked nights, too.

Zelda certainly seemed very happy. She still wasn’t over her interrupted sleep cycle, taking frequent naps throughout the day near him. He became accustomed to waking up alone in the mornings, knowing that all he needed to do was to walk downstairs to find her reading a book, or go outside and see her puttering round the little garden she had started. Since she was up at the lab so often, it only made sense that Link took charge of household chores. He discovered that he didn’t mind. The rhythmic routine of cleaning and tidying up felt satisfying. Zelda claimed it was from his time as a soldier.

“I very much like your house,” she told him one afternoon. They were curled up in the roots of the great tree on the island in Lake Sumac. Deer hidden in the trees across the water darted away into the forest when he made eye contact.

“It’s your house, too.”

“The sign says ‘Link’s House’.”

“Then we’ll change it.”

Bolson was very glad to make the renovation, even offering a discount down to 50 rupees. He chatted with Zelda while Karson grunted with every swing of his hammer to secure the new sign in its place. “How do you like the house, my dear?”

“Oh, it’s lovely! Thank you very much for helping Link.”
“And the bed?” Bolson grinned like a bokoblin and leaned his elbow on the fence. “Is it a comfortable bed?”

Zelda blinked, slightly confused. “Er, yes.”

“No lumps in the mattress?”

“No.”

“When it breaks, do let me know,” he chirped, ignoring Link’s death glares. “I’ll get you two a bigger one.”

The bed was already the right size, Link thought. He liked the way she snuggled up to him even on the warmest of summer nights. Ever exhausted, Zelda would fall asleep first, so Link could watch the gentle rise and fall of her chest for a while before he drifted off as well.

One night, he woke with a sudden start. The moonlight coming through the window created slanted slats across the blanket that rippled when he moved his legs. Link stretched and turned his head to look at Zelda.

She was sitting up, squeezed against the corner as if to make herself as small as possible. Her eyes were wide and unblinking as they zeroed in on something far away in the distance. She had wrapped her arms round knees drawn to her chest, the fingers on one hand kneading the back of the other. Link could hear her quick, shallow breathing, each one sharp and small in the dead silence of night.

She blinked, then looked down and finally noticed him staring. Without a word, Zelda slid back down under the covers, burrowing closer to him until her head rested under his chin.

“What’s wrong?” he murmured into her hair, fingers tracing her back so his arm could wrap around her waist.

“Nothing.” She pressed her face into his chest, and he could hear her struggle to measure her breathing.

“Remembering,” she whispered.

“Tell me.”

Zelda told him.

The legend was that she held the Calamity back in Hyrule Castle while Link slumbered in secret. That was true… to a certain extent. She had gone alone, picking a path up the slope past the wreckage, devastation, and death. Ganon’s exultations reverberated in the air around her, hot and heavy with malice. At the top, Zelda summoned the inner light of the Goddess. She was not scared. She knew that she would prevail.

But Hyrule’s ancient adversary had powers of its own. It could not be allowed to stay in this realm. Zelda pushed it back into the Sanctum and transformed the room into a prison, one that could not be contained in this realm, but a singular plane of nothingness that existed outside of time and space. The Calamity had already begun to infect Hyrule, but Zelda dragged it out through sheer force of will, ensuring that true devastation would not come to her kingdom. She was forced to seal herself in with it, binding the Calamity to her being to prevent Ganon from unleashing its full strength.
Hylia’s power and presence protected her from pain or corruption; it kept her sane and whole. But it would be hard to forget 100 years of staring into the twisted, mutilated face of evil that had been an unending source of misery and hate spanning hundreds of thousands of years for Hyrule.

“Do you see it every night?” he asked.

“Not… always. Not every night,” she said.

“But enough times that you’d prefer to sleep during the day.”

She did not respond. Link interpreted it as an admission.

“Wait.” This explanation didn’t make sense to him. “But you said you were watching over me.”

Zelda’s green eyes looked glassy under the shadows.

She had spent decades doing nothing else but concentrating on keeping the Calamity constrained, with only Hylia’s light and Ganon’s rage to accompany her. Zelda dared not reach out to her people for fear of the Calamity taking advantage of a weakness, but after a hundred years, she had been pushed to the limit. The Calamity was always fighting back, loosing strains of malice whenever it could through the cracks. Zelda would feel her grip slipping with each blood moon.

But when Link had stumbled out of the Shrine of Resurrection, it was like her senses had awakened, too. Zelda had cried at the sudden vision of Hyrule so healthy and whole after all this time, while the Calamity thrashed wildly in her grasp. Link was her connection back to the physical realm. Images and scenes were few and far between, but Zelda was with him in every single emotional experience: confusion, curiosity, sadness, anger — so much anger mixed into that sadness — amusement, satisfaction, longing. Determination, plagued with doubt. Loneliness.

Every time a blight was defeated at the hands of her hero, the Calamity stormed and seethed in their hidden realm, threatening to smash through the barrier and finish what it had started. But holding Ganon was nothing compared to knowing the exact moment Link had finally decided to come for her.

“I guess you did really mean it when you said I was your Link.”

He was rewarded with a small exhalation that could be something like a breathless, quiet laugh. Link leaned his cheek against her head.

He treasured what he’d learned on his adventures. There was a certain delight in discovery, even excitement in exploring the far corners of the continent. Link had liked blending into the scenery, coming so close with the different animals who wandered and roamed through the wilds that he could count their fur or feathers. Sometimes the solitude was nice, and he recognised how lucky he was to witness things that no other traveller ever could.

But too long alone, and he couldn’t be sure if he himself was even all there. It was surreal to suddenly realise that he was surrounded by stretches of grass or snow or sand like an endless sea, with not another person to call out to for Goddess knew how far. And Link would stand there, stock-still like a stone sinking into the earth, feeling his senses and mind go numb without a memory of who he was to give him reason to continue. Or, sometimes more like a feral creature feeding upon its instincts, giving into a primal urge to keep moving no matter what — run across that plain, climb that mountain, jump across the chasm, never stop or else his existence would cease.

The spell was only broken when someone suddenly appeared ahead on the road with a lantern or a
donkey or simply a wave hello. The wash of relief that followed would be overwhelming, that reassurance that he truly was real.

It was all over now, but knowing that he had never really been abandoned was precious comfort.

“Everyone always talked about you,” he said to her. “Usually to tell me to get a move on, but it was always what I needed to hear. It was saying that there was someone waiting for me, someone who knew me… and wanted to see me again. It became a reason to go back.”

Her fingers curled tighter around his arms. “Sometimes,” she said, “there would be these sudden sparks of something pure… like joy. And you showed me what made you so happy. Leaping off the Great Plateau, or seeing dragons at midnight, even the time you found your horse… in those moments, it was almost like everything was peaceful for me, too.”

He wrapped both arms around her this time, pulling her up until her face was level with his, and they kissed. Link took his time, breathing in her sweet scent and stroking her cheek with his thumb. He made a wordless promise of trust and truthfulness.

Suddenly, Zelda pulled away and giggled.

"Do you remember..." A rather undignified snort came out her nose. "That one time in Skull Lake, when you were climbing up one of the eyes and it started to rain? You clung to that rock for five hours!"

He groaned. "It always rains in Akkala."

"I was so impressed, but you looked like a lizard with your arms and legs splayed out like that."

“It hurt.” Link released her and rolled over on his back. “I could barely move the next day, my muscles…”

Zelda laughed again, then raised herself on one elbow. The moonlight caught in her hair lit her from behind so she really did look like a Goddess, but one who was smiling and beside him in his bed.

He said it without thinking. “I love you, Zelda.”

Her eyes widened, then scrunched up again as her smile grew, and she leaned over to deliver one last kiss, brief but gentle and full of meaning. She let out a sigh as she snuggled up to him again, intertwining her fingers with his. “I love you, Link.”

They lay waiting together, quiet and contemplative and fully awake, until the sun rose from the horizon and set the skies to rose and gold.

Chapter End Notes

1. This fic is not above poop jokes. A warning for everyone.
2. I’m just such a sucker for cute romantic getaways, because now they’re actually able to have them.
3. How to depict Link and Zelda’s time during the 100 years was something I really had to sit back and ruminate upon. Making them suffer for their sacrifices even after they win did not appeal to me because that’s just not the feel of the game or this fic at
all, but having zero consequences is too simple and does not do the characters/story justice.

I do believe that Zelda returns more or less unscathed because her power will always trump Ganon’s, but she can still be shaken and stressed out thinking back on it. It doesn’t have much bearing on her everyday life, but dark things still lurk on at night. Link is a very resilient person by nature and has been basically raised to endure a lot of things, but all those missing memories would have been very frustrating and even debilitating at times.

I know this is a subject that pretty much all the post-game stories address and examine. But I’m fairly confident that mine may be the only one where Link considers huddling together whispering about the things that haunt them as an appropriate time to make a really bad pun. (I haven’t read enough to check, though.)
November and I have been having a very lively round of fisticuffs. Meaning, it took one swing and I went down like a sack of big hearty radishes. Then it continued whaling on me which is very Not Fair, and I’ve only just begun to recuperate from it. Regretful warning that this is how updates are kind of going to go until I guess the end of this year. End of fall term be like that, most times.

BUT I finally got this chapter out! Please accept (because holy heck, look at the word count) and, I hope, enjoy.

As of 21/11/2018: FYI, I made a couple of changes since I first posted this yesterday. Addressed some things I forgot to do as well as expanded the Hateno meeting scene. Thanks for bearing with!

“What do you plan to do with the new Slates?” Link asked Zelda.

They had just finished their evening meal. The delicious smell of seafood fried rice lingered in the air, so enticing to Zelda despite the fact that she had just stuffed herself silly. Link looked at her from across the table with lantern light dusting his hair. He gnawed on an after-dinner apple, waiting for her answer.

“Well…” Zelda played with a wayward grain of rice on her plate with a spoon. “The primary function of the Sheikah Slate is to store and provide information through the compendium, camera, and user’s log. I believe it would be best used if available in multiple places around Hyrule, access granted to those in positions of leadership so they may better help their people and stay abreast of current events.”

“Would you let them use the travel gates?”

“Of course.”

“Is that safe?”

“Why not?” Zelda leaned her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands while Link began to clear it away. “You’ve described them to me, and they sound trustworthy. We must maintain solidarity with all races of Hyrule, connect them to each other again. With the Calamity finally overcome, it is imperative that we reach out and extend alliances with deliberation and confi…” She stopped when he turned around to look at her. “What?”

“You still consider yourself Hyrule’s princess.”

Zelda blinked. “No, I don’t.”

“You’re making all these sweeping statements about solidarity and alliances. That’s princess talk.”
She didn’t know why, but her insides squirmed as if his statement was something shocking and
distasteful, not a simple observation. “I-it was my identity for a significant time. Some habits are
difficult to break.”

Link said nothing as he carried the dishes to a basin. He returned to the table and sat down. “Do
you want to rule?”

Zelda was silent for a moment. There were restless crickets chirping in the grass outside, and a
sleepy wind tickled the leaves on the trees. Link’s hand found hers, and his thumb traced circles in
her palm reassuringly.

“I don’t want to rule,” she said.

“Okay,” he said, and that seemed to be the end of the discussion.

Zelda never looked back. She loved her new life in all its simplicity. She was sheltered in a warm
and cosy home. The people were kind and generous. There was always something new to learn,
whether it was something unique to this post-Calamity world or simply a task she had never had
the chance to try before.

“I don’t think this is your thing,” Link said after an ill-fated attempt at recreating the delicious
fruitcake from the castle cookbook. “Stick to technology.”

Zelda frowned at the slimy black mess left in the cooking pot. “But it’s nothing more than basic
chemistry: combining materials through the process of heat to create a new result. Shouldn’t it be
simpler than this?”

“That kind of thinking is why you’re good at elixirs…” Link picked out a few wildberries that had
fallen out of the pot. Their skins had blackened and split open, but a sweet, ripe smell still wafted
out of the glistening insides. He tossed them to her. “And terrible at cooking.”

Zelda rolled her eyes and popped a berry into her mouth. Link smiled and leaned in to kiss her. He
had gotten so much better at it since the first time in Kakariko Village. She wouldn’t tell him that
— at heart, Link was a true romantic and probably thought he had completely swept her off her
feet. Which was true, Zelda wouldn’t have changed anything in the slightest. But it had been, quite
literally, their first kiss.

He gave her free rein of the village, knowing that no harm could come to her in the shops and
farms, but always accompanied her whenever she needed to stray from the borders. It was an oddly
familiar feeling that made Zelda’s heart swell, remembering a time long ago when it had been just
the two of them wandering the forests and fields together. Except this time, Link walked beside her
instead of behind, and would reach for her hand often and without warning. She liked it.

They still spoke of travel, but nothing came of their conversations, at least for now. There was
enough to do right where they were. Zelda and Purah spent all season hard at work developing the
Slates. Though there were still errors and glitches to work through, they were almost finished with
a second prototype. It was for this reason that Link finally consented to take her up a Sheikah
tower, which involved far more physical exertion than she had expected. Still, it was undoubtedly
worth it when she inched up the final rungs of the ladder and dragged herself over the edge at the
top. The world was so much quieter from this high above. She could see their house, the Tech Lab,
and the Necluda Sea glittering silver behind it. Link pointed out the Dueling Peaks Stable, Fort
Hateno, and the peak of Death Mountain brimming with magma. Zelda marvelled at how far she could see the roads winding through the fields and mountains, the same roads that guided travellers bearing news from the rest of Hyrule to their village.

With no blood moons to speak of, monsters were staying dead. Koyin was immensely pleased after Link slew the bokoblins that lurked along Hateno Beach for a final time. Zelda wasn’t sure what they would do with all this milk. Treasure hunters venturing into Hyrule Field reported back that though the old pastures were still being patrolled by Guardians, they no longer posed a threat to passers-by. Pools of malice were shrinking by the day, leaving behind barren patches of earth safe to walk upon. And of that old shadow, Hyrule Castle… it was empty, people whispered on the roads and inside stables.

Zelda was on her way to the lab one crisp morning when she heard calls coming from behind her. She turned around to smile and wave at the village children running up the path.

“Zelda! Zelda!…”

Their feet pounded against the decking of the bridge, an irregular scatter of feet against wood.

“Princess… Zelda!”

Her raised hand froze, her heart hammering against her ribcage. They caught up to her between the windmills with tooth-missing grins and wind-tousled hair. They continued chanting as they skipped around her, looking immensely pleased with themselves and her stunned face.

“Prin-cess-Zel-da, Prin-cess-Zel—”

“Why are you calling me that?” Zelda asked. The children stopped and crowded around close.

“Karin!”

“Karin, show her.”

A curly-headed girl walked forward with a book clutched to her chest. It fell open easily at a well-worn page boasting colourful illustration. Everyone leaned in to look.

“She looks just like you,” Karin said, staring up at Zelda with wide, dark eyes.

The picture depicted a dark castle on a hill. A rider garbed in blue with a sword in his fist rode up the snaking path, where a figure with flowing yellow hair raised her hand towards a serpentine demon that snarled at the symbol held against it. The back of Zelda’s hand itched at the sight of the Triforce.

“My,” she said. “That certainly is uncanny.”

“Are you?” A little boy blinked at her through square spectacles. “Are you a princess?”

“Well… let’s see. How can you tell if somebody is a princess?”

“She wears a crown!”

“And a dress.”
“Princesses are very serious and strict, all the time.”

Zelda laughed. “Do any of those things apply to me?”

“No!”

“Sometimes you wear a dress… but so does my mama.”

Zelda shrugged. “So, based on this evidence, am I the princess?”

Nebb, the eldest of the children, shook his head. “Guess not!”

Zelda hiked up the hill in such haste that she was completely winded by the time she made it into the lab. She leaned against the closed doors and gasped like a beached porgy, the gulps of air feeling hard and bumpy as they travelled down her windpipe. That was a close call. It weighed on her conscience to be teaching faulty logic to impressionable young minds, but it was better than having her old title screamed from one end of the village to the other for the world to hear.

Even with this prevented, Zelda began to notice a shift around her. Hateno Village had recently been inundated with visitors. At first, she had chalked this up to safer roads bringing out the adventurers in people, but then began to notice their reactions to her. People would grab each other as she walked by, stopping to stare and whisper to each other. Some didn’t bother staying long, hurrying away in excitement almost as soon as they arrived, throwing furtive glances over their shoulders. Their actions made Zelda feel slightly uncomfortable, but they weren’t stepping over any boundaries.

At least, that’s what she thought until another afternoon. Zelda was tending to her garden. She had planted a few traditional flowerbeds and though she hadn’t intended it, two Silent Princesses had appeared in the earth to her endless pleasure. There was also an area dedicated to herbs and vegetables, more for Link’s benefit. Along that train of thought, she had decided to try cultivating mushrooms in the shady spot behind the house. As a result, Zelda was out of sight and elbow-deep in compost when her ears caught a nasal voice that cut through the birdsong like an arrow in the wind.

“I heard this town was holding a juicy little secret. The legendary princess and her hero… that’s you, isn’t it?”

“We’ve met before, Traysi.”

Zelda could picture Link standing at their end of the bridge, staring down this intruder with his arms folded.

“Oh, have we? Well, I AM an award-winning investigative journalist, you know! In that case, you must know how important this scoop is gonna be. Could it really be that this farming town at the edge of the world is where the lost princess ended up? Amazing! Woulda fooled me!” Somebody clapped their hands. “So, can I talk to her?”

“There’s no princess here.”

“Aw, come on. Just lemme have a look-see. What about that sign? Zelda’s not a common name round these parts.”
“Please leave.”

“Hey!” Traysi’s voice rose indignantly. “There’s no need to get uppity with me, mister. After all the danger I went through to get here? I’m not giving up! Truth is, you can’t hide anything from Traysi!”

Zelda pushed herself back up on her heels as she listened to the sound of angry footfalls on the bridge fading away. After a minute, Link poked his head around the corner of the house to check on her. Their eyes met, but there was nothing to say. Link never brought it up again. But he did ask her to cover her head the next time she was due at the lab and ended up walking her there, shooting surly glares at anyone who dared glance over at them.

Eventually, the hubbub died down. The influx of visitors returned to a slow trickle of the usual merchants and their mules. Nobody else appeared on their doorstep, and Zelda could walk through the village without hassle once more. Her neighbours seemed to miss the extra economy at first, then they too resumed their routines. Only Link remained wary. Since Traysi’s trespass, everything put him on edge. Zelda almost wished, as much as she loved him, that he would leave her alone for a few hours.

Hylians everywhere were taking advantage of Calamity Ganon’s defeat. Though most traces of old towns and settlements had long faded into the green grasses, it was finally safe to return to the seats of their ancestors and remake was ruined. The fields had lain fallow and wild for over a century, more than ready to be tilled and tamed again. Those who had spent most their lives wandering the roads were eager to build homes they could truly call their own without fear of danger and destruction.

Still, most of them couldn’t build these homes themselves. It was an enormous undertaking to rebuild from the ground up. And as the luminary, president, architect, and design lead of the best construction company this side of Necluda, Bolson was making sure that his name would be well-repeated for the next few weeks in Hyrule Field.

“Tarrey Town was a good practice run,” he said, stroking his beardless chin. “Not much room for expansion, though. We must seize opportunity in all its sparkling and seductive ways! In accordance to official policy, we can’t have you on permanently. But with all those folks demanding new homes… an extra pair of hands would be very welcome. What do you say, stud?”

Zelda and Link had been resting underneath the old tree by the house, she with a book and he dozing with his head in her lap. At least, she had believed he had been asleep. Upon the first noise of Bolson’s boots upon the bridge, Link sat up straight, muscles tense and ready for action.

“No thanks,” he said.

He leaned back against the tree, his eyes fixed upon the dancing leaves in the branches. Zelda took in a deep breath. “It’s wonderful that people are resettling the area,” she said to Bolson, who had flopped down beside her.

“Mm-hmm. This country’s positively bursting with go-getters ready for their just rewards.” Bolson leaned his chin into his hand and studied them both. “After all, most of them have never had a place of their own… well, life is full of hardship and toil. An inspiring story, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Zelda said as Link folded his arms.
Later that night, she cornered him while he was putting away clothes. Zelda hopped on top of the other trunk and stared at him. Link glanced over, arched his eyebrows, then returned his attention back to folding shirts.

“Why did you turn Bolson down?” Zelda asked.

“I don’t feel like it.”

“You know Hyrule Field better than anybody else. They couldn’t have built Tarrey Town without you. It makes sense that they would enlist your help.”

“My name doesn’t end in ‘son’.” Link shut the lid, then leaned against it. “And I can’t leave you alone.”

“I’ll be fine by myself!”

The laughter died upon his face once he saw hers. “I mean—”

“I know,” she said before jumping down and stalking up the staircase.

It was late when the lanterns went out that night. No moon or stars shone down through the window for the inky clouds that covered them, so Zelda could barely make out Link’s shadow coming up the stairs. He walked past the shelves and the desk, but instead of joining her from where she sat wrapped up on the bed, Link sat down upon the floor. He peered up at her, only the top half of his face visible.

She felt his gaze burning through the blankets and sat up. “What are you doing?”

“You’re angry with me.”

The air felt even stiller within the quiet house. Zelda set down the Sheikah Slate. Three bright blue eyes glowed in the darkness: one teared and unblinking, two watching her intently from just beyond the edge of the mattress.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, Zelda.”

When she didn’t answer, he pressed on. “But something will happen. It has to happen. Those two weeks when nobody would leave us alone were a nightmare. There were a lot more people wandering around and trying to get in. I didn’t tell you because—”

“Because you don’t trust me?”

“Because you’re so busy.” Link drew his knees up and rested his elbows on them, hunching his shoulders. Now his entire face was in shadow. “You’re fixing the kingdom, I protect you.”

“That’s a very outdated concept. I’m surprised at you.”

“Well, excuse me, Princess.”

Zelda grimaced at the honorific. “The Calamity is gone. Its hold over Hyrule has been broken completely. Those Hylians were merely curious after decades of rumour, and even the most
dedicated will turn to other pursuits, eventually. And anyway, you agreed with me that their trials have only united them to become helpful, and kind…”

Link sighed. “Some… Hylians may not be so kind.”

“What do you mean?”

For a moment, Link looked uncomfortable. His eyes darted away, settling only for seconds on the bedpost, window, the rafters in the roof. He pressed his lips together into a hard line. Zelda felt like throwing the pillow at him.

Then, Link sat up. “Would you come with us?”

“I can’t. If we want to give each nation a Slate, they must be suited to their regions. I recall that there had always been problems getting it to work properly in Gerudo, and Purah believes that the Zora would require a device that can withstand long-term submerging. That will take a while.”

Link shrugged, his brows furrowing obstinately. “Then I’m staying here, too.”

She reached down and squeezed her fingers into the soft stuffing. “Purah’s watched over this village for a hundred years. She won’t let anything happen to it.”

“Purah hasn’t set foot outside her lab since the anti-aging rune experiment, so a fat lot she could do.”

“I stared into the face of hatred for a century. I think I can handle whatever comes my way.”

“Sealed any demons, lately?” he asked. “There’s one by the pond if you need to practice.”

She let the pillow fly. Link only flinched slightly as three pounds of duck feathers hit him in the face.

“Alright,” he muttered, putting it aside. “That was out of line.”

It still wasn’t an apology, so Zelda simply turned her back on him, pressing her forehead against the cold, hard plaster walls.

“You really want to get rid of me, huh.”

His words plunged deep into her heart. Zelda peeked around in time to see Link turn his head. The Sheikah Slate barely lit his face. The faint light disappeared when they hit his scars, barriers of knitted flesh across his skin. Zelda ached at the sight.

It was slowly coming up to five months since she had opened her eyes in Hyrule Field. Five months since they had defeated the Calamity. But before that had been three years for Link, gruelling years of preparation and training and patience for a single day to seal the fate of the kingdom. What would one do once that was achieved? None of the stories Zelda remembered spoke of what came of the heroes after he saved Hyrule, short of walking directly into myth and obscurity. That wasn’t the case this time. He sat not three feet away from her, jabbing his fingers into the down very unhappily.

Link froze and looked up when she wriggled out of the blankets and slid over the side of the bed.
He didn’t smile, or even move as she fumbled over his knees and scooted in closer to him.

“I don’t want to rule. I want to make that clear. But I still want what’s best for Hyrule — everyone in it. That’s why I’m working on the Slates. That’s what I can do. I’m not good at much else, you know that.” She held up a finger before he could protest. “Let me finish, please.”

She reached up and retrieved the Sheikah Slate. Link blinked against its bright glow while she retrieved the log of requests. “My plans benefit the leaders of the land, and I can only hope they will share their blessings with their people. But you’ve always been able to directly change the lives of anyone you’ve met. Perhaps you didn’t think much of it when you sold this man a horse, or slayed a monster for this village… but that truly affects them. I can’t do that. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Link said.

“So…” Zelda took a deep breath. “I would like to ask you to go to Hyrule Field in my place. I want to make sure that even without me, they’re receiving enough help to settle into new lives and make something for themselves. And I promise to be watchful and wait for you right here.”

She peeked up at his face. Link’s expression had softened. He ran his hand through his hair, fingers stopping at the back of his neck and rubbing it. “Haven’t you waited for me long enough?”

A small, sad smile showed that he finally relented. Zelda leaned in and kissed it softly, relaying apologies and forgiveness all at once.

“I don’t mind,” she said. “I’ve become quite good at it.” She took his hand and pulled him back up onto the bed with her.

Two days later, they woke early. Little was said during breakfast. Zelda drank her tea quietly and watched Link select his armour and weapons. The Master Sword was the last thing he equipped. The gold details of the purple scabbard glimmered faintly even under the cloudy morning skies.

She followed him outside to await Bolson and Karson’s arrival, and they went over what they agreed upon for the next few days.

“I think you should stay with Purah,” Link said for the umpteenth time. “She’s got a reputation, even if they haven’t seen her in months.”

“I will be fine.” Zelda patted the damp wooden sign standing in the grass. “This is my house.”

“It’s so separate from the rest of the village. If you need help, you’ll have to cross the bridge and run down the path before you get to Pruce’s store. That’s just too far.”

Zelda stepped up and put her hands on his cheeks, her fingertips brushing the tough scar tissue running down his jaw as she pressed her lips against his. Link melted into her touch, wrapping his arms around her waist so she was flush against him.

“Stop worrying,” she said. “Nothing will happen to me.”

He kept her close, but reached down and took the Sheikah Slate from her belt. Despite his constant use of it while on his travels, Link had always refused to take it back, saying it was hers. Zelda felt otherwise as he tapped and swiped around the screen with great familiarity and confidence.
“That’s where we’re going,” he said, showing her a small star in the middle of the map. “Just so you know. If anything happens, promise me you’ll use the Slate and go to Purah?”

“I promise.”

Link smiled, relieved, and pulled her in again. She hugged his shoulders tightly with her nose buried into the crook of his neck as he pressed his mouth to her ear. The way his chest deflated from a sigh made her very reluctant to let him go, despite her desire to prove herself.

“Helloooooooo!”

They broke apart. Bolson waved from across the bridge. “Hyrule Field is a complete day’s ride, and we aren’t even riding. We promise to return him safe and sound, so please, let’s get going.”

Zelda and Link looked at each other. He frowned and squeezed her hand nervously. It was his last chance to change his mind. But instead, he had a final request.

“Please don’t try to cook while I’m gone. Other people can feed you.”

“Of that, I will make no promises.” She poked his stomach when he groaned. “How am I supposed to get any better if I don’t practise?”

Link pointed. “Pot, tree. Tree, branch. Branch, roof. A perfect path for fire to spread. I would like an intact house when I return. Good rupees paid for it.”

He smothered her giggles with one last kiss. Zelda couldn’t make out whatever Bolson yelled out, but she forced herself to pull back and look Link in the eye.

“I will miss you.”

“Oh, good,” he said.

He dodged her playful shove and walked across the bridge, laughing. Zelda laced her fingers together behind her back to stop herself from grabbing his elbow. Once on the other side, Link looked back at her. He seemed to hesitate, but Bolson clapped a hand on his shoulder and began steering him down the path. Karson blithely waved goodbye to Zelda before following them.

Zelda watched until all three of them were gone, then let out a long breath.

She was finally alone.

It surprised her how calm she felt about it. To be fair, being separated from Link for all of five minutes was hardly enough time to warrant pining. Zelda decided not to waste any time and get on with the day. With Link gone, Purah would certainly keep her longer at the lab.

She had just reached the main street of the village when she heard someone calling out her name. Young Nebb came sprinting out from between his father’s crops, the shell pendant of his necklace bouncing along his clavicle.

“Is it true?” he asked breathlessly when he caught up to her. Scabbed knees peeked out from beneath the hem of his shorts. “Did Link leave the village?”
“Yes.”

He looked at her with concern, then solemnly patted her arm. Zelda hid her laughter when Nebb declared, “Then I’ll protect you from now on.”

“That’s very kind of you, but our village is very safe.”

“Oh no,” he clarified, picking a broken tree branch off the ground. “Link told me to. He said that if he’s not here then I have to watch out for bad people and make sure they don’t follow you around, or anything.”

Zelda looked at the branch. It was green and splintered at one end from where it had snapped from the tree above. There was even a fat caterpillar wrapped around the tip, sure to consume the leaves still hanging on the twigs.

She consented to his escort. Nebb marched alongside her with the tree branch dangling from his back. The other children of the village spotted them and began to trail along curiously, giving her an entire entourage by the time they reached the windmills. Once they reached the top of the hill, most of the children had scattered to hide behind the stone lanterns, muttering to each other and shading their eyes against the sun to squint at the ramshackle tower. Even Nebb hesitated once he saw the fierce blue glow of the ancient furnace.

“Um,” he said. “This is okay?”

She smiled. “Yes, very. Thank you.”

He puffed up like a cucco and went to stand by an apple tree, hands planted on his hips as he surveyed Hateno Village below him. Zelda muffled her giggles when she recognised just who he was clearly imitating.

Purah was much less amused. “Send them away,” she hissed. “They’re SO distracting!”

“They’re not even ten feet from the building. You can’t even see them!”

“But I can feel their eyes.” Purah scowled as she snatched up a handful of ancient gears and showered them upon the table. “Honestly, Princess, if they’re going to be here all week, you might as well take your things home to work on until they lose interest. I don’t think I can stand this for even more than a day.”

It was late afternoon when Zelda finally emerged from the lab, her arms full of binders and books. Nebb jumped up from where he had been faithfully keeping his post amongst the tree roots. He shuffled to the side, trying to hide the pictures he had scratched out into the dirt when Zelda walked over to him.

“Thank you for waiting,” she said. “But you really don’t—”

“Link said!”

He walked with her to the main street before explaining that he was expected home for supper. Zelda bid him farewell and returned to her house across the bridge. It looked so dark and empty. Lighting the lanterns changed little, and she nibbled on the rice balls Purah had packed with her —
taking on the cooking pot would have to wait for another day — while staring at the star on the Sheikah Slate’s map. It was very bright against the sepia background.

Later that night, Zelda curled up alone in bed, hugging a pillow and listening to the lonely calls of owls outside.

Morning came too bright, too still, and too silent. Zelda didn’t move from beneath the blanket. She was used to squeezing up against the wall to make room for Link, who had a minor problem with sprawling limbs. It was, she noted, nice to have more space for herself. Well, she could enjoy it for at least four more days, which was far too long to be moping around and missing him every minute of every hour. She had to fill her time, do something productive.

Down at the vegetable stand, Amira and Nikki’s gossipy conversation petered to an astonished pause when they saw the towering pile of sheets and shirts moving towards them. Zelda shifted the laundry in her arms, pointedly ignoring the items that dangled over her elbow and along the ground.

“Good morning,” she said. “Could you show me how to wash these, please?”

Nebb, late but still loyal to his promises, soon found her putting her all into scrubbing sheets clean. This time, he had appropriated the community soup ladle as a weapon. His mother ordered him to put it back before helping all of them out. The fresh smell of laundry filled the air as they laid the wet cloths upon the grass and bushes nearby. Zelda was tickled with delight when she caught hightail lizards making tents out of table skirts.

That night, she was too tired for loneliness and fell asleep almost immediately.

On the third day, Zelda decided to take some time for herself. She spread her notes out along the length of the table and made neat piles of materials for her Slate on the chairs. Sunlight gave the weapons on the wall a friendly gleam as pigeons warbled their songs upon the roof. Once again, it was quite convenient to have all this space. She couldn’t blame Link for his tendency to leave things lying around on the floor anymore.

Being alone created such habits. She would need to be careful.

When she had had enough of being cooped up indoors, Zelda went into the garden. It was one of those intensely bright afternoons without a cloud in the sky. Though she enjoyed the way it brought butterflies wandering amongst her flowers, Zelda didn’t fancy sunburned cheeks. She put on a pointed straw hat, much like the ones farmers in the village wore. It provided ample shade while she watered radishes and picked some herbs.

The hat was so wide, and she was so immersed in her task, that the sudden voice completely spooked her. “Greetings, miss!”

Zelda dropped her spade as she shoved the brim of the hat back. Beyond the fence stood an unfamiliar man, right in the centre of the yard. Though his traveller’s clothes were appropriately faded in all the right places, they seemed ill-fitted for its wearer. Muscles bulged against the sleeves, betraying a vicious strength. But more menacingly, the stranger was staring down at her, unblinkingly, with a strained smile plastered upon his face.

Zelda reached for her belt, but she had left the Sheikah Slate inside the house. It was perched atop a pile of papers at the corner of the table.
“Looking to buy bananas? They’re imported all the way from Faron. Not an easy haul, I tell you.”

Zelda didn’t move. The man pulled down his pack and opened the top. “Just take a look at these fine bananas! Buy them up quick before you’ve missed your chance! It would be a mistake to pass on these amazing, wonderful, fantastic bananas!”

He grinned when she glared in response. “You seem troubled. Perhaps a glimpse of your future will ease your worries? What do you think? Shall I tell you your fortune?”

“Yes.” Zelda’s fingers trailed the soil until they wrapped themselves round the spade’s handle again. It was small and blunt, but would have to do for now. “It’s very far from here.”

The man chortled. “Oh, I’m so glad! I was sure you wouldn’t tell me... Princess Zelda.”

Zelda jumped to her feet and hurled a spadeful of dirt towards the man’s face, but he sprung back easily, even for a person of his bulk. Deep, spiteful laughter filled her ears as he transformed. Zelda’s heart dropped into her stomach at the sight of the bloody upside-down eye of the Yiga Clan printed upon the mask that covered his entire face. Instead of the lithe bodies and swinging sickles of a common footsoldier, this Yiga stood strong and sturdy like a stone pillar, a long curved sword in his hands. The wind whistled through holes in the blade, which glimmered shadow black and misty silver in the bright sunlight.

“You should have known what you were getting yourself into,” he sneered at her, “when you let him leave. Thank you, Princess, for making my job that much easier!”

All Zelda could do was gape with disbelief. Then, as if the situation could not get any more bizarre, the rest of Hateno’s children came streaming over the bridge, pelting stones, apples, and high-pitched abuse at this mysterious villain who dared unsettle the safety of their village.

“GO AWAY!”

“She’s OUR princess! Get yer own!”
The Blademaster stumbled back. Judging from the way he doubled over when another volley of ammunition peppered down on him, the dramatic red and black Yiga armour did not have very high defense. Zelda struggled to her feet just as a particularly hefty-looking rock came flying forth from the crowd. The Blademaster let out a yelp of pain as it collided with his shin, dropping the big windcleaver to clutch the injured leg.

Nebb darted forward and snatched it up. He swung the sword as hard as he could, sending out gusts of wind strong enough to bowl the Yiga Blademaster head over heels down the hilly slope. Nebb grinned as his friends shrieked with delight. “Nice, nice!”

Crack!

A bird’s egg had found its mark right upon the Blademaster’s forehead, splattering and soaking into the fabric of his mask. He clawed at the pieces of broken shell, smearing gooey yolk across the pupil of his Yiga eye.

“YEAH!” Teebo jumped up and down in glee, his spectacles bouncing off the end of his nose. “Got ‘im!”

Crack!

It was a sight that stopped her heart, and the Yiga Blademaster’s as well. Zelda heard him release a single gasp of fear before disappearing in a cloud of smoke and scarlet tags. Some of the children rushed forward and tried to catch them before they touched the ground. Others shouted with excitement as they picked up the scattered gemstones and leftover bananas.

Chase had reached them now, tossing her head proudly when she halted. Link swung down from her back, throwing the Master Sword aside. He ignored the squeals of mock disgust from the children as he grabbed Zelda and pulled her in for a desperate kiss. It was too fierce and frantic to be of any pleasure, but she shut her eyes tightly and did her best to reciprocate in a way that could assure him that she was alright. When he finally released her, she saw how wild his eyes were and knew that, regardless of Nebb and the others, he would have killed without hesitation.

“I’m fine,” she said. Still, her fingers grasped the sleeves of his tunic. Link cradled her close and brushed her hair back, peering into her eyes for any sign of distress. “We’re all fine.”

The children all agreed, a chorus of chirping voices echoing reassurance. Link glanced down at them, and while he nodded and praised the impeccable aim and innovative ammunition, Zelda saw how his eyes darted around with worry.

“Thanks for the help,” he said. “But go on home. Check to see if your families are okay, too.”

The children needed little prompting. They skipped across the bridge, waving goodbye and still crowing of their triumphs. Nebb was the last one to leave, saluting Link proudly before swaggering off with his new weapon in tow.
Once alone, Link wrapped his arms around her again, holding her close and tight. His arms were trembling. Zelda buried her face into his chest, feeling the rhythm of his heartbeat against her cheek.

“How did you know to come back?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Just woke up today and felt like everything was wrong.” He breathed a sigh into her hair. “I missed you like a hundred fires.”

“I thought about you every other moment,” she whispered back.

Now that the threat was gone and Link had returned, the enormity of the situation came crashing down upon her. Oh, Goddess… the Yiga Clan. They were still here and they had found her. They had waited until Link was gone before descending upon the village — the village! Hateno wasn’t safe anymore. Nowhere was safe. The children had thrown themselves into harm’s way for her sake. They were incredibly lucky to have escaped unscathed. It was her fault.

Link must have felt her thoughts, because he moved his hand to stroke her hair. Zelda closed her eyes and tried her best to measure her breathing.

They stood that way for a short while, clinging to one another and trying to get back to a place of normalcy, when there was the sudden sound of knuckles knocking against wood.

“Uh… hello.” A somewhat heavily built youth stood was standing next to the sign, his fist hovering awkwardly over it. He lowered his eyes in embarrassment at the sight of their embrace. “Er, hey. Reede called an emergency town meeting over at his place. I’m supposed to get everyone.”

“Okay,” Link said. Manny raised one shoulder in half-hearted acknowledgment and lumbered away.

The mayor’s residence was the largest in the village, perched on a ridge surrounded by a whitewashed wall. As they walked beneath the arch, Zelda glanced over at the Goddess Statue in her alcove. The stone figure was silent and serene, her hands clasped together in reverence.

The house was spacious, but still crowded when they entered. All the Hylians in Hateno Village had responded to the summons, milling around the room to greet one another and exchange news. Most hadn’t even changed out of their work clothes. The farmers were careful with their boots, remaining in the flagstone kitchen to avoid tracking mud on the varnished wood floors. Clavia weaved through the clumps of people, offering drinks of cider or steamed milk to her guests. Even the children were there, still glowing with exhilaration as they rushed around their parents’ long legs.

“Ah!” Reede hurried away from a conversation towards them. Hateno’s leader quickly slapped on a smile, but there were crow’s feet around his eyes and lines deep in his high forehead. “I’m very relieved to see you here, Zelda. I heard about… the incident. Are you sure you’re alright?”

She heard her voice sound far too cheerful in response. Reede nodded and requested to speak with Link alone. As the men moved away, Zelda slipped into a chair by the large dining table at the side of the hall. The only other person who had bothered sitting was Uma. The old woman only nodded and smiled instead of making conversation. Zelda was very grateful.

“Order, please!” Reede called from the hearth. Link stood just to the side, arms folded tightly and
an expression like stone. Nebb copied his stance, chin raised and the windcleaver scraping the floorboards behind him.

“So, ah. I’m sure you all…” Reede hesitated, stroking his beard. “Have a good guess as to why I’ve called this meeting tonight. Well, let’s lay the rumours to rest. The truth is: we had an attack on the village tonight.” He waved his hands to quell the new swell of conversation. “Though we’re not entirely sure who they are and why they chose to come here, I’m very relieved to say—”

“We know exactly who they are! It’s the Yiga Clan!”

All the heads turned in unison to see who had made this bold declaration. Zelda’s jaw dropped as she took in the newcomers: Purah and Symin, their robes a dazzling white and framed by the darkness of night through the doorway. Symin looked mortified and stared at the floor as his boss marched right into the house, her red eyes glowering at the confused and surprised faces all around her.

Despite herself, Zelda choked down a laugh when Purah finally reached the front of the crowd. Even Link seemed to relax slightly as she looked up at the mayor. “It’s the damn Yiga. They’re a splinter faction of the Sheikah Tribe, but the schism happened hundreds of years ago so don’t be blaming us for any of this! But I’m here to tell you exactly how they function and what will work against them. First of all, they’re…”

“Excuse me, but… do I know you?”

“Don’t you patronise me, Reede. I was there when you were born!”

His face morphed into one of pure amazement. “Granny Purah?” Reede whispered, aghast as his head turned from her to his young daughter. They were the exact same height.

Purah jabbed a warning finger into his face. “Don’t. Just. Don’t. We’re here for far more important business than your opinions on what I look like!” She dragged a chair over to the hearth and hopped on top of it to fix the villagers with a bold, bespectacled stare. “As I was saying, the Yiga have Sheikah background, so they depend mainly on their stealth, which translates as trickery for these pathetic whelps. They’ll transform their appearances to seem like your average Hylian traveller. So beware, they may try to take YOUR face! Luckily, they also seem to have the same amount of brains as your average mountain goat when it comes to actually acting like a Hylian, so that already gives every single person in this room an advantage. You too, Nack.”

Zelda could not take it any longer. She stood. “Excuse me. I… I have something to say.”

The room quieted when everyone turned to stare at her. Her vision blurred as she finally confessed. “I know why they came here. It’s because of me. I’m who they want. It’s… it’s quite complicated to explain, and I’m sure most of you won’t believe me. But I know for a fact that I’m the reason the village was attacked. I’m so sorry.” A sob escaped her throat, and warm tears began to roll down her cheeks. Zelda clasped her fingers together so she wouldn’t start rubbing the back of her hand. “You’ve all been so welcoming and kind to me that I cannot in good conscience keep endangering you with my presence. I promise to go first thing in the morning and leave you all in peace.”

She bent her head to avoid the stares and saw droplets splattering into the weathered grain of the table.

“Zelda,” Reede said kindly. “Please sit down. You mustn’t blame yourself for today’s events.”
“But I—”

“Princess,” Purah said bluntly. “If you think I’m letting you out of my sights now, you’re sorely mistaken. In fact, it’s embarrassing. You’re much too intelligent for this.”

Zelda stiffened at her words, but there was little reaction amongst the villagers. Some of them exchanged satisfied glances, but most seemed rather unperturbed. At least, the adults weren’t surprised.

“I knew it! I knew you were the princess!” Sefaro shouted before his parents hushed him sharply.

Zelda felt somebody put their arm around her. Uma rubbed her shoulder reassuringly. “You must understand, your highness,” she said, “that we’re not the type to turn out those who need help. Especially if it’s one of our own. Hateno is your home now, which means you’re part of our larger family.”

She gently seated Zelda back at the table again. Reede clapped his hands for attention. “Yes, exactly. The honour of housing the princess means that we have agreed to take on greater responsibility. We must also be vigilant at all times to make sure that Hateno Village remains a safe place for all Hylians, not just Link and Zelda.” He turned to them apologetically. “But in particular, for Link and Zelda.”

“For starters, perhaps you shouldn’t have a sign screaming ‘LINK AND ZELDA’S HOUSE’ right in the bloomin’ front!”

“Director, please,” Symin muttered.

Zelda wiped away the last of her tears as the others began to discuss possible ways to heighten security around the village. “We could ask secret questions,” Seldon suggested, “to test who might be a real villager and who isn’t.”

“Nah.” Thadd shook his head and downed the rest of his drink. “Can’t remember all that. We just need to get more people guardin’ the borders. I sure could use the help.”

Purah snapped her fingers. “I’ll set up an automated system for the telescope to sweep the town regularly. If there’s anything suspicious, we’ll raise a subtle alarm and investigate. Meanwhile, I can borrow some of the Sheikah cloaking technology we use back in Kakariko for the princess’s house.”

Koyin folded her arms and scowled. “Alarms and cloaking? We just need to become better fighters! That way, everyone can defend themselves.”

“Link?” Reede asked. “As a royal knight, your opinion is most valuable. What do you propose?”

Link had left the hearth, sneaking along the wall and avoiding everyone else. He reached the table and pulled up a chair for himself. “It all sounds good,” he said, reaching for Zelda.

Purah huffed. “That doesn’t help, Linky!”

She commanded the attention of the villagers again, and they bent their heads forward to listen and debate once more. Link pushed Zelda’s hair back. “You okay?” he asked. When she nodded, he gently brushed his lips against her cheek.
Zelda supposed that she had been a fool to think that she could have hidden from the world for the rest of her life. Fate always found a way. She sighed sadly and leaned against Link’s shoulder, feeling how warm he was beneath the soft, worn tunic. They watched the people in the room argue, exclaim, complain, laugh, and speak earnestly with feeling. All of them had agreed, without objection, to protect her. They were ready to fight for their right to be proud Hylians.

They were her friends. They were her family.

They were her people.

Hyrule had a princess once again.

Chapter End Notes

1. Sure, I’ll subscribe to the “Zelda can’t cook” headcanon. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯
2. After two chapters of Link gushing poetic about life with Zelda, it’s time for a realistic update from our top royal researcher. She loves him and he IS very romantic, just not always as smooth as he thinks. And even after all this time, there still lives a tiny spark of rebellion that flares up when Link won’t leave her alone.
3. This chapter is my love letter to the NPCs, the common folk, the Hylians who survived, adapted, but maintained their compassion and faith in the legends despite the ruin that befell the kingdom. (But holy cow, so many of them.)
At least when it takes me over two weeks to write something, you can bet your butt it’s going to be a pretty long chapter. Enjoy!

One thing that Link appreciated about the Hylians of Hateno Village was their absolute commitment to a promise made.

The changes were subtle but significant. Folks went about their days per the usual, but with a sharper eye and quicker step. A roster was created to offer Thadd some relief from his post at regular intervals. Even the most familiar of merchants and travellers were politely stopped and questioned before being allowed past the gate. If they glanced up towards the hill as they walked the cobbled street, they would see the lens of Purah’s telescope winking in their direction.

Nebb refused to give up the Yiga Blademaster’s windcleaver. Spoils of the fight were his rightful claim, he had argued. After all, who had been the first to come to the princess’s aid? His parents were not pleased when Link failed to side with them on the matter. The only consensus made between all four of them was that if Nebb was to tote around a dangerous instrument of violence, he needed to be properly trained in its arts. That, Link could provide.

“Third. First. Second. Fifth. First.” He adjusted the angle of the blade. “When you move from one parry to another, protect yourself by moving the blade in front and across your body.”

Nebb nodded fervently. Link tried to pry his fingers loose from their death grip on the hilt. “And you’re going to get cramps squeezing this hard.”

“But it’s so heavy!”

“No!” Nebb’s face shone with sweat and unparalleled obstinacy. “This is MY sword now. I’m using it!”

Link’s other students were far less picky about their weapons and thanks to their farming backgrounds, had enough muscle to keep them raised. And they were plenty familiar with ranged tools, Link thought as Koyin slammed her pitchfork into the old log with near-fanatical ferocity.

The only idea that hadn’t caught on was Seldon’s. Very few villagers were keen on memorising a unique set of questions and answers for every single person they knew. This was no deterrent for the town’s resident tour guide, as Link learned one day when he stopped by Ventest Clothing Boutique.

The shop was well-kept as always. Tables to the side stored folded everyday clothes while the shelves were filled with bolts of fabric neatly rolled up. Lanterns hanging from the grid above shone down on the featured displays. Seldon’s daughter, Sophie, hastily welcomed Link once he caught her hovering behind the door like usual. But before he could say anything, they both
jumped at a loud shout.

“Wait! Sophie!” Seldon jogged out of the doorway between the shop and living quarters, fumbling with the clasps of his suspenders. “Don’t forget, you must properly assess the individual before engaging them in conversation.”

Sophie sighed. “But father, nobody bothers with the questions… except for us.”

Seldon ignored her, staring Link solemnly in the eye. “When you first arrived to our fair village, what did I promise in exchange for your undivided attention?”

“A good, old fashioned dose of Hateno hospitality.”

Seldon broke into a smile. “Good, good. Now, I believe you have something to ask me.”

Sophie made a face as Link complied. “Uh, what is this place?”

“We’re a clothing shop with lots of apparel to choose from! Normal wear to adventure wear, you’ll find it where? Right here!” Seldon puffed up his chest as he gestured grandly towards the bright tunics and gleaming armour. “Now, Link. Ask Sophie your question.”

“You just confirmed him!” Sophie’s sleeves flapped as she gestured at Link in frustration. “And nobody else is going to show up with THAT sword!”

“Ah, but Grandma Purah did warn us. Those charlatans may appear in any shape or form! It’s best to be safe.” Seldon fixed Link with an expectant expression.

It was far easier to acquiesce than to argue. “So… you like this corner?”

“It’s him,” Sophie grumped.

In the end, no matter how hard they trained or what newfangled ideas were introduced, Hateno would always be a farming village. The daily chores of attending the fields and animal care were still the priority. Schedules remained the same and people moved around with ease, stepping confidently from their homes every morning towards where they were needed every day.

And whenever Zelda stepped out from their house, she would be greeted by friendly faces who just so happened to be passing by. Usually it would be the children of the village who buzzed around her like a swarm of courser bees as they slowly wandered up to the Tech Lab together. Reede volunteered his company a few times, politely inquiring after her research and possible plans for Hyrule. Even the housewives accosted her in the street with claims that they needed to collect knitting wool from Hateno Pasture. Once, Bolson of all people had left his typical seat by the fire to chase after Zelda. His sonorous tenor echoed around the buildings — very hard to miss.

Link knew that Zelda was grateful for all the care and thoughtfulness put into her protection. Each offer of companionship was always met with cheerful acceptance. But after she waved goodbye and closed the door, the smiles melted off her face. Sometimes, all this affection was no more than a reminder of the target she had painted upon this sweet little village.

Perhaps it was time to leave. Even just for a short time.

Rain always brought a lethargic mood to Hateno Village, although most of its inhabitants couldn’t use it as an excuse to shirk their duties. Link was glad that Zelda wasn’t one of them when he woke up and still felt her warmth beside him.
“I keep forgetting to ask you,” she said, cheek against his arm, “but whatever possessed you to take this picture?”

Her hair slid against his skin when she rolled over to hand him the Sheikah Slate. Link squinted at the screen. Its contents were slightly blurred and off-centre. That made sense, seeing how he had needed to hold the Slate with one hand and at an angle to try and get both himself and the bug-eyed Lizalfos into frame.

“Oh. I just wanted to see if I could do it.”

“You’re not even wearing any armour!”

“It’s hot in Faron,” was all he could come up with. Zelda wrinkled her nose, like she could smell the lack of effort put into this excuse.

“Hmm. Faron.” Her voice grew soft and thoughtful. “We didn’t go too far deep into that province. I mean, the Spring of Courage could almost be considered part of West Necluda.”

The gentle staccato of rain against the window filled in the silence. Zelda’s fingers traced the Sheikah Slate’s map. It depicted dark patches representing woodland and blue blots for the province’s many lakes. Link took his chance.

“Maybe we should go.”

Zelda lifted her head, her eyes wide. He continued. “We’re already here along the eastern coast. All you have to do is follow it south, and there’s Faron.”

They both knew that distance was not the issue. Nor was it the question of leaving her research behind, or if this was the right season for travelling, whether it was more worthwhile to head north or west instead…

Then, Zelda smiled at him. “Alright.”

They waited for a good day. The sun was warm but weak shortly after dawn when they bolted the door of the house. Link had traded his Champions’ tunic for the green and brown set he had picked up deep in Tanagar Canyon. Zelda wasn’t particularly fond of that one, pointing out that the cap was needlessly long and exposing his knees made him look like a child, but it was the most comfortable thing Link had ever worn. She looked ready for the journey in a snug Hylian tunic. Link thought that the dark red suited her, but he would be the first to admit bias. Not a scrap of blue on either of them. Blending in was key.

They walked past empty horse stalls. Chase and Cloud were not needed, for this trip was not about haste. Instead of crossing the bridge, Link and Zelda slipped away in the other direction, down the grassy slope of the hillside. Link was relieved to glimpse Karson standing by Hateno’s entrance with a sledgehammer leaned against the stone wall behind him. Hopefully their absence would provide some relaxation for the villagers, too. Only Purah and Reede had been informed of their plans, but he knew the news would leak out soon enough.

Link had forgotten, of course, what it was like to listen to two pairs of boots crunching pebbles along the dirt road, accompanied by nothing else but birdsong and rising sunlight through the distant cliffs. But he was certain that they had never held hands.

The land that stretched on before them was empty. A pack of wild horses, sporting coats of black and brown and blue, raised their heads at their scent upon the breeze and scattered away. Zelda blinked when Link tugged her towards a copse of trees clustered against a rocky hill. “Aren’t we
“You don’t always have to follow a road to get somewhere.”

The grass thinned as they entered an old ruin. It hadn’t been large or significant enough for the Sheikah Slate to name, but Link guessed it might have been a former military outpost, judging by the rusted spears laying in the rubble. Zelda studied the pointed stone archway with deep interest, but there really was little left to look at.

“A storage facility, perhaps,” she wondered out loud as she circled the chipped, low walls. “This was not a large building. Between the fort and the village, the garrison must have needed supplies…”

“Oh,” Link said, “It was a checkpoint.”

He led her behind the ruins to a narrow, short ravine. A waterfall tumbled into a very small pond where fat fish bobbed just beneath the surface. The remnants of an old trail were much clearer here in the steep slope. Zelda immediately began to follow it, no prompting required. Link could see that hunger for answers, delight in discovery, the fire from stepping into the unknown igniting once again in her green eyes.

The slope seemed daunting, but did not take long to climb at all. Zelda’s face lit up when she looked across Dunsel Plateau. The ground was green with grass. Herons spread their blue-tipped wings and took off on winds blowing out towards the sea just yonder. Great gnarled trees dotted this hidden pass, well watered on the shores of Keya Pond.

“I do find it odd,” she said as she waded back to him, “that we’ve been so alone. Shouldn’t there be others? Say, some monsters?”

“You want to see monsters?”

Her sleeves had managed to get wet despite being pushed up to her elbows, the cuffs streaked with mud. Zelda settled in beside him upon the rock in the centre of the pond, a small frog captured between her hands. She stroked its back absentmindedly with one finger. “I know, but I actually believe it would make me feel better. Just because we’re trying to reclaim the land from the Calamity doesn’t mean we can do whatever we want with it. They are still part of Hyrule’s ecosystem.” She saw his incredulous face and doubled down. “From all the reports coming in, it’s clear that it was the Calamity’s influence amplifying their violent tendencies. Now, they’re nothing more than humble animals. We must be careful that they aren’t completely eradicated.”

“Zelda, don’t take this the wrong way. But I’ve been out a little more than you have after the Calamity. Monsters still attack, and still cause damage.”

“Oh, of course. They probably thought you were crossing into their territory and only wanted to defend it. We would do the same, wouldn’t we? Moblins, lizalfos, even lynels… we should respect their homes as long as we have ours.”

Link knew when to give up. The frog wriggled its way out of Zelda’s fingers and splashed back into the water with a *plop*. They helped each other up and gathered their things.
Now that she had put monsters on his mind, Link began to think of the route more carefully. One thing he certainly could agree on was the territorial nature of bokoblins — and there was an encampment right between the plateau and the main road. Link recalled the terrain. By veering east and up the cliffs, he could paraglide down to the beach and stay out of range of the arrows.

“…Link!”

Shock coursed through him when Zelda’s voice, small and distant, cut into his thoughts. Link looked down to see her shading her eyes with both hands while she squinted up at him from nearly ten feet away on the ground. He glanced around and noticed, for the first time, his toes crammed into hairline cracks and fingers hanging off the narrowest of holds upon a cliff face that rose out of the plateau. Link felt his face turning red as he scrambled down.

“Sorry,” he said while Zelda peered into his eyes with concern. It embarrassed him to have forgotten she was there, even for just a moment. She seemed to forgive him easily, brushing dirt from his palms.

“I wish I could keep up,” she said. “I’m still a little envious just imagining the amazing things I could see, if only I had your skill.”

He promised her that she would see plenty. It was a great satisfaction to deliver on this promise a little under two hours later, when they made it into Atun Valley unscathed and set their sights upon Lurelin Village.

The skies were beginning to tinge with twilight when the first torches came into view. Packed dirt gave way to soft sand as they passed the threshold and beheld this little hamlet on the bay. Palm trees leaned out of swathes of dry beachgrass to dangle over their heads. Crabs and snails crawled around in the shallow surf lapping onto the curved shore, small waves cresting over their shells when fishermen brought in the day’s haul in their boats. The water shimmered like oil as the sun bled the clouds pink and orange.

Houses ringed the beach, round with roofs of woven thatching, resembling squat baskets on stilts. Zelda smiled at the many ways Lurelin villagers had chosen to set their homes apart: flags printed with swirling designs hanging down from the rafters, painted bird statuettes by the stairs, or an array of clay pots overflowing with springy ferns and colourful blooms that thrived in the tropical climate.

“Why couldn’t you have bought a house in this village instead?” she teased. “It’s adorable.”

Link dug through his pack. “There weren’t any up for sale, and the shopping’s not that great.” He found what he was looking for. It was a bit squashed and dangerously soft in his grasp, but at least it hadn’t melted. Zelda trailed him to a cooking pot sitting upon a rise.

“Hi, Kiana,” Link said. A woman turned, basket on her hip. She had pulled her dark hair into a bun, though the baby hairs on the nape of her neck escaped to flutter freely in the seaside breeze. Her clothes were traditional to the region: loose garments held up by ropes decorated with beads, flowers, or shells that clinked together gently with each movement.

Her eyebrows shot high upon her forehead. “Oh! Well, if it isn’t our good friend, Link. And this is…”

“Zelda,” said Zelda. Kiana blinked for a moment, then broke into a welcoming smile before shifting her basket to another hip in order to shake hands.
“This is Lurelin Village,” she said. “We’re a small fishing town and proud of it! My husband’s a fisherman, and I have two sons who will probably grow up to be fishermen too. This one’s Kinov, and Zuta’s up tending to the cows. What brings you here?”

“We’re just visiting,” Zelda said.

“You and all the others. We’ve had a lot of northerners coming through in the past few weeks. Something about a danger gone, making the roads a lot safer to travel. My husband’s had to go further out to get enough fish for all the demanding tourist tummies. We can’t complain though, since business is booming.” Kiana paused, frowning. “But what should I cook for tonight’s dinner?”

That was Link’s cue. He handed her the pack of goat butter. Kiana laughed.

“That settles it. I’ll make seafood paella.” She gestured towards the log benches. “Why don’t you eat with us? It’ll be done soon.”

“Yaaaay!” shouted Kinov.

A very interesting pendant hung round his neck, which he showed off to them proudly. It was an enormous, pale shell tapered into a spiked comb. Zelda and Link couldn’t help laughing at the comical picture the boy made with his cheeks puffing up like octo balloons while he blew a bright trumpet through the conch, calling his family home.

Zuta arrived quickly, huffing as he set aside the milk buckets. His father, Sebasto, soon came up the slope bearing a sharp harpoon and a string of fresh fish. They both greeted Link and Zelda warmly, making very little fuss. Link was relieved. News travelled slowly to this idyllic village on the sea. Even when it finally managed to get there, its inhabitants were not much concerned with continental drama. Zelda wouldn’t need to hide.

When everyone was ready, Kiana served them the paella. It was “so good and yummy and great”, as Kinov declared after his first bite. Link had to agree. The chewy meat of the snail had swelled up under the heat, rock salt enhancing its flavour. Mighty porgy and rice mixed together, each flake and grain glistening in the butter. A Hylian retriever suddenly slunk out from beneath one of the houses and came to sit by Link’s feet. He could feel a heavy, hot breath against his ankles with every desperate pant.

“Don’t,” Zuta warned as he shovelled rice into his mouth. “He picked you ‘cause he thinks you’re gonna be easy. Don’t fall for it.”

The dog shuffled closer, resting a furry chin on Link’s knee. His dark eyes shone with such deep wistfulness and woe, and Link realised that there were trials even harder than some of the most complicated of shrines.

“DON’T,” Zuta and Kinov chorused.

Zelda was holding riveting conversation with their parents. Sebasto couldn’t quite see eye to eye on her newly acquired position concerning the fate of monsters. “They take the best fishing spots. You’d used to be able to pull in a good haul at certain beaches, but some days you’d be lucky to leave there with your life.”

“I wouldn’t mean to surrender everything to them. I agree, we need boundaries, and the livelihoods of the people must come first.” Zelda’s spoon had been suspended over her bowl for at least a full minute. She leaned forward eagerly. “It will require long hours of study and discussion with the
various settlements around Hyrule, but a good policy to protect both us and them is the fairest
course to take!”

Sebasto and Kiana smiled politely at her before sharing a quizzical look. Link nudged Zelda to
remind her to eat.

After the meal, they bid farewell to the family. It was dark enough that the horizon had disappeared
into the darkness, and the torches upon the pier could only cast small pools of light that didn’t
penetrate the depths. The Fishing Resort only had room for one more person, Chessica was deeply
apologetic to tell them. Link glanced around at the small, cramped inn. Every cot held someone
curled up and snoring away, some even sprawled out on the floor beside them.

The remaining spot was nothing more than a reed mat and a few blankets, set up beside a Gerudo
who frowned and flexed even in her sleep. “You take it,” Link said to Zelda. “I’ll figure something
out.”

Just as he remembered, there was a fire pit on the beach not too far away. Link settled by the
smouldering embers. The wind rustled the palm branches nearby, and in the distance, dark waves
pulled back and forth. Link lay there in the cool, soft sand, listening to the gentle rhythm of the
ocean before falling asleep.

He woke to a gentle pat on his shoulder. Link cracked an eye open and there was Zelda, trying not
to laugh at him.

“Good morning, beach bum,” she said cheerfully as he floundered slightly in the shifting sand up to
a sitting position. “I think you need a good dusting.”

She made him cover his eyes before running her hands through his hair to get rid of even more
sand, her fingers coming to rest just under his ears. Zelda leaned in and kissed him quickly before
pulling away, but he saw how her cheeks went pink, even though she was smiling.

“Breakfast first,” Zelda said, holding up a bunch of mighty bananas. “Risa was so kind to offer me
some! She came here all the way from Gerudo on foot, a truly remarkable feat. Something about a
legendary pond to find her voice… but she did tell me some news from the west. Apparently, there is
currently a big case going on concerning the women-only policy of the town, which is just
fascinating. Some male Hylian traders have managed to exploit a flaw in the guards’ examinations
to infiltrate the city…”

The bananas were at perfect ripeness, sweet but firm. Link watched and listened to her, a sense of
satisfaction and pride growing as the empty space in his stomach diminished. It had been weeks
since she had been this animated and excited, fidgeting while she gestured and exclaimed.

Lurelin Village was far more crowded than what he remembered in previous visits. Folks in
travelling gear lounged upon the docks, eating palm fruit and roasted porgy on sticks. Many of
them had begun to peel away towards the various beaches like flocks of seagulls. Link didn’t think
that fighting for a patch of sand amongst a crowd of nosy Hylians would be much fun. So instead,
they stopped by the small dock at the side of the bay where an old man stood staring out at sea
with his hands held behind his back. He was Rozel, the village elder, and more than happy to
bequeath the nearby raft to them after learning they had come from Hateno. Zelda leaned into the
spray as the Korok leaf ushered them out of the harbour, her long yellow hair set dancing at the
speed.

Link had reclaimed the treasure chests within the golden triangle months ago, but everything else
was just as he had left it. One could see right down to the teeming reef below. Fish striped and
shining in all colours darted away from their shadows when they came floating over the beautiful coral that grew unhindered in the clear water. Link helped Zelda amass a small collection of samples and creatures that she lined up carefully upon the edge of the raft, taking pictures and writing down notes before slipping them safely back into their undersea homes.

He finally convinced her to put down the pencil and take to the water with the sunlight bearing down on them, unfiltered and bright. For some relief, the Sheikah Slate drew up a platform of ice where they sat to share lunch and somewhat salty kisses.

They returned to Lurelin Village afterward. Things had calmed down now that most of the tourists were off at the beaches, leaving behind mainly villagers who went about their business with barely a glance at Zelda, whose skin was rosy with warmth and hair blazing under the sun.

“What next?” she asked.

Link nodded towards the east. “There’s a ruin that way. You like that old stuff, right?”

“Does it have a shrine?”

“…Yes.”

Zelda grinned. “I think it’s high time that I’ve entered one. No excuses this time. You’ve activated them all, and I’ve been waiting for over 100 years!”

He had no choice but to lead her there. They were nearly out of the village again when she suddenly spoke up. “Wait, what’s going on over there?”

Link looked. There was a sizable lineup at one of the larger buildings, a structure of sloped siding with lanterns glowing behind the slightly-open blinds. “That’s the chest game. I tried it once. Nothing special, just gambling.”

Zelda nodded, her interest fading rapidly. Before they had walked past it, though, there came a tremendous CRASH from within the ship-shaped house. The shadow of a large object flew by behind the blinds, and the sound of ripping cloth and shouting filled the otherwise peaceful atmosphere.

Link and Zelda, along with other alarmed villagers, hurried up the dusty path in time to see a red-faced Hylian storm out of the shop. He made great effort to pound his boots heavily against the wooden steps, though he slipped upon an edge and tumbled down to the ground. Patches of sweat darkening his thick tunic marked him as an outsider, and he rounded on Cloyne, the vendor, once the crowd had backed away from them both.

“You tricked me!” he screamed, slapping a hand onto the wooden railing. “There wasn’t a gold rupee in any of those chests. You wiped me clean!”

“Them’s just the breaks, brother.” Cloyne tugged nervously on his goatee. “What’s a bet, after all, if you don’t stand to lose a bundle on it? That’s the part that really gets a man’s heart racing.”

He leaned away just as the irate customer lunged, and two of the local fishermen jumped forward to pull them apart. Link was about to leave when suddenly, Zelda pushed past him. She walked right up to the men and planted her hands on her hips. “This constant shouting will do you no good,” she said. “Causing a scene will not get your rupees back.”

“Who are you?” the man spat into her face.
“An outsider with no stake in this matter, so allow me to mediate.”

Link noticed the crowd’s attention shifting with surprise and admiration. She did cut a very commanding figure in the late afternoon sunlight filtering through the palm branches, stranding with her shoulders back, chin lifted, and not flinching even in the slightest when the man scowled and muttered to himself, yanking his arm out of the fisherman’s grasp.

“Both of you will speak your piece separately, without interruption, so we may compare them.” Zelda pointed at Cloyne. “You first.”

Cloyne hastily described his hustle. Customers placed bets before selecting one of three chests, standing to either double or even triple their original amount or to walk away with a child’s pocket change. The simplicity of the game drew some people to keep going until they were completely spent, which seemed to be the case here. “I’m not talking about anything illegal, here,” he concluded, eyes darting around nervously. “It’s pure luck. And by Hylia, I’m already bein’ kind — even the sorest loser gets to go home with at least one rupee.”

His accuser frowned. “That’s not how you put it,” he insisted. “That’s not what I got from the first time you explained the rules. It was hidden beneath all the talk of getting lucky, making quick cash… you offered me palm wine!” He jabbed a finger at Cloyne. “That’s coercive, trying to put me under the influence!”

Zelda stayed silent as the crowd burst into chatter. The fishermen added their voices to the din, siding with Cloyne in regards to the rules of the game. The ruckus went on until Zelda raised her hand, and everyone quieted.

“It seems to me that you were aware that this is a game of chance,” she said to the man. “And despite the manipulative wording, you made an agreement to play by his rules. I’m sorry.”

“However.” She turned to Cloyne before he could gloat “I strongly advise that you put up a written statement regarding how this business operates to avoid further argument in the future. And get rid of the wine,” she added, eyes narrowing. “Does that sound fair to you both?”

She fixed them with a stare until both men mumbled their agreement. Zelda turned back to Link but before they could leave, someone else came walking up the path.

Rozel peered up through his shaggy white hair at everyone. “Ah, it seems that I’ve arrived late. But has the issue been resolved?”

“Yes, thanks to this young lady.” One of the fishermen gestured to Zelda. “A wise one.”

Rozel chuckled, leathery wrinkles appearing on his face. “Could have guessed that of a girl named Zelda.”

The crowd was suddenly set with whispers.

“Zelda!”

“Did he call her Zelda?”

“You mean… like the Princess Zelda?”

She stiffened at the sound of her name, eyes widening. Link leaned forward and grabbed her hand. They squeezed through the bodies that kept turning towards them and quickly walked away, though eyes were still trained upon their backs.
The coast quite empty now, save for straggling groups of one or two coming back from their
carefree days in the sun. It was a little jolting to remember that theirs had only been hours ago.
Zelda kept her head bent and staring at the sand as they rounded a bend that finally hid Lurelin
Village from sight.

She didn’t say anything, placing one foot in front of the other at a steady rhythm. Link let her walk.
The only time he intercepted was to nudge her towards the path instead of the beach that would
lead to a monster encampment. Zelda turned and began hiking up without another word. She lifted
a hand and brushed it over her eyes.

No matter where they went, she could not run away from her name. She could not change who she
was. She was Hyrule’s princess. Link followed the swish of her yellow hair, honey-gold now in the
slowly sinking sun. As for himself, distractions weren’t the answer. His role — as it always had
been — was to stay by her side. Even when when the terrain grew complex and difficult to
navigate, he told himself as the trail grew steeper. And it would.

The top of the mountain was a lush and verdant carpet of wildflowers, the blooms blushing a riot of
romantic colours from sky blue to warm violet to the palest of pinks. They ringed a small pond that
looked shallow at first glance, but its rich turquoise colour hinted to greater depths. Its shape was
perfectly symmetrical, a graceful curve on either side meeting at a point. Zelda stopped in her
tracks.

“What is this place?” she asked slowly.

“Lover’s Pond,” Link replied. “Legends say that those who find it on their own are sure to find
their true love.”

He just smiled when she shot him a look. Zelda rolled her eyes, but he saw the edges of her mouth
tremble. “Is this why you wanted to come here?”

“It’s a nice location for a picnic.”

Tuft Mountain was a good place to watch the sun set. They finished eating and lay down in the
grass to gaze into the glowing sky where the first few stars were already twinkling in the twilight.
Zelda wrapped her arms around him, closing her eyes. She missed the first fireflies and even some
fairies fluttering over the pond’s surface, but Link decided against disturbing her.

So he was mildly surprised when she was the one who started the conversation. “What should I
do?” Zelda whispered into his collar.

He couldn’t play her false. “You would make a good ruler,” he admitted. “All you’ve talked about
since we left Kakariko Village is how you want to change things and help people. It would help if
you had some kind of authority.”

“What authority? Nobody knows me.”

Link reached up to touch her hair, so long and silken that they flowed through his fingers like
liquid. “Didn’t you see what happened when all those people heard your name? They know you.”

Silence, for a few seconds.

“It’s only… I never loved my title. It felt like a cage. Nobody knew, or acknowledged how hard I
tried to live up to my ancestors. I hated every moment. But the alternative simply wasn’t
acceptable… if I couldn’t awaken the powers, what would happen to Hyrule? There was no talk of
my ascension to the throne and ruling the kingdom. It was always only the question of whether I
She rolled away from him to lie on her back and stare forlornly at the stars. “Yes. And that’s why people will say that my reaction, my feelings are unfounded, or immature. That I should know better now, and it’s my duty to take back the crown. But…” Zelda sighed, her voice breaking softly. It sounded so sad and desperate that Link’s heart skipped a beat. “I can’t help but feel dread, and doubt, and this horrible sense that everything will fall apart just like before. I made so many mistakes that had severe consequences. My father did, too. Would it really be so bad to allow us to disappear into time?”

She pushed herself up into a sitting position, her fingers curling in the grass until the blades twisted in their grasp. Tiny petals clung to the fabric of her clothes. Link sat up too.

“Your feelings are justified,” he said. “Because you’ve learned from your experiences. So when you make more mistakes, you’ll only grow stronger. Others will never truly understand what you’ve been through, and what you’ve done for them. That’s just how it is. Don’t let that stop you. It only means that you’re doing your job well.”

“When people don’t see the effort in the undertaking, that’s mastery at work,” she said quietly. “Yes.”

She seemed to wait for a moment, then resumed picking at the grass when he had nothing else to add.

“There isn’t a right or wrong answer,” Link said finally. “I can’t decide for you. But I’m… I’m with you on whichever choice you make.”

He wished he could have worded that better, like some sort of official pledge that sounded eloquent and stirring and profound. Zelda didn’t seem to mind, though, from the way she stopped and looked at him with tears in her eyes. They leaned towards each other at the same time, like two halves of one heart becoming whole, and stayed that way for a long time after.

It was late in the night when they finally reached Lurelin Village again. The harbour was quiet, and the houses had closed their blinds. The Hylian retriever twitched its paws and nose as it slumbered by the cooking pot. Link walked Zelda to the Fishing Resort. Surprisingly, there were two figures sitting outside of it, seemingly waiting for them. Upon closer inspection, one turned out to be Zelda’s new Gerudo friend, her cropped red hair gleaming like the flames in the torch above her. The other was… the angry Hylian.

He stood up when they approached. “I would like to apologise to you, Princess.”

His tone was very much the same as before, harsh, aggressive and tinged with annoyance. Zelda winced. “Oh… alright. Thank you.”

Her lukewarm response only made him more agitated. “You must think that I’m doing this reluctantly, or trying to score points with royalty. No! Not at all! I have personal integrity, I promise you! I acted out of foolish pride, attacking anyone who disagreed, then you came along and ripped my pathetic complaints to shreds! It was a wise and fair judgment that few could argue against! So when I say I’m sorry, I MEAN IT!”

At the last shout, a small flock of seagulls suddenly scattered from the tree above them. Link had to bite his tongue to keep from bursting into laughter as a falling palm fruit nearly clocked the
Hylian on the head. He jumped in alarm, almost tumbling into the Gerudo’s lap. She made no
move, staring at him as he scrambled back to his feet with scarlet cheeks.

Zelda had to smile. “I believe you. Thank you for your honesty…”

“Rartek.”

“Thank you, Rartek.”

Rartek nodded, the pointed ends of his ears still flushed pink. “Yes, I mean it. This entire country is
a mess, and we’re going to need someone to put us in our places after so long. I’m glad we met!”
He leaned down and hefted a large traveller’s pack onto his shoulder. “Well, I didn’t book a bed
last night so the inn’s full. I’m sleeping in the pasture. Beach’s too wet. Goodnight, everyone!”

He stomped away into the palm trees, sand flying up with every forceful step. The Gerudo watched
him leave with deep interest before turning back to them. “It’s quite charming to meet a voe so
passionate about his own defeat.”

“Yes. And oh, Risa, we did find that pond. It’s just at the top of the—”

“I won’t need it,” Risa declared. She got up and followed Rartek. Zelda and Link exchanged
amused glances. Zelda let go of his hand to walk up the inn steps, but paused before entering.

“I have made up my mind,” she told him.

“And?”

“And tomorrow we return to Kakariko Village.”

It was the clearest day Link had seen in weeks. All of Central Hyrule was laid out before them, but
even the mists that rose from distant rivers marred not the beautiful scene. Sunlight gleamed off
rocky ridges, the grass rippled in the lively winds, and minute movements of animals darting
between the trees could be seen even from this distance. Mountain ranges sculpted the horizon, the
striking silhouettes of both Divine Beast Vah Medoh and Hyrule Castle itself rising out of it.

Link stood beside Zelda, taking it all in. Kakariko Village was behind them, hidden in the cliffs.

They had arrived a few days ago after a journey through Faron and Necluda. The Sheikah
welcomed them back with open arms and tears of joy — mostly on Paya’s part. But unlike the
gentle and leisurely stay those several months before, Zelda made herself busy. She held long
meetings with Impa, sometimes so deeply entrenched in conversation that Link would leave in the
morning and return at dusk to find them still talking, their hands clasped together in earnest.

“We’ll make our way to Zora’s Domain,” Zelda now said. “Divine Beast Vah Ruta looks like it
stopped working. Let’s investigate the situation.”

She looked up from the Sheikah Slate, smile fading slightly as she thought ahead to the task before
her. “Mipha’s father… I believe he would like to hear more about her. The least we can do is visit
him and offer him some closure.”

In one of their meetings, Impa had given her a small box. Undoing the ties revealed a stack of
letters and reports — news from the provinces of Hyrule, descriptions of complicated issues and
delicate situations. The three of them went through each paper, which took much longer than Link
had expected. But he had seen Zelda’s resolve only strengthening with every new request, her eyes
searching the lines for a challenge, ideas flooding to her lips in droves. She couldn’t wait to begin. All they needed were a few key items left in their Hateno house and to retrieve Chase and Cloud from the stable. That had been easy enough, with a few strokes of the Sheikah Slate.

“Although Ganon is gone for now, there is still so much more for us to do. And so many painful memories that we must bear.”

She was a vision in blue — royal blue with gold trim, a pure white blouse buttoned up to her neck beneath it, and wearing riding breeches tucked into long boots emblazoned with the royal Triforce on the cuff. It had been Impa’s final parting gift that morning. Zelda had gasped when the old Sheikah presented it to her, carefully preserved under protective layers of linen.

“As promised, I have kept your belongings safe until your return.” Impa watched as Zelda traced her fingers over the belt of gold where a Triforce shimmered. “They have been blessed by our watchful protector so that it remains durable and fresh as the day you left them with us.”

Link had reclaimed his Champion tunic, too. He watched as her eyes roved the land once more, shifting from the old castle to the flowering canopy of Great Hyrule Forest, down to the shimmering lakes of Lanayru, then to the jagged peaks of Death Mountain, before settling on the motionless trunk of Vah Ruta, raised towards the sun.

“I believe in my heart, that if all of us work together… we can restore Hyrule to its former glory.”

“Perhaps even beyond,” Link said.

Zelda lifted her chin. The world seemed to be reflected in her green eyes. “Yes. But it all must start with us.”

“Let’s be off.” She turned on her heel and strode resolutely towards their grazing horses. Link was about to follow her when she suddenly slowed her step.

Just before they had left Kakariko that morning, Paya had rushed out of her house one final time. Link had thought she was about to burst into a fresh round of tears, but instead, she held out a small bundle towards Zelda.

“P-princess… I know, I know you don’t need to train any longer. The Goddess lives in your blood. But I thought, would you want…?”

The cloth in her hands was white. Zelda stared as the familiar pleated skirt of her old ceremonial dress came tumbling over Paya’s fingers.

“No, Paya,” she said. “I don’t think I’ll need it. But thank you.”

But now, she hesitated. “I can no longer hear the voice inside the sword,” Zelda said, more softly than before. “Not since… coming back. I suppose it would make sense if my powers had dwindled over the past 100 years.”

She turned around to look at him. There was a fleeting moment of worry, a flash of that uncertainty displayed by Lover’s Pond, and the anguish Link had only seen in faded memory. But then, like sunshine banishing a storm, Zelda smiled.

“I’m surprised to admit it, but I can accept that.”

Link ran to her. His heart was full at the sound of her laughter when he caught her round the waist, and soul consumed with love and the taste of her against his lips. There was nowhere else he
wished to be than here upon this slope surrounded by the very symbol of their survival. Silent Princesses flooded the grassy knoll, their scent signalling the reign of a new era.

The reign of his princess.

Silent no longer.

Chapter End Notes

1. From a craft standpoint, it’s terribly blatant to me how easier/more enjoyable it was to write this chapter compared to the previous one. Ironically, I had come up with the beats and tiny details of “Reveal” weeks ahead of writing it, but this one was nothing more than “Zelink go to Lurelin Village and she finally makes up her mind there” until I sat down and got started. Writing is weird.

2. As far as OCs go, Rartek is clearly my second masterpiece after Chard. I imagine his vocal inflection mirrors Craig Middlebrooks's. Oh, and five points to whoever remembers where Risa appears in the game!

I have a semi-strict schedule to finish this fic within the early months of next year so the updates will hopefully become regular again! Will have at least one more before the month is out. Thank you for sticking by, I truly am grateful (even when I don't personally respond to your comment... I still love and reread them over and over!)
Chapter Notes

I said it months ago and I'll say it again: Zora's Domain is a **constant** soap opera.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Great Zora Bridge’s arches were aglow with pale splendour against the cobalt depths of the lake. Pillars like the stems of lilies rose out of the water to bear the shining walls of Zora’s Domain. Sunshine set them blazing once the clouds parted. Zelda walked onward with Link, feeling the spray of the tumbling falls cooling her cheek, hearing the soft splashes as they spilled into the lake, and breathing in fresh air cleansed by these pure waters.

It was breathtaking but bittersweet. She had become accustomed to a world in ruin, with its empty plains, overgrown forests, and sunken settlements. Even the journey along the Zora River had been more of the same, boulders and thorns on the path that needed to be scaled or cleared before they could continue. There had been enough hindrances to force them to camp out beneath a rocky outcropping for the night before they could rise with the dawn to make an early entrance at the place the Zora called home.

“I have to warn you,” Link had said as he stamped out the last embers of their fire, “that the Zora are going to be different from Hylians.”

“I should hope so, unless evolution has made some astounding progress in the past 100 years.”

Link barely smiled. “The Calamity isn’t history to them, not yet. They knew me on sight, and you’re the princess — a lot has happened. Just be prepared.”

She was not. After walking through the silent desolation of her own kingdom, seeing Zora’s Domain so perfectly preserved down to every carved column and ivory rail caused a lump in her throat. A cool breeze came sweeping over her skin. What of the people, were they the same as before? Refined, learned, proud…

Did they blame her for taking away their own princess, over a century ago?

Time ran out for her to wonder. She could already see guards at the threshold of the city in helms and breastplates of silver. They nodded at Link with recognition and Zelda with interest, making no moves as the two of them crossed into the city proper. Zelda’s feet slowed as she approached what should have been the Fountain of Welcoming.

Despite initial impressions, this was not the Zora’s Domain of her past.

The pool around the platform still flowed with a gentle current, but it was no longer fed by jets flowing over the rim of the large, ornate basin in the centre. A pure white light shone from inside, illuminating the lovely figure who rose from it. Zelda felt her eyes growing warm and a gasp escaping her lips when she looked up at the serene face of her old friend, Princess Mipha of the Zora. She gazed down on Zelda with sparkling eyes of crystal, her body frozen in a graceful pose with the Lightscale Trident resting upon one shoulder.
Zelda was lucky to have witnessed it in action, even if it had only been once.

* * *

She had been 15 years old. Her father had permitted her leave of the castle for a short stay in Kakariko Village, provided that she continue her training by praying to the Goddess every day. Zelda had won him over by suggesting that the Great Fairy’s blessing could somehow bestow her with magical wisdom. But as soon as she arrived, Impa had news that sent all plans out the window.

“I leave for Zora’s Domain at dawn. Another individual has begun the sacred trials, meaning that there may be another worthy candidate to pilot a Divine Beast.”

Zelda begged to come along. The sacred trials could help her understand Hylia’s purpose, she tried. Holy inspiration might descend upon her from witnessing these acts of heroism.

Unexpectedly, Impa consented. They were carried down the Rutala River from Lanayru West Gate in a simple sailboat and were joined by other Sheikah researchers at their excavation site on Samasa Plain. Zelda gazed up at the Divine Beast Vah Ruta, newly cleared of the mud and grime that had accumulated within its recesses during its thousand-years underwater repose. It loomed over everyone upon four stout legs, its body a thick wall of pulsing wheels and energy cells. Her heart hammered wildly within her chest when the Beast tilted its head towards her, stone ears carved with swirling designs seeming to flap in the riverside breeze, a long, long nose curling up, and the two glowing discs for its eyes slowly turning in place.

They were greeted at the top of East Reservoir Lake by a contingent of Zora Knights, led by an olive-grey official with the biggest head fins Zelda had ever seen. He announced himself as Muzu, the minister administrator of the Zora Council. Muzu seemed to find the entire situation beneath him. Even when Impa introduced Zelda as Hyrule’s crown princess, he only sniffed and bobbed his head in a barely-there nod.

“Tell us more about the citizen taking on the trial, Minister,” Impa said as they began walking across the pristine blue platforms. Zelda hurried on behind them, feeling rather unimportant in this world of light and water.

“Citizen?” Muzu’s head fins flapped like flags as he turned to stare disapprovingly at Impa. “She is none other than Lady Mipha!”

Minister Muzu held his head high as he explained how this had come to pass. For days, the Zora princess had been murmuring a mysterious phrase to herself. While the sun is newly born, follow the path of light. Nobody had understood its meaning until one morning, there was a great commotion in court. Mipha had disappeared during the night, and King Dorephan was beside himself with worry. Just before they were to send out all able-bodied Zora to search for her, Mipha had returned on her own, bearing a glowing orb she claimed to have found in the deepest parts of the ocean. The Sheikah researchers immediately recognised it as a sacred Divine Beast emblem, and… here they were.

Zelda gripped the railing of the long stair that led them down the reservoir walls. She shielded her eyes from the glare of sunshine reflected off the elegant pavilions and walkways of Zora’s Domain, to say nothing of the resplendent stone fish topping the city. Mipha’s story fascinated her, for it deviated from the other Champion candidates’. They had all stumbled upon their Divine Beast emblem quite unexpectedly, though they were during acts of great courage. Revali the Rito had discovered his as a prize after a daring stunt on a legendary dragon, while Lord Daruk and Chief Urbosa had simply been protecting their homes from monstrous threats. But this had not
been the same case. It sounded more like Mipha had been… selected. Spoken to. By a sacred, spiritual power.

Zelda wished she knew what that was like.

The smooth stone gave way to lush grass beneath their feet. Vegetation thrived here in the constant spray of water. Zelda tried not to slip in the puddles as they approached a lake fed by a gushing waterfall. Zora knights held back a fidgeting crowd that chattered with each other, occasionally calling out words of encouragement towards the maiden who stood waiting in the shallows.

“Lady Mipha!” Muzu’s wheezing voice was shrill with excitement as he strode forward. He grasped the maiden’s hand reverently. “The Sheikah have arrived to observe your sacred trial.”

“Thank you, Muzu,” she replied.

Princess Mipha was shorter than the rest of the Zora, save for the children. She had bright scarlet scales with fins trimmed with a stripe of buttery yellow and royal blue. As was the fashion amongst her people, she was dressed lavishly with many decoration: a sash studded with sapphires, golden braid around her neck, and silver ornaments in the shape of the Zora triple-crescent insignia hanging upon her head fins. She was petite, feminine, graceful… and carrying a long, sharp trident in one fist.

Mipha turned and locked warm, amber eyes with Zelda. “Hyrule’s princess,” she said in surprise.

Zelda bowed hastily. “My apologies for arriving unannounced,” she said. “But I was intrigued when I heard a sacred trial of the ancient Sheikah had begun here in Lanayru, and wished to see it.”

“No, please don’t apologise! I am deeply honoured.” Mipha beamed with genuine joy. “And hope we will make a good impression on your first visit to our Domain.”

“Sergeant Seggin!” She suddenly turned to a lean, scarred Zora with dark scales standing beside her. “I entrust the princess’s safety to you during her stay with us. Please attend to her and see that any request is fulfilled.”

“Yes, Lady Mipha.”

Like Muzu, the Sergeant seemed to be one of Mipha’s mentors. But he took her order without question. He gave Zelda a solemn salute with his spear before turning attention back to his own princess.

Impa explained the process. “If you truly possess the emblem of the Divine Beast, the trial will activate. According to our deciphered records, you must chase the rings of the waterfall and conquer the ancient foes to prove yourself worthy.”

Mipha’s jewellery glinted as she nodded. “I will do my very best.”

Everybody stepped back. Mipha touched her fingers to her chest. A murmur rose from the spectators as a sphere appeared to emerge from her body, ghostly tendrils rising from it. She held it over the water, and louder cries sounded from the crowd when a spinning portal began to shimmer in the mist, unmistakable Sheikah blue ringed with ancient text. Zelda caught the triumphant expression upon Mipha’s face mere seconds before she dove into it.

Zelda had never seen anything like this. Mipha became a blur of bright crimson as she streaked up the crashing water, every portal dissolving into particles of light when she flew through them.
When she disappeared behind the lip of the first fall, the knights released the crowd of Zora, all of whom leaped in after Mipha to follow her. Sergeant Seggin carried Zelda upon his back. She clung to his shoulders holding her breath, feeling the cold flooding over her skin like liquid sheets of silk.

Zelda gasped when the Sergeant finally broke out of Lulu Lake. She could see the knights forming another barrier at the edge of the waterfall, but they needed little reinforcement this time as the Zora shrank away from shadows of three Guardian Skywatchers sweeping over the top of Ploymus Mountain. A single turret Guardian was at their centre, beeping ominously and swivelling back and forth as it sought its target.

Zelda leaned forward eagerly, but was met with the shaft of Sergeant Seggin’s spear. She felt another hand on her shoulder and turned to see Impa standing behind her, her brows pulled into concentration as she watched the action before them.

Mipha fought alone. The Lightscale Trident stayed true to its name, blazing brilliantly as it twirled through the air to pierce one of the Skywatchers clean through. The machine grumbled and groaned before crashing to the ground. Mipha was already racing through the slick grass, dodging the searchlights and snatching up her weapon. Zelda caught a glimpse of Mipha’s face as she glanced back to calculate her next move. It was focused and fierce. Nothing like the genteel, kindly princess who had greeted her so cheerfully at the bottom of the mountain.

Another Skywatcher went down. But the turret Guardian gave Mipha a sound challenge, quite literally so every time it released a high-pitched whine while its laser zeroed in right in the centre of her head tail. Mipha didn’t bat an eyelid even as she scrambled up a tall boulder at the side of the plateau.

Shouts of shock ripped the air as Mipha launched herself off the rock, her trident winking in the harsh sunlight. She drove it right into the Skywatcher’s single eye but kept holding on tightly. Zelda couldn’t move as she stared up at the tiny Zora princess dangling from a sliver of silver high in the air, head tail swinging and ornaments sparkling.

The grating sound of stone grinding against stone rumbled once again as the turret Guardian spun around to take aim. Impa’s fingernails dug into Zelda’s shoulder when the Skywatcher exploded into smithereens. The Zora screamed, but Zelda saw a flash of scarlet dropping down from the sky. Mipha slammed her trident deep into the turret Guardian’s head with all her might, unflinching as the machine shuddered, then cracked under the strain.

The astonished silence only lasted for a few seconds before all of the Zora, knights included, erupted into joyous cheers. They flooded the plateau, singing their princess’s praises. Minister Muzu sobbed openly. Sergeant Seggin bared his sharp teeth in a proud grin. Mipha remained atop her defeated foe, radiant with glory.

Zelda stood beside Impa and couldn’t help but think: this was a Goddess-blessed princess.

* * *

“Hey! LINK!!”

The memory melted away, and Zelda blinked back to the present at the bellows of a booming voice.

“My dear friend! How delighted I am to have you back in our beloved Domain once again. It has been ages. So much has happened since your last visit here, where do I even begin?”
A red-finned Zora came bounding down to them, his legs making big splashes as they strode through the pools. He halted before the both of them, spreading his arms in a joyous, generous gesture. “Father will be glad to see you again! Vah Ruta has been unresponsive for weeks, and you were the last to go near it. We were told of a great battle upon Hyrule Field, was that y…”

The Zora finally noticed Zelda and froze at the sight of her. “Princess Zelda,” he breathed.

Zelda stared back at him. The way he had spoken her name seemed to imply some familiarity, and so did his compassionate expression. She noted the presence of a sapphire-studded sash, golden braid, and silver ornaments…

“Prince Sidon?”

His amber eyes lit up at his name. Mipha’s younger brother knelt down to take her hand in both of his. His touch was as warm as the hue of his scales, burnished scarlet. “To think that Hyrule’s princess remembers me. It was a very long time ago. I am honoured to welcome you back to Zora’s Domain. ”

Zelda recalled a shy and mild-mannered child who had barely reached her hip. But now, even on one knee, Sidon towered over her. He truly was the tallest Zora that Zelda had ever seen, save for King Dorephan himself, and certainly the most powerfully built. She felt her cheeks growing warm. Everywhere she looked, there was toned muscle and shining scales. It was… distracting.

Sidon took no notice of her fluster and continued to pat her hand. “I know now with utmost certainty that it was you who defeated the scourge of the Kingdom, Link! Naturally, it could be none other than the Hylian Champion, my most treasured friend! I am so proud of you!”

“Thanks,” Link said, smirking at Zelda. She pressed her lips together and willed herself to focus on the task at hand.

“What was it you said about Vah Ruta?” she asked. Sidon brightened once more, releasing her and getting to his feet.

“Ah, yes.” Sidon motioned for them to walk with him up the staircase. “That is an issue we ought to take up before my father the King. No doubt that you are here to see him, after all. Let us go at once! We have often wondered after you, Princess, since Link told us of your miraculous survival within Hyrule Castle. I am sure he will want to hear the tale from your own lips.”

As she walked through Zora’s Domain, recognition swept over Zelda like the flow of the falls that tumbled off the platforms around her. There were young knights patrolling the railings, stopping to throw up salutes at the sight of their prince. An artisan tested the luminous stone columns with a delicate chisel, brushing away invisible dust. Zora children played in the open air, chasing each other and nearly tripping on their head tails. There was the Goddess Statue at her seat of honour between the banisters. Light reflected off the surface of her pool, creating a glowing pattern that undulated back and forth upon her body.

Everything was just as Zelda had remembered. That is, until an elderly Zora passed her by. He had drooping fins and scales dappled with age. At first it seemed that they would pass without any acknowledgment, but then the Zora glanced over at her. He stopped in his tracks at once. The elder stared daggers, not saying a word. All she could do was continue following Sidon.

Link must have sensed something, for he stopped and waited until she caught up, quietly lacing his fingers around hers.
They entered King Dorephan’s court. The lively sounds of Zora’s Domain grew faint, replaced by the gentle splashing of fountains on either side of the King. He was as massive and majestic as ever, the sharp points of his silver crown dull against the soft glow of the domed ceiling. There were deep lines set into his face and scars crossing his brow. The trim of his head fins were thin and translucent. He leaned against the rests of his throne wearily.

Still, his face broke into a smile when she and Link stepped up to the sloped dais before his throne. “I cannot believe it,” he said in a voice like reverberating drums. “The Hylian princess appearing before us. After all this time, it is a blessing from the Goddess for us to meet once more. So many memories. My mind overflows with nostalgia.”

“As does mine,” she said. “The Domain remains as a haven within Lanayru, having not lost any of its strength and elegance. Coming here has filled me with a hope for the rest of Hyrule, that it too can come to find peace and prosperity again.”

King Dorephan nodded. “We have been sworn allies with the royal family of Hyrule for thousands of years. This vow did not break even when we believed Hylia’s line to have ended. I gladly give you my support, Princess Zelda, should you choose to retake your kingdom. There is no use for knowledge and resources if we cannot share it with other nations in need.”

“Thank you. I am forever grateful. But…” Zelda felt her insides quaking. It was so hard to look into King Dorephan’s sombre eyes. “I have come to tell you about… about Mipha.”

The atmosphere shifted, though nobody in the room said a word. Sidon was like a statue at his father’s left hand, blinking at Zelda through narrow eyes. He surprised her by closing them and bowing low, not a haughty word or disdainful sneer present. She could saw how his barbels trembled, and his head fins swayed when he slowly raised his head again. Fatigue and sadness filled his face. Zelda was surprised again when she felt sympathy in her heart.

Quietly, painstakingly, and with much sorrow, Zelda recounted Mipha’s fate to those who had loved her the most. Link helped her fill in the gaps, describing those final moments within Ruta before her spirit was set free to make battle with Ganon. The King smiled with tears in his eyes, mourning his daughter, but proud that her last act was still to protect her home from harm.

“I had heard a terrible rumour that your death was what sealed the Calamity away.” King Dorephan bowed his head. “It shames me to confess that learning of your continued fight within Hyrule Castle gave me false hope that perhaps my precious daughter could have returned to us, too. But worry not, Princess. I have made peace with the fact that Mipha is gone. She will not come back.”

“I’m sorry,” Zelda said.

“Please,” Sidon assured, “do not blame yourself. My sister chose to be your Champion, and she never expressed regret.”

Only Muzu had lost his composure. The elderly Zora gasped as he wept, salty tears running down his weathered scales and disappearing into the pools upon the floor. “Our princess,” he choked out. “Her unjust fate, her suffering! A promising future ripped from her healing hands. She possessed the gift of life, yet her life was taken from her! The glimpses of what could have been are all we
have left… the Lightscale Trident, the Zora armour crafted from the depths of her very heart and soul! And both of these rest not with us, but a Hylian…”

“Muzu,” Sidon warned.

But the Minister was too far gone in his grief. “He who stands here... the man called Link! Her betrothed! The one whom my lost lady, Mipha, was sworn to marry!”

His words were like a shock arrow to the chest, numbing and searing at the same time. Zelda didn’t move, forced to be made aware of every sensation upon and within her body. From the chill breeze from the rolling waters creeping along her scalp, the heat of blood rushing to her cheeks, her heart beating wildly against her ribcage, her legs heavy and rooted to the floor. Link’s fingers squeezing hers too tightly. She let go.

“Excuse me,” she said out loud. Before Sidon or King Dorephan could say anything, Zelda turned and fled from the room.

The sky above was greying as clouds heavy with rain drifted their way. Zelda staggered as her boots threatened to send her sliding down the steep stair and crashing into the railings. Nearby Zora shot her curious glances as she walked towards the platform’s edge. Below the balcony, the cheerful children danced around the first droplets, oblivious to her.

“Zelda, wait!”

He had followed her, of course. “Zelda, Muzu is old. He hasn’t been the same since… he’s talking out his tail. Don’t listen to him.”

She couldn’t look at him. “Did she make you Zora armour?”

“Yes. But the King gave it to me, not her. It was only so I could help Sidon with Ruta.”

That didn’t matter to her. Zelda knew enough about Zora culture and tradition to know what that armour truly meant. When she had returned to the castle from that first intimidating journey to Lanayru, she had sought out the library for more knowledge about the alluring Zora. There had been an entire chapter dedicated to the intricate designs of their princesses’ betrothal armour in great detail, from the painstaking process of weaving the fine metalwork, a complete glossary of symbols and sigils, and of course, the legend of the white scale. Each suit was different, handmade and tailored for their intended wearers.

Crafting Zora armour was not a flighty undertaking. Mipha had not been a foolish, simpering girl who would have allowed a mere infatuation take root. She would have taken this decision most seriously and with her people in mind. If she had been ready to risk their respect and her throne for an ignoble Hylian, she must have felt strongly about it. If she had taken the time and trouble… she must have been sure that Link would have said yes.

And why wouldn’t he? Zelda watched as his tunic slowly changed colour in front of her as rain seeped through the cloth. Mipha was beautiful and sweet, charming and capable. Link loved Zora’s Domain; he had spent his childhood here. It certainly made sense…

“Zelda.”

Her silence was making him restless, she could tell. Link shifted his weight, hands clenched upon his hips. He sighed to himself before speaking again. “I do not believe I was ever engaged to Mipha.”
“You don’t... believe?” Zelda was aghast. “Do you mean to say you don’t remember something as serious as this?”

Impatience flickered across his face. “Well, I don’t get to choose what I can or can’t remember.”

It was then that Zelda realised that he had yet to answer the question she asked him out on Hyrule Field. Nearly half a year ago. “Link,” she said. “Do you really remember me?”

He hesitated, for just an instant too long. “Yes.”

She stared at him, and he looked away. It was enough to loosen her tongue, and the questions burst forth from her like the downpour around them. “The first time we went to Hateno Village? Or Lake Hylia? The Spring of Courage, with Farosh! The book I lent you. You studied from it for weeks, don’t you remember its title? And the last day we spent together on Mount Lanayru, and you brought my something... what was it?”

“Goddesses, Zelda. I have the important memories, okay? Not everything.”

How could he say those weren’t important?

“What about those from your childhood? Or the royal guard?” She forced air down her throat. “Or the Captain. Your father, Link.”

That did it. Link’s face fell and he stared at his feet. Water dripped down his chin. Zelda didn’t need him to speak. She knew that his recovered memories were so few. So he had barely known her when they kissed in Kakariko Village. He had allowed her to keep rambling on with her stories featuring characters he had never known for hours in Hateno. She thought he had been humouring her urges to suddenly talk about the past, but he just didn’t know.

Then, Zelda was struck with the worst thought. What if everything about them now was built on a grave mistake? Not on his part, but hers — since the moment Link had stepped out of the Shrine of Resurrection, all he had been told to do was to find her. He had said so himself. Zelda. Zelda. Save the princess, Zelda. They had pushed him to think that she was the only thing from his previous life that mattered which, as she saw now, was absolutely untrue. She felt like a deceit. As if... she had manipulated him.

Was it love, or was it all fabricated?

“What are you saying?”

She blinked and looked up. Link was staring hard at her, his blue eyes stormy as the clouds above. Zelda’s heart stopped when she realised that she had been speaking her all unfiltered thoughts out loud. Link glared at her, a dark and terrible expression fusing disbelief and anger and hurt all at once.

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“No, I didn’t say that at all! I mean—”

“You always do this. Whatever I have to say — even when it comes to my own existence — is never as important as whatever you have decided in that brain of yours. Even when you’re wrong. And you are wrong, Zelda. You are wrong a lot.”

It was so dark now that it seemed like night. Even the glowing blue pillars of the Domain were dim
against the sheets of rain that showered down around them. All the Zora had retreated, taking shelter under their stone pagodas or diving to the depths of the turbulent lake below. Link’s voice rose above the incessant rattle of droplets against stone.

“You are beautiful, smart, and powerful. But not that powerful. What makes you know me better than me? I’m true with you, and you never believe me. Why the hell would I not love you? I died for you. What else would you have me do?”

She had no answer to that, and he knew it. Link stepped back, breathing hard. His fringe was plastered to his forehead. He shot her one last resentful look before storming off towards the eastern passage to Ploymus Mountain. Zelda finally unstuck her throat.

“Link, wait!”

He ignored her, stalking across the bridge. Zelda watched him leave until his shape blurred in her eyes, from rain or otherwise.

“Princess?”

Rivulets of water ran down Sidon’s scales as he reached Zelda. The black plume on his head ornament looked very bedraggled. Sidon lifted a thick cloth from his arm and draped it round Zelda’s shoulders firmly. “Do not worry about Link. He is the greatest Hylian I have ever known. I recommend that you take a rest from your long journey.” He saw the look on her face. “Perhaps away from prying eyes.”

He ushered her down the stairs to the lower level. Zelda covered her head when she saw Mipha’s statue, shame welling up in her throat. Sidon hesitated. Instead of bringing her to the inn, he led her past the statue.

The Sheikah shrine was alive and humming within its alcove, glowing blue just like the walls around it. The air was warmer here, and sweetened by the fleet-lotus flowers floating upon the surface of the pool that collected the water from the fountain. Sidon urged Zelda to sit. She leaned against the Guidance stone and said nothing.

Sidon joined her on the edge of the shrine’s platform, stretching his legs into the water. “Father and I agreed that with this dismal weather and the… ah, situation at hand, we shall postpone a welcoming banquet until a more opportune atmosphere arises.”

“Thank you,” Zelda said.

Sidon nodded. Almost on cue, they both glanced up, to where Mipha stood brilliant and brave against the pouring skies. Zelda touched the back of her hand.

Sidon gazed at the figure of his sister. “I loved her dearly, but… it is hard, living up to the memory of your kin. The elders were very bitter after the events of the Calamity. Mipha was their hope for a new era of glory for Zora’s Domain. But instead, they were left with me.”

Zelda glanced over and saw the pale lines of a scar visible upon one head fin. Thunder cracked in the distance.

“When the bodies returned from battle, I could do nothing.” The bright gleam of Sidon’s eyes dimmed as he regarded the blossoms drifting by his ankles. “It was a very low time for the Zora. I was heavily scrutinised in the early years, but only disappointed the elders when I failed to exhibit the same abilities as my sister. My father was put under pressure, but there was nothing he could do.”
This was sounding all too familiar. Zelda’s fingertips pressed hard against the bones beneath her skin. “It was not your fault,” she said.

The Zora prince smiled at her. “Yes. You are right. But it took me years — decades, even — to reconcile myself with this. I trained and studied everything expected of me with utmost diligence, but that was not enough. Constant comparison to my sister would only keep me from any true growth. So with my father’s blessing, I distanced myself from the council. I paid attention to the plights of my people and sought to serve them instead. No problem was too big or small.”

“That was the best decision I have ever made. It has taught me essential skills in many fields. Or brought me to places most Zora have never been, like rivers deep in the jungle or the salty open seas! But most importantly, it has brought me closer to my people, creating dear companions who trust and believe in me.” Sidon looked at Mipha’s statue again, smiling. “Were it not for them, I would never have arrived at the place I am today: hoisted upon their shoulders to see the bright future Zora’s Domain deserves and will receive!”

He spoke with such ardent conviction, grasping the air before him in an eager, clenched fist and flashing gleaming, pointed teeth. Zelda suddenly had the compulsion to applaud. Instead, she squeezed her hands together and smiled. “I believe in you too, Sidon. Long live your father, but you too will make a great king one day.”

Sidon lowered his arms, resting them upon his knees. “Your support moves me, Princess. There is something I would like to tell you. Will you hear it?”

“With absolute pleasure.”

Sidon leaned in, his smile more like soft candlelight rather than the glaring beams of sunshine she was coming to expect. “Release some of your pride. When someone has given you their heart, they deserve the same in return. Believe them, no matter how far-fetched the story might seem. Listen closely and cherish their words. Learning to see the world through another’s eyes is the deepest truth I have ever known.”

He spoke what had been hiding in her heart all along. But there was still a final question burning within it.

“Did you know… about them?” She knew her cheeks were flushing with embarrassment. “Link and Mipha.”

Sidon went quiet. Zelda could see that he was preparing to break news to her gently.

“The last moment I shared with my sister,” he said softly, “was before she left for Mount Lanayru. It was during the smallest hours of the night, when the rest of the Domain was lost in deep slumber. For some reason, I was unable to join them. I tossed and turned in my pool for a long time, which was why I was able to see her.”

“Mipha was awake. She moved quickly but quietly, looking around her often as if afraid of being caught. There was something in her hands, something rather large but hidden beneath a dark cloth. I couldn’t help it; I followed her. I thought I was being stealthy, but she was already waiting for me at the Goddess Statue. Mipha asked me if I could help her keep a secret. I said yes.”

“At first, it seemed like we were going to Father’s room, but she took me round the back of the fish. I could see then that she was holding a chest. It was heavy when we carried it together, across the lake and up the falls. We buried it in a crevice between the falls and the steppe. Mipha wanted to hide it well, so we made a concrete of mud and embedded stones in it so nobody would see the
cracks.”

Sidon ran a hand over the fore of his head tail. “I did not fully understand it at the time, but I knew that it was very important that I keep the secret. So I never went back to the chest until… until a few years ago. We were desperately in need of a Hylian’s help to subdue Ruta, and I knew the armour would be of use.” His smile now looked more like a grimace. “And as fate would have it, that Hylian still turned out to be Link!”

“What I mean to say is that I believe that my sister knew… that Link would not have agreed to her proposal. Perhaps Mipha thought that burying the very symbol of her feelings would help ease them.”

This did not make Zelda feel much better, especially when she could see Mipha before her, leaning on her trident. “Mipha is gone,” Sidon reminded her. “That is a statue. Cold, lifeless stone. My sister deserves better than becoming a vapid idol to fawn over.”

He was right. Zelda looked at the water cascading gently towards them, a constant flow down the steps. She tried to imagine them washing through her, cleaning away the guilt and panic. She held onto a small share of sadness, to mourn her friend and empathise with her heartbreak, but allowed all else to melt and run off into the current.

“I carry a name famed for wisdom,” she said. “Yet it seems that every new friend I make has needed to guide me, instead.”

Sidon beamed. “That is precisely what I mean, Princess!”

“I must say,” he added, “that in the end, a union between my sister and Link would be quite impossible. How would they produce an heir? Perhaps she had planned to abdicate. Of course, I am now set to inherit anyway, but the thought is quite alarming.”

Zelda leaned her chin into her palm. “Speaking of heirs, it is now your responsibility to continue the royal lineage. Have you given it any thought, lately? I’ve noticed many Zora maidens responding quite enthusiastically to your greetings.”

She grinned as Sidon blinked and babbled. “That… that is a premature notion, Princess! I’m far too young to think of such matters.”

“Sidon, you’re over 100 years old!”

“And so are you!”

Their laughter echoed around the domed chamber, sending bright-eyed crabs scuttling into the corners.

There was a loud splash coming from the alcove entrance. Link stood silhouetted against the slowly lightening skies. He was not smiling. Zelda’s heart dropped when she saw the silver Zora triple-crescent dangling over the deep blue mail of his armour. From the sparkling turquoise gems in the belt and collar to the woven scales across his back, this was undoubtedly Mipha’s design.

“My friend,” Sidon said, “is everything alright? Where did—”

Link held up a gnarled, yellowed object in one hand. He tossed it to Sidon as he walked down to them, sputters of water with every step. “That lynel on the mountain’s gone for good now. I took all the arrows, too.”
“Thank you! Full of surprises as always, Link!” Sidon examined the lynel horn with great interest. “I shall inform Father at once.”

He rose to his feet and left them, but not before grasping Zelda’s hand firmly, encouragingly. Link watched him leave, then came to sit down beside her. Neither spoke for several seconds.

He pointed at her belt. “Can I?”

Zelda unclipped the Sheikah Slate. Link’s face lit up with that vivid, bright glare of the screen, as if there wasn’t enough blue all around them already. He seemed to find what he had been looking for and handed the Slate back to her.

She looked into the image of Hyrule Ridge, just north of where the old Royal Ancient Tech Lab had been. The field in the foreground was absolutely flooded by flowers in every colour, rich and bold or delicate and pastel, stems and petals crossing in and out together like a tapestry woven on a loom gone wild. A single tree at the side curved round the border to frame Hyrule Castle in the distance, a dark shadow to contrast the bright and beautiful scenery.

“It’s a good picture,” she said to him.

“You took it,” he replied. His hands covered hers again when he flicked the screen back to the album. Zelda went through the images, emotions surging in her chest at how they captured Hyrule before its ruin, from the proud arch of Lanayru East Gate to castle parapets that were not crumbled and cracked.

“This is how I remembered you,” Link said. “Impa told me to find the locations in these pictures. They weren’t easy to find. But once I did… it was like sliding back into that Link’s body. I could feel everything. Even the temperature, the wind, sand or ground or whatever under my feet… it was going back and reliving the moment.”

“This was the worst one,” he said, pointing at the field of flowers. “Watching you pick up that damn frog. Trying to find a way out but knowing that stupid me was going to do it anyway because there was no chance I could look at your smile and disobey… it was real.” Link swallowed as he stared into the Sheikah Slate. “I know it was.”

His expression was so torn, miserable, and exasperated at the same time that it had to be genuine. She discovered that she felt no relief at coming to this realisation, since it had always been there — Link loved her, of course. He had told her so many times, directly or through subtle acts.

“I’m sorry for not trusting you.”

“I’m sorry I shouted at you.”

“No, don’t be. I needed it. In fact, you ought to shout more because Goddesses know I’m awful at listening. Please help me become a wise and good person.”

He smiled wryly. “You’re a good person. You’re just… used to having your way.”

“Then you need to make sure I don’t all the time.”

“See?” He shook his head. “There we go.”

The silver pieces on his armour glittered under the luminous stone. Zelda reached out and touched the delicate chain that stretched across Link’s torso. “This is one of a kind,” she said. “You must treasure it.”
Link nodded. He wrapped his arm around Zelda and she pressed her cheek against the cool, smooth surface of the silver pauldrons of his armour. She was close enough to see every individual scale now, and couldn’t help admiring Mipha’s craftsmanship.

She frowned. “What’s this stuff?”

“Lynel blood, I guess.”

“Ugh!” Zelda pushed him away. “After I told you to treasure it! Mipha worked hard on this!”

“It’s armour, it’s supposed to keep the gunk off me.” Link frowned at his midriff. “And I thought going through the lake would wash it off anyway.”

“Well, it certainly did not. Go change right now! Ask someone here how to clean Zora armour.”

Link grumbled as he got to his feet. Zelda darted in and kissed his cheek while he was looking away. Link stopped and looked at her, traces of that anguished longing still in his eyes.

“Zelda. I lo…”

“I know,” she said. “You don’t have to prove it. I believe you.”

The following day was balmy and cool, good weather for a hike. Zelda, Link, and Sidon climbed up into the Zobodon Highlands with the wind whipping through their hair and fins, making their way to the round pond where Vah Ruta had made its resting spot, still aimed at Hyrule Castle with its trunk raised high.

“It’s because Mipha’s spirit is gone,” Link said, walking around the edge of the Divine Beast, eyeing it warily. “And Ganon, too. Nothing to attack, nothing to control it. It’s not broken, or anything.”

Zelda agreed. But she could sense something from within the great creature. There was still power in Vah Ruta, which could be harnessed if one only had the key to unlock it. And with the right person wielding that key.

She smiled to herself, then turned to their gracious host. “Sidon, it is my turn to offer you something. A token of my gratitude for your wonderful friendship and sound advice. Though it does come with a request first.”

“Request away, Princess!”

“Would you take up the role of Vah Ruta’s new pilot?”

Sidon was taken aback. His eyes darted down to the surface of the pool. “I… I am touched by this offer, but I’m afraid I lack any characteristics worthy of a Divine Beast. I have none of my sister’s abilities, which were key to controlling Ruta.”

“That’s where my gift comes in.” Zelda pulled out a new Sheikah Slate from her pouch. It was so slim and small and nondescript, but she couldn’t help but marvel at how much power could be packed into one device. There had been no time for decorations, not even mild embellishments, but Zelda was sure that the Zora would find a way to fashion something handsome and striking to match their prince.

“It is time for you to take up Mipha’s legacy and make it your own.” Zelda handed him the Slate.
“I name you Zora Champion. Please take this Sheikah Slate for your people, using it to protect them through Ruta and to stay close to Hyrule, for your counsel has been invaluable.”

Sidon was rendered speechless, something Zelda suspected was not a common occurrence. “I… will it truly work for me?”

Zelda grinned and turned to the Divine Beast, who had lowered its trunk. She saw Link’s head jerking round in surprise when he noticed that a doorway had appeared in Ruta’s side. “There is only one way to find out.”

Chapter End Notes

I swear, if 7k becomes the new chapter length average I will... keep writing, I guess.

1. I am way more interested in exploring Mipha as a foil/inspiration to Zelda rather than one-note emotional baggage for Link. But if you’ve read my stuff this far in, I’m sure you’re already aware. ;P
2. Make that both Zora siblings! There’s so much to examine between Sidon and Zelda regarding the expectations laid upon them after the death of a beloved family member: their support networks, their dissenters, how much they allowed those memories to shape who they became…
3. I just like the juxtaposition of these two royal families of Hyrule, a lot. Desperate dads, princesses under pressure, a kid left behind to pick up the pieces. Sometimes I wish that the devs saw the wealth of potential they created, but part of me is relieved they didn’t do diddly squat because now I get to use it.

Missed the Solstice by one day, but wishing everyone a happy holidays with Merry Christmas to those who celebrate it! I baked a chocolate chip cookie cake and it was delicious.
Link kept a hand upon the smooth stone walls of Ruta’s back as the Divine Beast sailed down the river with incredible ease and surprising swiftness.

“AMAZING!” Sidon shouted. The cliffs echoed with his uproarious laughter as they made a beeline towards Rutala Dam. “As long as there is water, Ruta can get through! What a miraculous feat for such a large creature. Princess, I fully understand your appreciation towards those ancient Sheikah geniuses!”

Zelda was still trying to sort out her hair, drenched from the first time Sidon had attempted — and succeeded — to move Ruta from its perch. She flashed him a smile, tempered slightly by the worried crease in her brow. “Yes, indeed. But Sidon, the reservoir is very deep. As a Zora, spending time underwater is of no consequence for you. However, Link and I…”

“Don’t worry, Princess. I’ll never let you drown! We’re getting close!”

He held up his new Sheikah Slate. Link saw the glowing blueprint of Vah Ruta upon the screen just as Sidon tapped it with great conviction. Zelda grabbed both Sidon’s elbow and Link’s wrist before the Divine Beast reared up and plunged back into the depths of the river. Gallons of water gushed past Link’s ears, and he felt himself losing grip just before a muscular arm clamped round his stomach. Link choked in surprise, gulping down a mouthful of murky lake water. An alarming tightness spread through his chest with every additional second spent in this dark, wet world…

Divine Beast Vah Ruta burst forth from the surface of East Lake Reservoir. The orbs on its back blazed bright green as they churned, expelling water from the insides by way of gushing waterfalls. Triumphant trumpeting echoed round Upland Zorana as Ruta raised its trunk to anoint Shatterback Point once again. Sidon set down both Link and Zelda, and they lay sprawled upon the stone bedraggled and gasping for breath.

Sidon patted Link on the shoulder. “There, there. It wasn’t too bad! Take your time, my friends!”

He turned to address the Zora assembled upon the reservoir jetty. It must have caused quite a stir in the Domain when Ruta disappeared from the cliffs, and to hear the sounds of several hundred tonnes of machine thundering through the river. Cries of astonishment rose from the crowed when they recognised their prince standing atop the Divine Beast.

Sidon waved at them. “My fellow Zora! Gaze now upon the Divine Beast Vah Ruta. An ancient being that so recently threatened to drown the world in her tears, but may I remind you that it was once the protector of our beautiful Domain and helmed by none other than my beloved sister, Mipha. You have all witnessed the fearlessness of the Hylian hero, Link, in rescuing Ruta from the clutches of Ganon!”

“And yet, even when the Calamity was banished once and for all, we were unable to reclaim our wayward guardian. It is only through the efforts of the brilliant princess of Hyrule that Ruta has returned home to our side. Thus, I shall now declare Zora’s Domain as sworn allies of Hyrule once again!” Sidon grabbed Zelda’s hand, dragging her forward. She had to scramble atop the stone ledge just to avoid being dangled in mid-air. “Together, we shall rebuild the land until all nations can thrive and prosper. There is nothing stopping us! I know we can do it! I believe in us!”
His speech was met with a round of applause and loud cheering. Sidon grinned as he gestured for Zelda to hold onto his back before diving into the lake. Link followed suit.

Sidon’s victory was deemed worthy for a celebration. The banquet was a cosy affair, but was still treated with all the pomp and grandeur that only Zora’s Domain could supply. The pavilions were hung with lovely lanterns, and tables laden with deliciously prepared dishes of fish and crustaceans alike were set up upon the reservoir jetty. There were no waterfalls leading up to East Lake, so most citizens came up the stairs gleaming in heirloom jewels and polished armour. A few youths showed off by diving in from Shatterback Point, now much more enticing for the lack of lurking lynels. They swam around Vah Ruta daringly, marring the water’s surface with their slipstreams.

Sidon glided around, offering personal welcomes to each arrival and making sure they were introduced to his guests of honour. He had hung his Sheikah Slate upon his belt, a plain little device beside the fine silver and turquoise accessories. Zelda seemed to be enjoying herself very much, showing enthusiasm with every new introduction and eagerly taking every opportunity to describe her hopes for Zora’s Domain and the Sheikah technology.

“Ruta is powered by electricity. See those glowing orbs? They house some sort of device that creates a perpetual charge, even after all these years! Of course, the fact that Link was able to disable them easily with mere shock arrows means that those orbs are quite dangerously exposed. We will need to examine Ruta’s insulation methods to replicate them and ensure the safety of Prince Sidon as he pilots the Divine Beast. But he has done exceedingly well so far, I must say.”

The Zora girls she was speaking to had looked politely flummoxed for most of this conversation, but perked up at the name of their prince. They enthusiastically agreed that Sidon was absolutely deserving of being named a Champion and began regaling Zelda with other stories of his dashing bravery. Link ate more crab.

It was very late in the night when the banquet ended. Sidon had assigned them the reservoir outpost for private quarters. Zelda was delighted to watch Ruta from a window, continuing to ramble while Link changed out of his tunic.

“That was a much smaller Zora banquet than what I remember,” she said. “They used to completely flood the Domain, all three levels and the walkways too. But tonight, everyone was able to comfortably fit right here. I mean, it was nice. I could have proper conversations with everyone. And they actually wanted to speak with me, too.” Zelda drew her knees up to her chest and looked over as Link pulled back the blankets. “So I believe changes can be good. Remember the past, but look to the future.”

Link didn’t respond as he lay down. The carved ceiling above him had a pattern that reminded him of armour, tiny interlocking rings like mail.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing. I’m tired.”

“Me too.”

She settled in beside him. Link stayed awake, listening to the steady splash of the falls in the distance.

He knew that he didn’t remember everything. He hated it, every time somebody had reacted in shock and disappointment to see a lack of recognition in his eyes — Impa, Purah, Robbie, Dorephan, any of those stick-in-the-ass Zora elders — as if it was a personal insult that he had
returned from the dead and sacrificed his entire history for it. That’s why he loved Zelda, because she loved him back and didn’t care that it had taken him so long to singlehandedly fulfill every demand all the others had tossed at him, only begging for his safety and to see him again.

At least, that’s what he had thought. Now, over half a year into their combined lives where they had been together, living together, sleeping together nearly every single night, she decided it actually was of consequence? He loved her more than anything else now, did it matter what happened if he, for some unfathomable reason, had not then?

But she had been desperate to apologise, and he believed her because he had always believed her, so this was all water under the Great Zora Bridge now, ebbing away on rapid currents until it all welled up in stagnant, swampy wetland.

Zelda sighed softly in her sleep. With her eyes still tightly shut, she rolled over so her face pressed into his chest, her hand resting over his heart. Link watched her shoulders relax and felt his ire fade.

He had spent plenty of time on his own staring at that statue in the fountain, willing himself to scrounge up something stronger than a short conversation in the sky, but there was nothing. Nothing but an acute sense of hollowness inside him, and the sadness that followed was more for those missing pieces than the pretty girl with the trident.

Clouds shifted in the night sky and Link’s heart skipped a beat. The Hylian shield, which he had sat rather untidily over all his other belongings on the shelf opposite the bed, was suddenly lit with a single moonbeam. The silver rim shone fierce within the pale light, and the deep blue simply made the crimson wings stand out more. The Triforce looked almost ethereal. It stirred something in Link, but he could not place it.

Formal goodbyes were said the following morning in King Dorephan’s throne room. Zelda apologised for her abrupt departure from court two days prior, but the King waved an enormous hand. “Small matters, Princess, compared to how you have helped us. To know that Zora’s Domain is watched over once again by Vah Ruta is as if my own daughter has returned… All of the Zora thank you from the depths of their hearts for your selfless work. We are truly grateful.”

“Yes! After all, we must do something about those orbs. I cannot promise an exact date, but I will relay a message to the tech lab at once to see what we can do. They shall be in touch with you shortly.”

“Splendid!” Sidon bent down and grasped Zelda’s hands in both of his, teeth glinting like the crystalline kingdom behind him. “Truly, I could never thank you enough! You have given Zora’s Domain newfound hope for the future. This calls for a top-tier expression of gratitude!”
Despite himself, Link could not suppress a snort of laughter at the alarm on Zelda’s face when Sidon straightened up and bellowed, “ZO! ZO! RA RA RA! With all my heart, thank you, Princess!”

The journey out of Lanayru was uneventful. Zelda kept up a steady stream of chatter for most of it. “I’m looking forward to seeing Goron City again. It’s possible that they can assist us with Ruta’s electricity issues, given their skills in engineering and masonry. Combined with our understanding of the ancient technology, perhaps we can even invent something completely new! I recall that one hundred years ago, the Gorons had already worked out a transportation system using carts and bomb flowers. That has always intrigued me, but now if we can harness electricity or Sheikah energy from the towers instead… Link?”

She stopped atop a boulder in the middle of the river, water splashing over the toes of her boots. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” He knew that she didn’t buy it for a second. She was quiet for the rest of the hike.

Eventually, the wetlands dried out into rocky foothills with scrubby pine trees finding a way to push through the hard earth and still thrive in the dry atmosphere. The sun was setting fast, but the range remained well lit from the glowing magma rim of Death Mountain’s summit right above them. Stable hands were settling in for the night, tarp stretched over boxes of goods and sweeping red dust into the fire beneath the cooking pot, causing the flames to sputter and smoke a little.

A soft bed was available for the night. Zelda hugged a pillow as Link unequipped his weapons. Nobody would dare bother her with the Master Sword leaning so casually by the footboard. She spoke up softly before he could leave. “Is it about Mipha?”

“No,” he said honestly.

“Me?”

“No.”

Her brows were pulled together in worry, and she was kneading the back of one hand like it was a particularly obstinate dough. Link sat down and touched her fingers to make her stop. “You’re overthinking,” he said. “I’m just going through… something.”

“Can’t you tell me?”

“I don’t even know what it is,” he admitted. Zelda’s forehead smoothed and she kissed his cheek.

“Come back soon.”

Even close to midnight, the air was very warm. Link walked the gritty path up to where a shrine hummed softly. The lake behind it looked like an obsidian mirror. He could see fireflies floating lazily over their reflections in the water. Facing back towards the west, the thin blue column of Lanayru Tower was just visible, and even tinier in the distance, Divine Beast Vah Naboris was a minuscule pinprick on the horizon.

Link was suddenly seized with the desire to leap down and make for the hills, weighed down by nothing else but the clothes on his back and boots on his feet. It was so tempting to flee from all this and regress into the Link who was unaware that he was incomplete, only wanting to know what was on top of that mountain or what that mushroom would taste like. Simple times.

A light flickered behind the canvas walls of the stable, and his intrusive thoughts disintegrated as
easily as the ash in the wind. Link plopped down upon the shrine’s travel gate and buried his face in his hands. What a stupid feeling. This intense loneliness that just made him want to be more alone. He would never leave Zelda, even if this was partially her fault. No, not their fight in Zora’s Domain. Zelda had always been the key to remembering. Link had returned to the Sheikah Slate’s album countless times to brood over those pictures, so much that now he only needed to concentrate and he could replay any of the scenes near-flawlessly behind his eyelids.

But she couldn’t bring back everything. Link felt the edge of his shield digging into his shoulder and took it off, setting it down beside him. He slowly traced the Triforce with one finger, a habit he had picked up from the first time it was awarded to him in the dungeons of the castle. He did have a few memories that weren’t related to Zelda. Not many, but a few. Death Mountain rumbled ominously in the distance, and a cheerful, gruff voice echoed in his head.

“...can’t quite see the range for the peaks. Remember that, and you’ll be fine!”

Link looked up at the great volcano at these words, in time to see a dark shadow move stealthily from the smoking caldera.

He finally returned to the stable dangerously close to sunrise. The soft bed truly lived up to its name. Link sank into it gratefully. Shutting his eyes, he pressed his nose into Zelda’s hair and waited for sleep.

It seemed as if he had only just found it when someone was shaking his shoulder. “Come on,” Zelda said. “I already got us fireproof elixirs. Let’s get going.”

They carefully removed any flammable items from their persons and set out for Goron City. The ground beneath them quickly went from prickly with grass to bare and crumbling. Beneath a natural stone archway stood a metal marker pointing them onward. Steam rolled off the surfaces of twin lakes fed by hot underground springs, creating a heavy mist that obscured the rusty red crags towering over them. Leafless trees clung to the dry banks and beady-eyed ostriches ruffled their wings before taking off at a sprint.

Feathery white flakes of ash swirled through the acrid air as they entered the Maw of Death Mountain. Zelda reached for Link’s hand when they passed a broken husk of an ancient Guardian, its crevices coated in soot. Her fingers were too warm for comfort, but he let her hold on as they navigated the winding road together. Hardened lava made for smoother paths, though they were the preferred nesting grounds for fire chuchus who created tarry trails of melted stone behind them as they rolled around.

Even the top of Eldin Tower was no respite. Link mopped his face with his sleeve while Zelda upgraded her Slates. She stepped back and smiled when the blue droplet splashed down from the Sheikah stalactite.

“I don’t believe I’ll ever tire of watching that,” she said as Link gave her an elixir. “Or being up here. With the additional height of the mountain, the view is even more spectacular. I can see all the way to the Gerudo Highlands… oh!”

She grabbed his arm and pulled him to the edge. Decades of activity had carved out perpetual rivers of lava upon Death Mountain’s slopes. Even at this distance, Link could see how thick the layers were as they cascaded over the volcano’s summit and swallowed boulders whole. But a pointed head with glowing blue eyes — unnerving in comparison to the orange flames around it — was peering over them, stone claws clamped into the rock. It turned this way and that slowly.

“Rudania was always a restless one,” Zelda remarked, as if referring to an old pet. “Well, it needn’t
They resumed their journey towards Goron City, she with a far more eager stride. Link quickened his pace too. “You speak of the Divine Beasts as if they are their own persons.”

“Of course they are.”

“Ruta was empty and lifeless when we investigated it with Sidon. Why is Rudania active?”

Zelda’s yellow hair shimmered in the heat haze. “It’s odd, I know. But I do have a theory. When the Champions were chosen one hundred years ago, it was some time before we could train them. To our surprise, the Divine Beasts took matters into their own hands. They were ready and waiting for us, moving from their excavation sites to where the confirmed Champions lived. Remember when we went to Ri…”

She stopped abruptly. Link felt his shoulder muscles tightening in annoyance at the guilty glance she shot him. A small part of him protested that she was trying. He sidestepped glowing cracks in the ground beneath him and said nothing.

Zelda swallowed. “Well, my theory is that I believe all Sheikah technology is connected. There’s the energy network that Purah and I spoke of, and now this. Perhaps when Vah Ruta accepted Sidon as its new pilot, the other Divine Beasts were alerted to it, somehow, and are now stirring in preparation for their new roles.”

They settled into silence afterward. The road was only becoming more arduous. Not simply from the octorocks who lurked between boulders, but the land itself. Fire would suddenly erupt from the ground wherever it split open from the sheer heat, smoke billowing in great clouds from the cracks and mingling with burning embers that sprinkled down from the lava vents above. Link and Zelda needed their utmost concentration in this desolate, dangerous place.

Finally, they reached Goron City. No other place could be more unlike the tranquil and elegant world of Zora’s Domain, but in the strangest way, they were also very similar: surrounded by the constant tumble of falls that fed streams flowing through the town, and perpetually illuminated by the glowing rocks around them. It was just that one place was all water, and the other burning flame. Lanayru was a land of artistic reflection, but Eldin was all industry, from the constant signage pointing visitors towards shops to loads of ore glittering as they were lugged around. Gorons rolled around in great hurry, both on the ground level and upon the metal bridges stretched across the rocks above.

Zelda shielded her eyes. “I thought Mipha’s statue was impressive, but Daruk comes out as the clear winner this time!”

Link turned to see what she was pointing at. Several likenesses of Gorons had been carved from a great cliff face: a child, a youth, an elder. But towering over them was Goron Champion Daruk. He grinned over his hometown, raising a fist in triumph and greeting. Sunlight glared off the sculpted beard and frozen locks of wild hair, rendering them a blinding white. The ridge of his brow cast shadows for eyes, dark and piercing, yet still belying that playful pride Link had come to know. Zelda gazed up at them with her hands clasped together, lips trembling between laughter and mourning.

“Drat! That blasted Rudania!”

The shout had come from a basalt house located at the top of the town. A grizzled old Goron appeared in the doorway. He sported a tough leather eyepatch and a beard so long that it was tied
into four different bunches. He hobbled out into the square, muttering darkly as he glared up at the Divine Beast who was now crawling aimlessly around Death Mountain.

“Just when I thought we were done with this beast nonsense! It’s goin’ to mess up our mining operations... all over again! We put so much time into fixin’ up the North Mine, and right before we have everything ready to go, it’s back to chasin’ off that fiend—” He stomped his foot angrily, then froze and groaned, clutching his side. “Youch. Where are my painkillers?”

Link and Zelda hurried over. Bludo, the Boss of Goron City, was fumbling with a small pouch. He tipped what looked like a handful of pebbles into one chunky palm, then stuffed them into his mouth. His lips puckered in distaste while he swallowed.

“Ah! It’s the tiny traveller!” Bludo zeroed in on Link. “Brother, am I glad to see you. You see our problem here?”

Link nodded. “Yep. And I brought an expert on the Divine Beasts.”

Zelda gave a start when he nudged her forward. “Oh! Yes. Hello. So good to meet you, sir. For the past six months I’ve been working alongside Director Purah of the Hateno Ancient Tech Lab specialising in replication and rune enhancement, but I’ve also many years researching Guardians and Divine Beasts from the records in Kakari—”

“No need for a resume. It’s just gonna sound like steam off the hot springs to my ears. I believe my brother here! No disrespects to Lord Daruk’s legacy, but all I want is for Rudania to leave us in peace. Don’t care how, just make it stop knocking magma down from the summit!”

Zelda had brightened at Daruk’s name. “Actually, I may be able to do you one better. We were just in Lanayru. The Zora have been able to reclaim their Divine Beast with a new pilot, placing Vah Ruta under their care once again.” She held up another new Sheikah Slate. “With this device, I can help train one of your people to take control of Vah Rudania as well. Then, it can be of help to Goron City instead of a hindrance.”

Bludo squinted down at the Sheikah Slate. “Take control, eh? I like you already. What do I call you, little sister?”

“Zelda.”

“Huh. That’s a historical name.” Bludo tugged on his beard and grimaced when Rudania splashed another claw into the lava, sending globs of it sizzling through the air. “Welp. If you’re looking for a new pilot, it’s got to be Yunobo. He’s actually a descendant of the great Daruk. You’ll find him with the others at the Northern Mine. They’ve probably stopped production for the day, seein’ how Rudania’s being such a bother. Alright, that’s enough out of me. Go put a muzzle on that Beast!”

They followed the order at once, with only a short detour to fit Zelda with flamebreaker armour. At this proximity to Death Mountain, it would be certain doom for Hylians without strong protection. Zelda and Link’s footsteps left ridged impressions upon the soot that accumulated upon the rocks here as they walked beneath burning lavafalls towards the Northern Mine entrance. They could see Goron miners clustered around the entrance, leaning against the metal rail fence and peering up at Death Mountain’s summit.

“Yeesh! What’s goin’ on today? First the big lizard comes back, and now we got Hylians runnin’ around our operations!” A young-looking miner frowned down at Link and Zelda, his tool slung casually upon one rocky shoulder. “Look, you should know it gets much hotter past here. And, we’re closin’ early. The mountain’s toooooo unstable with Rudania knockin’ down rocks and stuff.
Already damaged one cannon.”

“We’re looking for Yunobo,” Zelda explained. The Gorons looked around at each other in surprise.

“Yeeeeeesh!” the first Goron repeated, slapping a huge hand against his hard hat. “We forgot to
tell Yunobo we’re done. He’s at the Isle of Rabac. I reeeeeaaaally don’t wanna go all the way back
up there again!”

“We’ll get him,” Link said. “Boss sent us.”

“Huh?! Boss did?” This changed the Goron miner’s attitude considerably. “Well… then I guess ya
better get goin’, brother. Gooooooood-bye!”

Link and Zelda backtracked to where a length of track had been suspended over the boiling surface
of Lake Darman. They climbed into the cart, and a quick tap of the Sheikah Slate sent them
zooming off. Lava bubbled and burst mere feet away from their faces. The journey required several
stops and starts, with every new burst from the Sheikah bombs making the carts’ wheels spin
recklessly across the warped metal. Once it even reared up over a bump in the track, threatening to
capsize them into the lake altogether.

They could already see the entrance of a small cave when everything began to shake. Zelda yelped
as enormous flaming boulders came rolling down Death Mountain, emitting sparks with every
crash against the ground before plunging deep into the lake. A wave of lava surged outward, a
deadly ripple across the lake. It splashed over the track, and Link watched in horror as the metal
began to twist and melt before their eyes, the cart dipping down with it.

“OHHHHHH NOOOOOO!”

Link heard the panicked cry just as he and Zelda were almost lost to their doom. There was a loud
*THUD*, followed by a hum that filled his ears with static. Link looked up to see a screen of pulsing
orange energy covering them. He pulled Zelda closer as the cart suddenly lurched backward, away
from the gaping hole before them.

The shaking died away. They turned to face their saviour, who trembled upon the track behind
them. He was surprisingly smooth-skinned for a hardy Goron, wringing his pudgy hands together
and breathing hard through his mouth. He had round cheeks flushed with exertion, black eyes
blinking in amazement, and the image of the Goron Ruby painted upon a square lock rising and
falling from where it hung over his chest.

“LINK!” Yunobo gasped, reaching out to crush him in a desperate, relieved hug. “That was close,
goro! Way too close. I’m so happy to see you here, but not… here, goro!”

“Thanks for saving us.” Link’s spirits rose at the sight of his bumbling, flustered friend. “Would’ve
been goners without you, brother.”

“Yeah! Guess… guess Rudania isn’t done with us yet. That’s so weird, goro.” The tuft of white
hair upon Yunobo’s head flopped to one side as he shook his head. “We were so close to upgrading
the whole mine! I bet Boss is pretty annoyed, goro.”

“Yep.” Link looked over at Zelda, who had half-climbed onto the hood of the cart in her
excitement.

“That was a flawless execution of Daruk’s Protection! This means we won’t need the Sheikah Slate
to control Rudania; you have it in your blood.” She spotted the scrap of cloth tied around Yunobo’s
shoulders. “And a replica of the Champions’ cloth. I’m so touched! Who did the embroidery this
time? Oh, a ruby is so much easier to stitch than any Divine Beast.”

It took Yunobo several seconds to process her words. He blinked a few times and glanced back at Link, who shrugged. “Th-this time? That means… you’re…” Yunobo jumped back, nearly toppling into the lake beneath him. “Princess Zelda? The Princess Zelda?! Oh man, oh man, oh man… I can’t believe it. goro! She’s here! With us! Oh MAN!”

He helped them pull the cart back to a safer distance. Zelda told him the purpose of their visit and made her offer.

Yunobo almost knocked the cart over in his shock. “M-me? Pilot the Divine Beast? Like Lord Daruk?! You can’t be serious, goro! I’m… not the Champion type.”

Zelda hopped out of the cart. “Let me tell you a little bit about Daruk. I knew him personally. He was indeed one of the most courageous and capable of warriors. He would not hesitate to put himself between the helpless and their attackers. I’m sure that’s how he developed his special ability. But you should know… he was not as fearless as you might think.”

She leaned in conspiratorially, and Yunobo crouched down to hear her. “Daruk had a phobia of dogs. Sweet, adorable puppies… sent him cowering!”

Yunobo’s eyes and mouth were perfect circles. “I never imagined the great Lord Daruk to have a weakness like that!”

“We all have weaknesses and strengths. It’s time you used yours, Yunobo. We live in a different era than the Champions of old. The Divine Beasts are here to help and protect their nations, not wage war on ancient evils. So we needn’t any of the complicated process of trial and ceremony, just someone willing to stand up and promise to serve their people. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes! I do, goro!” Yunobo trembled anxiously. “I’ll try my best, Princess Zelda! Promise!”

“Wonderful!” She threw her arms round his middle, though they barely reached halfway. Yunobo gasped. He looked to Link in a panic, who had no other response but to join in, too. Yunobo, blushing and stammering, didn’t return the hug until Zelda began to giggle and Link shot him a grin, then it became a ridiculous scene of three people clutching at each other in hysterical laughter over Stolock Bridge.

The sounds of Gorons hard at work — the grumbling of drills, call of shopkeepers, ringing hammers against rock — faded away as they left the city limits. Yunobo glanced behind him at the statue of Daruk. He smiled sheepishly when he noticed Link and Zelda watching him.

“Lord Daruk was my grandfather, goro. My dad always told me lots of stories about him. He made it sound like Daruk was the greatest Goron who ever lived. Fierce, famous.. He made friends with heroes and got presents from princesses! Oh, and he was a real gourmet Goron chef too. When Dad described his prime rock roasts, I just feel sooo hungry, goro!

“I heard ‘bout him all my life so… it was so awesome to see him standin’ on top of Rudania! I know it sounds crazy, but I coulda sworn I saw him, goro. I dunno how to explain it, but somehow I feel a lot braver whenever I think ‘bout it.” Yunobo fiddled with the lock around his neck. “My dad wasn’t like him, though. He was real shy, and didn’t like fighting — kind of like me, goro. Of course, it was the Age of Burning Fields. They say it took a long time for us to fix up Goron City, and my dad was able to help. He made sure that statue of Daruk was made, goro! Even… even when it turned out that I inherited Daruk’s Protection, I always felt like he understood me better. I didn’t have to be this hero in front of him, goro?”
They emerged from beneath a craggy overhang to behold Eldin Bridge. They were so close to the top of Death Mountain. Smoke and ash and steam billowed from the vent in great puffs, filling the blistering air with thousands of smouldering particles. Through the thick smoke, a shadow appeared: Vah Rudania, come to meet them at last with bright eyes. It lowered its head, and Link saw the blue Sheikah eye glowing above a doorway just over the Divine Beast’s neck.

“Yunobo gawked at it for a few seconds. Then, determination settled across his face. “I’m ready, Princess! I want to be strong like Daruk, and kind like my dad. I’m gonna rep the Gorons like a true brother and make them proud! Let’s do this, goro!”

“Yes!” Zelda beamed at him, clapping her hands together. Her thick gloves muffled any sound. “Let’s!”

The two of them marched across the bridge with confidence. Zelda turned around halfway. Link saw her forehead wrinkle even through the ash and wavering heat. “Link?”

Yunobo sat down beside the Boss’s cannon, trying to dispel the sudden heaviness in his chest by breathing deeply. The air was scorching and smelled like sulphur. His shield clanked against the lever, so he yanked it off.

“Go without me,” he said. “I’m not feeling up to it.”

Zelda immediately walked to him. Her yellow hair slid over her shoulder to dangle towards the ground when she leaned over to peer into his eyes. The embers that came fluttering by made it look like a rippling sheet of gold. “Are you sure?” she asked.

Link nodded. Zelda looked at him for a few long seconds. Then, she kissed his forehead. “Okay. We won’t be long.”

She and Yunobo left him with his thoughts and the shield. Link traced the Triforce and held his head. Why now? Yunobo’s story of his father and grandfather was touching and true, why did he feel so bothered by it? Link felt like his head was on fire. Heat was getting to him, not just Death Mountain but shame that burned in his heart. There was something he was missing form this. Something important, something… Link frowned at the Hylian shield.

Then, everything went white.

* * *

Link felt nervous.

He was standing in a small chamber with no windows. The only lights were from torches flickering in their sconces, illuminating the perspiration dripping down the stone walls. Cold drafts swept by him every so often, bringing him the smell of mud and stagnant water. Link shivered as he trained his eyes on the rusted metal grate before him.

“Sixteen.”

“Fresh from training, who does he think he is? It’s going to destroy him.”

“Sixteen!”
“The Captain’s boy.”

Link felt his fingers flex at that one. They were wrapped around the holds of a round shield, studded in the centre but otherwise very simple and utilitarian. He was aware of the weapons at his disposal: a broadsword, a bow, and a quiver with a dozen arrows. That was it.

A few royal soldiers walked around and whispered to one another, glancing over at him as they did so. They sported fine uniforms of a deep blue tabard over maroon sleeves. Their spotless white gloves and boots seemed to gleam in the gloom of this dungeon. Link stood still in his threadbare tunic. He didn’t know any of these men. He waited.

One of them finally caught his eye and nodded. When his head dipped forward, the crest embroidered on his cap caught the dim torchlight, glittering ever so briefly in this dark place. Link felt his legs propel him forward into a much larger room. It was round. It smelled old, very old. Link glanced down at the gritty black dirt that coated the floor, mingled in with dust and droppings of small rodents. Hardly anyone came to this place, he reckoned.

But he didn’t need these clues to tell him that. In the very centre, a pile of bleached bones lay in a jumble. Link watched it warily, his senses prickling in warning. Just as he reached up for his sword, they began to shake violently. Femurs twisted and connected to a table-sized hip, a ribcage that could have housed Link easily rose into the air. Fleshless fingers reached down to pick up the stalnox’s skull and jam it back onto its spine, the single eye black and green, grotesque and phantom.

Link brandished his sword and shield. He was not scared. He knew how to fight.

It was not easy, but it was not impossible. The monster was big and built to crush, but Link was fast and trained well. He landed almost all his hits, feeling bone against his blade. Still, the Stalnox persisted. It smashed its fist upon the floor, the impact ringing in Link’s ears as he leapt out of the way.

Perhaps it was because he wasn’t really thinking about this battle. The voices of the crowd rose and fell with every attack, unintelligible and distant. It would be foolish to try to discern any individual voice, and if he was watching, he wouldn’t be shouting advice anyway…

The eye swivelled round to fix him with an eerie stare. Link grabbed his bow and an arrow. One moment of stillness was all he needed. The Goddess rewarded his courage, and Link tried not to fall as the Stalnox howled and threw itself to the ground. He heard the squelch of the eyeball escaping its socket. Link snatched up his sword and slashed until everything disintegrated into the same black dust.

A chest had appeared. Link knelt to open it. His heart hammered at the beautiful sight, one he’d longed for ages: the Hylian shield, silver and blue and red and gold. He touched the Triforce with one finger, first the triangle for courage, followed by wisdom, and finally power. The foundations of Hyrule, the responsibility of Knights.

Link rose shakily to his feet, clutching his new shield to his chest. He saw them now, the people behind the rusted Lock-Up bars, jumping and and waving their arms at him. Their mouths showed teeth and tongue in a blur as they shouted their congratulations at him. The royal guards regarded Link with proud smiles and expressions of deep admiration. Some applauded, those immaculate gloves wrinkling with every clap.

One had stepped forward, his hand resting upon the rusted portcullis. He was very still compared to the twitching, animated crowd. He had a trim, tawny beard like rice ready for harvest and clear
blue eyes that had always been able to see through Link’s excuses, even when they were truthful ones. He wasn’t smiling, but Link knew that smiles weren’t necessary for happiness.

Link looked back at his father and felt happy, too.

* * *

“Link, Link!”

His eyes snapped open. The scene was already fading away, brown seeping in at the edges to eat away at the image. Link turned his head and tried to hold onto that face, now so painfully familiar, in his memory. He couldn’t let it go now.

Zelda knelt before him, her hand on his knee. Yunobo hovered behind her. “Link, what happened?”

“Oh man, oh man,” Yunobo whispered.

Link opened his mouth to say something. But his vocal cords weren’t working properly. Or his lungs; they were making him breathe far too shallowly. Neither were several other internal organs, like his heart that felt like it had melted away under the heat of Death Mountain, or the warmth that had flooded him so fleetingly when he made eye contact with his father.

Zelda pulled him to his feet. He leaned against her while Yunobo gnawed on his thumb in worry. “He’s shakin’ real bad, goro.”

“Let’s go back,” Zelda said. “Everything will be fine.”

The three of them managed to make their way down the mountain. Yunobo fended off obnoxious keese while Zelda led Link by the hand. At the hot springs, she stopped. “Yunobo, go back to Rudania. Bring it down to the city and show the Boss. We’ll meet you there.”

The new Goron Champion saluted her. “Yes, Princess! I’ll see you, goro!”

Link waited until Yunobo was out of earshot, rolling up the mountain path at full speed. “I remember him.”

“Who?”

“Chard.”

Zelda’s jaw went slack at the name. She stared at Link for the briefest of moments before wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pulling him close. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to collapse under the overwhelming struggle inside of him, joy and tender emotions warring against despair and sadness. Both sides fueled an ache that was eating up his newfound heart, every pump of blood through his system bearing pain that no elixirs could cover.

Zelda pulled back and cradled his face in her hands. “Do you want to rest?”

He nodded. She sat with him on the edge of one of the springs. Its turquoise waters never stayed still, bubbles rising from cracks hidden in the rocks. It was said to be boiling, but they felt cool and comforting to Link's touch. He let the liquid flow over his fingers, trying to blink away whatever blurred his sight.

His grief was beginning to recede now, and bitterness took its place. It was the familiar frustration of finally having a small part of his mind light up just to reveal that there was another patch of
darkness lurking beyond it. Link was tired of this guessing game. He wanted substance. He wanted answers. “All I really knew about my past was that I was a knight. And that he was a knight. And I was raised to the position. This memory didn’t tell me anything new.”

Zelda was quiet, still holding his hand in both of hers. When she finally spoke, it was with a small, soft voice. “You told me a fair bit about your father, and always with the utmost respect. He was your only family and… you loved him. Perhaps your path had been set for you, but there was nobody else better to be your teacher and I am absolutely certain that he held you in nothing but the highest regard. The two of you were the best of the best in all of Hyrule. Everyone knew it.”

“The Captain was always kind to me. He was honour-bound to serve my father but there were times when it was clear that I was getting away with things purely because of his lenience.” Her eyes were shining now too, much like the pearly sheen of the water. “That’s something you learned from him, too. That’s where you get your compassion and selflessness. Your good heart and noble spirit. I’m sure of it.”

Link didn’t think that he had any more tears left within him — especially here, where they would evaporate immediately anyway — but he leaned his forehead against her shoulder. She pressed her lips against his ear and stroked his hair until his breathing finally evened out.

The Gorons were only mildly impressed with Vah Rudania’s presence in their city. In fact, Yunobo explained to Link and Zelda, they had come at it with weapons raised before he hollered and waved at them. Boss Bludo was the main man who needed convincing. He scowled up at the Divine Beast poking its head out over the cliffs of Goro Cove.

“Hmph. It’s a beast, that’s for sure. I guess we could use ‘im as a station near the summit.” He tugged on a lock of beard thoughtfully. “Yeah… a base of operations at the very top of Death Mountain! Think of all the top grade ore we could finally transport in this thing. You say it went right into the crater, no problem?”

“Yes!” Yunobo’s voice was faint but enthusiastic from where he called from Rudania’s head. “Just hopped right in and crawled back out, goro!”

“Seems like those ancient folks knew what they were doin’!” Bludo bared teeth like limestone slabs. “Alright. I’m warmin’ up to this idea.”

Zelda presented him with a Sheikah Slate. Yunobo’s ability allowed him to pilot Rudania telepathically, but she had also attuned the Slate to the Divine Beast’s terminals during their training session. Bludo’s mouth twisted in interest when she showed him how the Slate also possessed a map of Eldin, and a way to stay connected with the rest of Hyrule through the shrine travel gates.

“I also have a request to make,” Zelda said. “This ancient Sheikah technology grows scarce the more we dismantle Guardians and Skywatchers. And sometimes, not all the parts we are able to find can be salvaged. Gorons lead the world in their smithing skills. I would like to borrow some of your best talents for a short while, just to work out how we can recreate ancient parts on a larger scale, and even possibly fashion our own machines from them. Like new and better mining equipment, for instance!”

“Hey, we owe ya Hylians this boon for calming Rudania. And if it gets us better mining equipment… deal!” Bludo and Zelda shook hands, his dwarfing hers considerably.

Zelda skipped back to the Protein Palace in victory, where Link sat with a seared steak sizzling on
the table before him. It had been out in the open for all of three seconds.

“Looks like we’ll be here for a few more days,” she said happily. “So much progress in so little time! I can’t wait to report back to Purah.”

Link watched her select mushrooms that were browning at a rapid rate. “I think I know why I triggered that memory. When Yunobo talked about his family and the love of his father figures, I guess I got jealous. I have no idea who my family is. I mean, I had no idea.”

She smiled at him. “Well, my father loved you too. Sometimes I felt that he preferred you over me. So don’t worry, you get two father figures too.” Another mushroom hesitated in her fingers. “Actually, we can add Daruk to this list as well. Every time we came to visit, he was so excited to see you.”

Zelda frowned. The shroom shrivelled up, blackened and completely burnt. “And there’s King Dorephan, since you nearly married his daughter. That’s four father figures, Link. Tell me, where does it end?”

She was trying to make him laugh, and for that reason, he did. “So, we’re fine with that now? The whole… Mipha thing?”

“Yes, we are.” Zelda brushed the soot from her palms. “But now for a more serious topic. Is it always that bad, regaining a memory?”

“Sometimes. I can never know.”

“Are you ready for more of them to return to you?”

Link glanced over to where Vah Rudania was returning to the rocky slopes. Yunobo’s blue scarf was just barely visible amongst the glaring red lava. “Do I have a choice?”

“You might.” Zelda gave up on eating, turning around on the bench to give him her full attention. “At least, I think there might be a way you can be more prepared. There aren’t many people who share memories with you, but there are some of us. Purah, Impa, Robbie… King Dorephan, too. We should speak more openly about what happened. You can ask us. Then, you can get the information first, so if it does trigger the memory in question, perhaps the emotional response won’t be as… debilitating.”

Zelda was so good and beautiful and she loved him dearly, even after his deepest flaws had surfaced, even after he had failed to keep them in check. When he looked into her green eyes Link felt he could finally handle the gaps, start filling them in.

Link took his time cutting into the steak, which was unbearably tough by now. “Sounds good. Let’s start.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.” Link leaned forward, and he saw her lips turn up into a smile before he kissed them. “Tell me everything.”

Chapter End Notes
1. I rewatched the Ruta aims cutscene a few times to try to fathom how it went from a reservoir to a pond at the top of a mountain without like, smashing the dam or tunnelling through rock. My conclusion was that it has minor water teleportation powers? This is what you get when you try to logic video game stuff.

2. LINK being the one with dramatic inner monologue this time is such a 180 from HYD, where Zelda did all the mind-rambling. I’m extremely amused.

3. How could I write anything in this series without bringing back our beloved Charddad? He is the greatest fanfiction character I have ever made. He makes me cry.

Why...
WHY ARE THESE SO LONG NOW?!

I know I'm the only one complaining. It just makes me wonder whether I'm indulging way too much and losing my pacing and/or sense of plot. But like, that's also something I allow myself to do with fanfic, just run away with it. Now y'all pull a Carly Rae and run away with me too! Thank you!
Chapter Notes

After 15k words of drama and angst, I am back on my fluffy bullshit and nobody can stop me!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh,” Link said in surprise as he looked around. “It didn’t reset.”

Zelda didn’t move. She simply stood where she was, her heart hammering and breath shuddering in excitement. After years of guesses and ages of waiting, here she finally was — inside an ancient Sheikah shrine.

She stepped off the disc, the whisper of a hum fading in and out as her body passed through the wavering blue barrier of the portal. They had been transported to a vast, otherworldly cavern all of precise edges and smooth stone. Her footsteps echoed in this massive chamber when she reached the top of the stair and gazed out. The floor below was covered in perfectly circular pits lined with glowing trails of the ancient Sheikah script. At the head of each column was a constellation styled in sharp, angular design upon the wall, a low one that provided a window for Zelda to observe a burning mural of stars further ahead. “Well, we need to find one you haven’t done, then.”

“I did them all,” Link confessed, scratching the back of his neck. “They said so when I finished.”

He shrugged when she shot him a look of disappointment. “Not all of them were easy puzzles like this one,” he defended. “There were tests of strength, and idiotic apparatuses… wait until you see how those work. I wanted to break the damn thing.”

He sat down along the edge of the platform and waited while she poked around the chamber. Orange and blue lights blinked around her feet. Zelda read the script around the pits, lifted up the stone spheres to stick her arm down the holes, and even did a triumphant, giddy dance around the space. She simply couldn’t contain her delight. When Link’s echoing laughter faded, he joined her in walking through the lower archway together. Obsidian pillars flanked a procession down towards an empty altar.

“Monk Keo Ruug,” she read out loud when they stepped up to it.

“Every one of them had weird names,” Link said. “I couldn’t pronounce half of them.”

“You really couldn’t leave one for me?”

“I needed to be strong enough to save you.”

He said this mildly and without ceremony, but Zelda dropped her hands from the pedestal, chastened. The true purpose of these shrines were not for her entertainment. She had to remember that.

Her sudden silence did not go undetected. Link glanced over, gave her a smile, then leaned in for a
kiss. Zelda pressed herself into him and closed her eyes tight. After their struggles in Lanayru and Eldin, they were only just reaching the same wavelength once again. Things had certainly shifted, however. Zelda couldn’t expect Link to read her mind, and when he kept his distance, it no longer felt like he was unhappy with her. They would learn new things about the other every day for years to come, and that was just fine.

But right now, there was nothing more comforting than to feel his arms around her. She refused to let him go even when they broke apart, and shivers went down her spine when Link let out a short, quiet chuckle and gave her more. There was just something so perfect about everything at this very moment. Down here, they were alone and unreachable by any other soul alive — a thought that made her heartbeat flicker. She was so tempted to give in and stay like this forever…

Just as she was about to, Link pulled back. “You’ve seen enough, I think.” He sighed at her pouting face. “I’m cold, Zelda. And it’s too quiet in here. Let’s go.”

They emerged from the recess of the shrine into a world that was buzzing and alive as the chamber had been stark and still. Zelda breathed in the fresh, sweet scent of Korok Forest. All around her was green, green, and more green. Dappled sunlight glittered upon the shallow ponds that fed the abundant grass and flowers carpeting the ground. The wind whispering by the glowing bean lamps made dancing shadows upon the moss-covered bark of sturdy trees. Their branches wove a thick canopy of leaves to shield this lush sanctuary from unworthy, prying eyes. Zelda’s heart overflowed with happiness from simply being here.

Hearing that they were next headed west, Yunobo had been eager to offer Zelda and Link a ride down Death Mountain to Great Hyrule Forest. A lack of road was no problem for Vah Rudania. The Divine Beast sent charred rocks clattering down the mountainside with every clamp of its claws, wading through the fiery Goronbi River with nary a hitch. Zelda stayed upon Rudania’s shoulder for the duration of the trip, savouring the gorgeous views of Hyrule from this high up. Anyway, Bludo and his miners had already begun filling Rudania with equipment and ore. Odd noises could be heard knocking around beneath them as they moved along.

“Oops!” Yunobo winced. “That’ll be the new cannon, goro…”

Zelda had looked forward to reuniting with Cloud, but Link surprised her by suggesting a detour first. “We’ll take the horses out soon enough,” he promised, “but there’s someone who’s been waiting to see you again.”

When the fog had lifted to reveal a golden clearing at the end of the path, Zelda’s heart lurched upon seeing the cracked, triangular podium half-sunken into the soft earth. The three statues at each corner were so weathered that their surfaces were worn smooth.

“Well, well. It’s you, Princess. After 100 years…” The Great Deku Tree’s deep voice rumbled gently throughout his tranquil wood. “I never gave up the hope of seeing you again.”

Zelda could not find adequate words. She clasped her hands before her and smiled through her tears. That seemed to be enough.

“With your return, I sense hope awakening throughout the land. Life, pushing through the soil to reach for the sun. Hyrule Kingdom will flourish under your wisdom once more.”
“Hyrule has never needed me for growth,” Zelda said. She recalled the new villages seen from Rudania’s back. Even from the vantage point of a Divine Beast, they had been nothing more but smudges in the distance. Still, they were a reminder that Hylians would find a way to move forward, no matter what.

Thousands of tiny leaves crinkling mimicked the swell of laughter. “That may be so. But when the Goddess herself gave up her divinity for the world she loved so, it was written into the fabric of history that her presence would never leave Hyrule. So as her blood stands before me, so does her vow to continue as a guiding light, protecting and leading her people onward. But my dear princess, worry not. You owe not a soul in this land your servitude, having given it freely for a lifetime and more. The path ahead is wholly yours to forge.”

“I have already made my mind,” Zelda confessed.

The Great Deku Tree smiled down at her. “I know. And the land hums with its gratitude.”

To receive such blessings touched her heart. However, her current decision was to forget about her tasks ahead, and here was the perfect place to recuperate from the stress and tireless toil that had marked their journey so far. Zelda couldn’t even keep track of time within this ageless wood, and she didn’t care. She and Link explored the misty thickets and climbed into the crowns of the ancient trees to watch animals flit around the brush beneath them. Deer darted by in packs, the does following their bucks, hesitant but swift. Woodland boars nosed around the roots in search for delicious truffles. Black-beaked crows and pink-winged herons took flight from the twisted branches around them. Even a small pack of maraudo wolves once padded into their midst, their muscles rippling beneath shaggy grey fur. Their eyes were bright in the darkness, and though Zelda saw lips curling up to reveal sharp yellow teeth, they eventually turned tail and plunged back into the bracken.

She and Link sat upon the massive roots of the Great Deku Tree and listened to stories of Hyrule through the ages. Though sunlight streamed through the branches and the air was filled with the heady scent of flowering blooms, Zelda shivered at the thought of the many heroes and princesses who had come and gone, possibly sitting exactly where she was to heed the ancient guardian’s counsel.

“I have watched over Hyrule since time immemorial. Eras have risen and fallen beneath my branches. Princesses of destiny, heroes of courage… it is like the cleansing rain every time you return before me. You are always welcome here, my children.” The Great Deku Tree could not move, but it seemed to turn its gaze upon Link. “After all, this was your home. Once upon a time.”

They were just so safe and cared for, it was impossible to be unhappy. Zelda felt so lazy and pampered from the kindness of invisible spirits who waited upon them with what Link assured her was delight and enthusiasm. They called themselves Koroks, the children of the Lost Woods. Link translated the silence for her when needed, such as reciting each of the adorable names for the shops prepared for their arrival. Zelda had been unsure about sleeping within “the Great Deku Tree’s Navel”, but the bed of leaves was so comfortable and cozy that she had ended up staying in it until late morning the next day.

She truly wished she could interact with the dear Koroks in better ways than merely accepting all their gifts and hard work. Link helped her climb to the very top of the Great Deku Tree, where a hidden oasis waited. Flowers of ivory and buttery gold spread a heavy aroma from where they blossomed alongside sprawling ferns. Summerwing butterflies and warm darners fluttered over the crystal clear water, which was crisp and cold to the taste. The pink petals of the Deku Tree’s branches suffused it all with a rosy glow. And upon a wide, waxy leaf at one end was a perfect
pyramid of the ripest, reddest wildberries.

“I said they’re your favourite, so they went searching the continent,” Link said. “It’s all yours.”

“How sweet,” Zelda said, making him snort at the inadvertent pun. “I truly wish that I could see them.”

“They’re crowding all around you.” Link was staring at the vague vicinity of her elbow. He shrugged at what to Zelda seemed like a mote of dust twirling in a sunbeam. “…You could try, but I don’t know if she’ll be able to.”

His face suddenly screwed up, and he leaned away. She thought that she might have almost heard the faint sounds of tinkling bells, but it could very well be her imagination.

Link rubbed his ears. “That was deafening,” he said. “Still nothing?”

“No. I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged at the leaves around them, and they rustled energetically in the wind. “Don’t worry, Miss Princess. We love you.”

Zelda was very upset at her inability to scoop up the dear creatures in a heartfelt embrace. Link sought to cheer her up by leading her to the northeast portion of Korok Forest. A scratched-out signpost named it “The Test of Wood”. Sure enough, there was a complete wooden weapon set resting against a fallen log. Zelda picked up the bow. It was a delicate and exquisitely carved instrument with a sturdy vine for the string.

Link unequipped his Hylian shield, placing it carefully in the moss. Zelda had noticed how he handled it now, often touching the Triforce in moments of contemplation. But at this moment, he snatched up the Forest Dweller’s shield and looked at her eagerly.

“Watch this, Zelda.” He faced back the way they had come. “Are you watching?”

“Yes, Link.”

He flashed her a grin before jumping high, knees to his chest. Zelda’s hands flew to her mouth as Link confidently whipped out the shield and threw it to the ground, landing upon it with both feet. He slid speedily through the narrow canyon upon the slick grass with frogs croaking as they hopped out of his way. It was like seal surfing without the seals, Zelda thought. Though because of that, she hardly saw the appeal.

Link soon came to a stop, but the smile didn’t leave his face. Brimming with confidence, he took a running leap off to perform an impressive forward flip before slamming down hard onto the wood. Upon impact, the Korok-made shield splintered into pieces, causing Link to yelp as he tripped over a stone and went tumbling down the dewy slope. Zelda cried out and rushed to where he lay curled up in a coil of vines.

“It works better on snow,” Link insisted as she felt for any broken bones. “You’ll see when we get to Hebra.”

Zelda was not very impressed at all at this new sport he had picked up, but she would concede that it was time to get going. Even the most perfect of holidays had to come to an end.

Laden with gifts from the Koroks — mainly an assortment of mushrooms and many, many acorns — Zelda and Link emerged from the Lost Woods just as dawn broke over Hyrule. The horizon
glowed golden beneath what she could only call chuchu blue. The Forest Dweller’s shield clacked softly against its matching bow upon her back. A new one had mysteriously reappeared the following morning, and Link confirmed that the Korok had insisted she take it. Now returned to the rest of the world, it was comforting to have protection.

Cloud and Chase were fetched from their stalls at long last. Zelda kissed Cloud’s soft nose and rubbed his neck while Link obliged to Chase’s voracious appetite and demands for attention. The horses were eager to ride. Their tails swished back and forth restlessly as they flared their nostrils towards the west and the alluring smell of the wild.

It was a pleasant ride along the Rauru Hills. Lake Mekar and the castle moat cooled the air around them, and the only sound was the steady rhythm of horses’ hooves upon the soil. Grass covered the rambling knolls, and Zelda steered Cloud up to a high ridge. She took a moment to admire the beauty of this region. There was Great Hyrule Forest to the north on her right, grey silhouettes of trees barely glimpsed through its thick protective fog. The Deku Tree’s flowering branches waved gently at her. But when she turned her head to the south, Hyrule Castle stood lonely and silent. From this close, the Sheikah columns’ heights and scale were truly impressive, and they cast a soft blue glow upon the empty ramparts. Zelda felt her fingers tighten around Cloud’s reins when she glanced up and saw a few tattered banners still fluttering bravely from the tops of towers.

An idea came to her, not quite fully formed but pertinent and intriguing all the same. “We’re close, and it’s been long enough time. Should we investigate?”

Link stared at the barren trees littered upon the far bank. A half-decayed Guardian, its legs missing, was nestled amongst them. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Ganon is gone, and we’re armed. I cannot think of a better opportunity for me to gain some closure and to sate my curiosity.”

“I know, but…” Link made a face. “The smell, Zelda. I hate to tell you this, but that castle is filthy. Thank all the monsters who made it a home.”

“Oh.” Zelda imagined moblins making nests of her books and clothes. Link blinked in surprise when she suddenly dismounted and clambered up a rock to face the most recognised symbol of her kingdom, her birthplace and inheritance, a stronghold from whence she had ensured the future of her people for 100 years. Zelda held up her right hand towards it in a gesture of banishment. “In the name of my ancestor, the Goddess Hylia herself… GET. OUT. OF. MY. HOUSE!”

Chase reared when Link burst into hysterical laughter.

Nothing bothered them as the afternoon wore on, not even a nosy pack of wolves who backed away from Cloud’s powerful hooves and Chase’s warning snorts. As the land levelled into green plains, Zelda began to see the snowy peaks of Hebra rising up in the distance, as well as the stately trees that dotted the canyon cliffside. Her heart soared with the memories of these thickly wooded mountains. “Link, how much do you recall of the time I abandoned you in Rito Village?”

“Well, it was not as nearly as entertaining of a story while it unfolded, but in hindsight I can certainly laugh at my immaturity. The fault does partially lie with you for sleeping in.”

“Really? You’re going to blame me?” They were moving at a faster pace now. Cloud’s ears had pricked forward towards a dense ring of trees. The canvas head of a stable peeped over the
evergreen tops. “A hundred years after the fact?”

“For an appointed knight and watchful protector, you certainly weren’t watching carefully enough! But if it so satisfies you…” Zelda looked back to see him smiling at her. “The severe tongue-lashing we received back at the castle by both the King and Captain put us on equal footing.”

His face softened at the mention of their fathers. Zelda wished that she knew more about Link’s childhood, for those were the widest gaps to fill. She resolved to speak with King Dorephan about it the next time they were in Lanayru. It was still hard to believe that she had regained her Zora and Goron allies so smoothly and within such a short amount of time, with new Champions to pilot the Divine Beasts to boot. It was her dearest hope that the Rito would be just as receptive, and they would find one among them daring and proud enough to take on Vah Medoh.

They entered the grounds of Serenne Stable. Zelda immediately saw the signs of Hyrule and Tabantha’s generous harvest from the bales of hay and barrels of grain stacked up high beneath storage shelters. A stable hand hurried out of the inn, her gloved hand raised in welcome… but she froze at the sight of Zelda swinging down from Cloud’s saddle.

“It’s her,” she squeaked. “She’s here! Princess Zelda!”

Hylians came spilling out of the stable in a commotion. The stable master elbowed his way through the gawking crowd, the braids beneath his hat swinging. He opened his arms in a welcome gesture. “Honoured to have you at Serenne Stable, Princess Zelda! The name’s Sprinn. We’ll get you anything you need. Nothing but the best for the princess and her knight.”

“How… how do you know who I am?”

Sprinn motioned for the girl to take Cloud’s reins. “People have been talking ‘bout it up and down the country for weeks. Rumours always thrive on the road, but it was just a few days ago when a Zora confirmed it was really you. Said he met you at a banquet and everything.”

“And Pikango’s been throwing around that portrait of his around every stable ever since,” a traveller added.

“A girl with yellow hair and a white horse.” Sprinn peered at the bridle as it passed him. “That’s the royal wingcrest, alright.”

There was nothing for them to do but accept the hospitality. Sprinn made sure that the best beds were prepared and the food came piping hot. He apologised for their humble fare, but Zelda assured him that it was more than adequate Link agreed by having four heaping bowls of the meat stew. Otherwise, things remained pleasantly and surprisingly down-to-earth. Travellers staying for the night were careful not to crowd Zelda, approaching their table in smaller groups with polite greetings and questions. Several of them were friends of Link, such as a tall merchant whose shirt was far too short for his torso.

“Ohhh, thanks for coming to see me!” Beedle crooned to and cradled a rhino beetle in cupped hands, a thoughtful gift from Link’s pouch. Zelda looked from the horned bug to the bulging knapsack and wondered whether he had named himself. “Such a rare beetle you almost never see! Please, let me pay you back — I’m sure I have something you’ll find useful.”

He deposited the beetle carefully into a pocket before he began unhooking bundles and boxes from his enormous pack. “Where are you headed, by the way?”

“Rito Village,” Link said.
Beedle’s eyebrows shot up. “It’s going to get cold, my friend! I have just the thing.” He rummaged around until he pulled out a bottle. “Spicy elixir! It will last you hours, keeping you nice and toasty even knee-deep in the snow. Trust me, I’ve done it!”

The generosity continued the following morning. Sprinn and his employees urged Zelda and Link to take supplies for their journey even if it would not be long: packages of cooked food, extra weaponry, and thick quilts for their horses in the inevitable cold. Beedle hoisted his wares upon his back, grunting as he slowly got to his feet. He flashed them a heroic thumbs-up even as they galloped away.

Zelda’s reclaimed title was a double-edged sword. There was more help, but also more danger. In less than half a day, they managed to encounter two Yiga Clan members. Zelda was learning their tells quickly. The first had been disguised as a regular traveller loitering by a ruined farmhouse. She kept pacing the same stretch of dirt beneath a tree, glancing around and fingering the handle of a red leather instrument tucked discreetly into a belt. Zelda and Link raced by before the Yiga could even raise a hand.

When they rounded the bend at the top of the canyon, they were less lucky. The temperature began dropping, and Zelda noticed the minute details of frost upon the blades of grass. The horses soldiered on bravely, but they were forced to pause when Chase skidded upon an icy patch of frozen earth. Link dismounted to examine her leg, and that was when Zelda saw the puff of red smoke. A figure already clad in black and scarlet appeared within it, lean and wiry and twirling that familiar sickle-shaped blade in their fist. They somersaulted backwards as Zelda snatched up her bow. Link was only just turning around — though his hand already reaching for the Master Sword — when the assassin charged at him, and Zelda felt the arrow’s feathery fletching brush her cheek as it shot through the chilly air and made its mark in the Yiga’s clavicle. They howled in pain before vanishing in a cloud of paper tags.

Link praised her quick thinking, but Zelda could not savour her triumph while they weathered out a blizzard at Snowfield Stable. “Didn’t you say that their leader is gone? And now with the Calamity ended, what could be their goal now?”

“I couldn’t say.” Link stared out into the white expanse past the canvas ties of the stable entrance. A few flurries of snowflakes found their way inside, though they melted upon impact with the wooden floorboards. “The Yiga are unpredictable. Every little thing is a personal insult to them.”

The storm cleared shortly after midday, though a few clouds remained to obscure the sun high above them. Zelda didn’t mind as Cloud flew on, his hooves leaving impressions within the snow and kicking up flecks of ice as they went along. Hebra was harsh and lonely and empty, but the silence simply made it all the more majestic. Tabantha moose lumbered away from them and snowcoat foxes dove into the deep drifts. The cold and speed took Zelda’s breath away, and it returned to her in visible puffs only when they reached Hebra Tower. The climb was harder than ever with numb fingers, but Link pulled her over the top and it was all worth it: smooth, pristine stretches like a thick, white blanket only augmented by the glowing blue shrines dotting the landscape, all seen through a swirl of snowflakes that kissed her cheeks before giving into her warmth.

The trail took them downhill from there, slicing through the remains of Tabantha Village in the shadow of frozen cliffs. Link was eager to show off his shield surfing skills again. His snowquill headdress quivered as he went sailing over the thick snow, with Chase living up to her name right on his heels. Zelda still didn’t quite understand the appeal, but they were clearly having fun. Never was there such a perfectly paired man and horse.
Sunset had just started when they emerged from the mountain pass and into the verdant valley of the Rito. Rito Village rose out of Lake Totori so much like she remembered, a delicate spire of stone hugged by narrow wooden walkways and houses perched precariously at the sides. Here was the home of a people who valued freedom, adventure, independence and intrepidness, and there was no better symbol of this than the great Divine Beast spreading its wings over them all. Zelda could not resist keeping her head tilted up to stare at it, even when Cloud slowed to a trot towards the waiting stable. Vah Medoh’s triumphant pose, proud and unrepentant, reminded her so much of its former Champion. It stung to know that Revali no longer waited — ruffling his feathers and tapping his foot in impatience — for them within it.

Zelda and Link began their long ascent to the Village Elder’s house. Wooden pinwheels clacked and whirled beside them as winds blew around the valley. Sparks from hearths seen through the open-air windows of houses danced along with them, burning bright for a brief moment before disappearing into the sky. The air became chilly and bracing as night quickly descended, so they hurried their step towards the top of the village.

Link stopped her halfway there, touching her arm and turning his chin. Zelda saw another long bridge towards another small island, this one holding a glowing Sheikah shrine and a flight landing currently occupied. A Rito with blue plumage was swaying to the song around him, eyes closed and with a peaceful smile on his face. He had a broad chest and a curved beak, but in his hands was a musical device that Zelda had not thought about in 100 years, though she recognised it at once.

Link was already strolling down the bridge. He waved his hand, and the music stopped. Suddenly, five fluffy heads appeared over the platform railing.

“Oh, it’s Link!”

“Hiiiiiiii!”

“Do we sound good? We’ve been practising every single day.”

“Dad, I’m hungry. Can we go home now?”

“Dad, Link is here!”

The blue Rito hadn’t moved. He stared past Link’s shoulder and didn’t say a word even while his children hopped up and down and flapped their wings. His gaze was fixed upon Zelda as she drew nearer.

“This is Kass,” Link said to her. “And his daughters: Kheel, Cree, Notts, Genli, and Kotts.”

“Who’s this, Link?” Kheel chirped.

“Her name is—”

“Zelda,” Kass finished for him. He placed the squeezebox down upon the platform. “Girls, rehearsal is finished for today. Run home and tell your mother that we have guests tonight. She’ll need our help to get ready.”

High-pitched cheers erupted amongst the fledglings as they rushed away to deliver the news. They nudged each other playfully even as the bridge rocked back and forth, twittering excitedly about salmon and bread and nutcake.

Kass turned his full attention on Zelda, bowing very low. “Princess Zelda, as I fly and breathe. It’s the greatest honour to finally meet you. I often wondered if I ever would be able to.” He
straightened and smiled at her, tears in his eyes. “I am grateful for the fates that brought you here.”

His deference exceeded even the Hylians at Serenne Stable. Zelda was at a loss for words.

He chuckled, a gentle rumble in his chest. “Excuse me, I fear I may have gotten carried away… nostalgia will do that to a person. You see, I was gifted this musical instrument by my late teacher. He was of the Sheikah tribe, and the court poet of the Hyrulean noble family. It was his most cherished possession… he passed away several years ago. But not before telling me all about you.”

Zelda’s heart dropped into her stomach. “Utano.”

Kass nodded slowly, a tear spilling down his cheek. “A most noble man. He dedicated his life to helping the hero through his words and music, and passed them on to me when he realised that he would not see him awake. Yes, he told me many stories of your wisdom and beauty, Princess. You were the love of his life…” He glanced over at Link. “…but he had accepted the fact that he wasn’t yours.”

They stood there together for a moment of mourning, Kass for his mentor and Zelda for her dear friend. Utano had been one of the very few people at the royal court whose company she had truly enjoyed. She had been dimly aware of his feelings for her, but they had been eclipsed by the anxiety of her burdens and of course, the company of her appointed knight… who was now hefting the squeezebox onto his knee. Link pressed the ends together and a loud chord wheezed out from it.

Kass wiped his eyes and laughed. “Not a bad start! If you would like lessons, I’m happy to oblige.”

“You used to hate that thing,” Zelda said. Link shrugged. She now suspected that it wasn’t the squeezebox itself, possibly just the person wielding it. Link and Utano had not been friends.

Stars were beginning to shine in the quickly darkening sky. Kass accompanied them up the stair. In the highest house of the village, a Rito Elder sat in a rocking chair. His downy beard was braided in the fashion of his people, and his sash had the Rito emblem brocaded over the weave. He looked up from the book in his hands and smiled broadly at the sight of Link.

“Hoo hoo hoo! Welcome back to our village, Champion descendant. It’s a pleasure to see you again. Look, Divine Beast Vah Medoh has become a protector of this village instead of its enemy. Like Master Revali, it will live on in legend… alongside you, of course.” He turned his head to set bright, round eyes upon Zelda. “And who might this be? I am Kaneli, the Elder of Rito Village.”

Zelda bowed. It would seem that the rumours of her return might not have reached this far. “I am a scholar who has studied the ancient Sheikah technology, come to pay my respects and offer help regarding Medoh. It truly is your protector, but will be more help to you once piloted by a member of the Rito once again.”

“The Divine Beast Vah Medoh? But it is an ancient Sheikah weapon with the power to seal evil.” Kaneli steepled his feathery fingers. “If the legends are true, only an individual with innate abilities can harness the strength of a Divine Beast.”

“You are correct, wise Elder. But there is another way.” She pulled a new Slate from her pouch, and Kaneli’s eyes grew even rounder. “Here is a device designed explicitly for a new Champion of Rito Village. Once attuned to the Divine Beast, the new pilot will have the ability to control it.”

Kaneli took the Slate and held it up for scrutiny. The strokes of the painted eye glistened in the lantern light. “Ancient Sheikah Slates are hard to come by. Who are you, really?”

Hesitation hung in the air. Then, Kass stepped forward. “Elder Kaneli, forgive my intrusion. This
will be no doubt of great shock to you, but this maiden is none other than Princess Zelda, the same legendary leader of the Champions. She has returned to Hyrule. I have seen for myself how the castle stands empty, and you know that monsters plague the wilds no more.”

Kaneli’s eyes bulged even further. His head swivelled from Zelda to Link almost frantically. “If that is so, then you are…?”

“He is Link, the Hylian Champion. No mere descendant, but the one and only.”

Zelda and Link waited with bated breath — and no small amount of embarrassment at the dramatic declamations — as Kaneli muttered to himself, his tufty eyebrows trembling. “No… what am I thinking? The Champions have all been dead for 100 years! This girl… well, the legends spoke of a sleeping hero and the princess sealed away, but could it possibly… I cannot…”

Kass turned Link’s shoulder. “You will need surefire proof.”

“But what kind of…” Enlightenment dawned upon Link. “Oh. I’ll be right back.”

Poor Kaneli, Zelda thought. The Elder nearly molted upon seeing Link disappear into a haze of blue particles right within their midst. She walked over to him and patted his soft wings. “Regardless of who I am, will you allow me to help train a new pilot for Vah Medoh? I only wish to help you.”

Kaneli tapped his beak pensively. “We do have talented and brave Rito within our tribe, but you’ll find that most of them will consider the task rather daunting. Revali is a very big name to live up to. He is the greatest Rito warrior who ever was, after all.”

Zelda smiled to herself. If the warrior himself could only hear these very words, there would be no amount of modesty left in all of Tabantha. Kaneli squawked in surprise when there was a sudden stomping on the stair. Link was back, panting slightly and holding a wooden frame in his hands.

“Here.” He thrust it at Kaneli, who squinted down at the figures depicted through the protective glass panel. “That’s us. With Mipha, Daruk, Urbosa, and Revali.”

Kaneli looked at it for a long time. “Ah! So this is what Master Revali looked like. A very dashing Rito, just as expected.”

Revali had been caught in the process of nearly falling flat on his beak, but evidently that wasn’t much of an issue for Kaneli. He beamed. “Extravagant monuments and idols are not the way of the Rito. We prefer that our ancestors be remembered through their contributions to the whole tribe. But it is indeed a privilege and delight to view the image of our Champion. Ah, those were the days. Do you mind if I keep this?”

“We’ll get you a copy,” Link suggested. Kass cleared his throat.

Kaneli tore his eyes away from Revali’s picture. “Well… that certainly is an uncanny resemblance. Do forgive me if it’s hard to believe. I… I suppose I shall take you up on your offer for the Divine Beast. My nomination would be Teba. You know him, Champion de— Champion. An excellent shot with a bow, and quite dedicated to protecting our village. The closest we have to a Champion like Master Revali.”

They took Kaneli’s leave and walked to the next house over. Kass knocked upon the wooden frame before lifting the tapestry covering the entrance. Zelda saw the very portrait of Rito domesticity. A woman was ladling out stew into bowls while a man sat cross-legged upon the cheerful blue carpet, stringing a stately falcon bow with a fledgling boy perched beside him on a cushion, clutching a
matching quiver to his little fluffy chest. They were a very handsome family, from the mother’s beautifully curled plumage to her husband’s wild crest.

He glanced up at Zelda and immediately feigned not having heard every single word that had been uttered next door. “Sorry, but we’re very busy here. You should probably go.”

Before they could respond, the boy jumped up. “Hey, Link! How long are you here? Let’s go to Flight Range tomorrow! I’ve been practising. Now I can get three targets in five minutes!”

“Very nice,” Link said. Kass turned to the mother, smiling politely.

“Saki, do you mind if we borrow Teba for just a minute? It’s a direct request from the Elder.”

“Of course.” Saki met her husband’s furrowed gaze with calm firmness. “If the Elder asked, then it’s got to be important. Tulin can eat his supper first.”

Teba slowly got to his feet. He was tall and lean, and his stride was purposeful and strong. He snapped the tapestry irritably behind him with a powerful wing. Zelda understood that this was the Rito who assisted Link with Medoh before. She wondered why he was so hostile.

Once they were gathered at the landing nearby, Teba stared her down contemptuously. “Let me get this straight. Some random Hylian girl wants to…” He crooked two fingers on each wing. “…train me to control Divine Beast Vah Medoh? I’m not buying it, so-called Princess or not. Just like the Elder to trust any fool wandering into town.”

Zelda took none of this personally. She acknowledged just how far-fetched it all sounded. But Kass was suddenly beside her. He puffed up his chest and spread his wings in a threatening pose. “Watch your attitude, Teba. She comes to our village not seeking anything for her personal gain, and this is how you respond? Royalty or not, you disgrace the Rito with your disrespect.”

Though Kass seemed nearly twice the size as he was before, Teba didn’t bat an eye, staring right back at him without moving a muscle. Then, he folded his wings. “Alright, sorry. Let me start over. Look — you seem like you mean what you say, girl. But let’s make one thing clear. I’m not going anywhere near that menace. It took a chunk out of my wing the last time I flew too close, and it took weeks to mend. You’d better stay away from it too.”

“I’ve been inside Vah Medoh,” she told him. “In fact, it was my first Divine Beast.”

Teba blinked. He could see that she was telling the truth. Still, he shook his head. “The only people able to enter the Divine Beasts and control them were the five champions of old. Link managed it too, which… lends credibility to your story, I guess. I don’t think he has it in him to lie.” He cracked a wry smile when Link frowned. “That’s a compliment, pal.”

Zelda stepped forward. “I understand that the safety of your people is your first priority. So this is your chance to truly take that matter into your own hands. Wouldn’t you rather Medoh be firmly allied with the Rito rather than a free agent shadowing your village? As a warrior, you must know that risks come with the territory.”

Before Teba could argue back at her again, they were interrupted by a cry. Everyone turned to see Tulin leaping out the window of his house, his white feathers almost aglow against the falling night. Teba gasped and moved to catch him, but the young Rito sailed gracefully through the air, only tripping slightly on his landing.

“Do it!” he cried. “Please! I want to see you on the big bird.”
“Tulin!” Saki rushed down, though she used the stair. “That… that was dangerous! Come back here this instant.”

But her son would not budge. “A Rito warrior doesn’t rest until his people are safe. That’s what you always say! The princess wants you to be… a what?”

“A Champion,” Zelda said.

Tulin hopped from one foot to the other in frantic excitement. “A Champion, Dad! Like Master Revali!”

Teba said nothing while his wife scooped up their child, who wiggled and begged as he was taken away. Only when Tulin was finally out of earshot did he finally mutter, “That was pretty good flying form, if I do say so myself.”

“He learns quickly. Like father, like son,” Kass offered gently.

Teba sighed. “I think I am going to regret this, but he won’t leave it alone if I refuse. Fine. I submit. But don’t expect much. Now, if I had both the strength and speed of Master Revali, that would be a different story.”

“Revali is gone,” Zelda said. “I knew him. He was a very individualistic character and had no descendants, but his loyalties lay with his people. His standards were always high and he never accepted anything less. You are more like him that you know. I think Vah Medoh will suit you well.”

Teba hesitated before giving her a curt nod. “We’ll see, Princess. Tomorrow at dawn. Right now, I have to deal with my brave, though disobedient, kid.” He left them on the landing, the wind ruffling his winged epaulettes.

There was no big feast or celebration, just a homecooked meal with Kass and his family. His wife, Amali, welcomed Zelda and Link with grace and cheer. The fledglings scattered feathers as they danced around the spread of freshly baked bread, crispy salmon meuniere, spicy cream of sunshroom soup, and of course, the famed nutcake studded with acorns. It was a particular favourite amongst the girls, fighting over even bits of crust that broke off. Only young Genli ignored her sisters, scarfing down more salmon resolutely.

The fledglings were familiar with Link, and they were fascinated by Zelda. They pelted them both with questions, many of which were of a very personal bent.

“Do you stay with the princess all the time?”

“Yes.”

“Even if she’s sleeping?”

“Yes.”

“Even if she’s pooping?”

“Uh.”

“Even princesses gotta poop!”

Kotts scattered crumbs everywhere as she piped up, “I saw a horse down at the stable once. It took
a REAAAALLY long poop.”

“Oh… okay,” Link said weakly.

“And, it stinked somethin’ fierce.”

Zelda couldn’t hold in her laughter at the bemused and faintly uncomfortable expression on Link’s face. Then, something soft brushed against her arm. She looked over to see Cree sitting very close. The little Rito girl stared solemnly up at her with shining round eyes. “Do you love Link, Princess Zelda?”

Her sisters hushed up immediately.

“Yes.”

They squealed in delight. “Are you married to him, then?”

“No.”

Zelda was only being honest, but the fledglings took this news with deep distress. “WHY NOT?!” Cree shrieked, nearly taking to the air as she flapped her wings furiously. “You need to get married if you love him!”

“Yes! Get married! And then, get pregnant!”

“What?” Zelda cried, but she was drowned out under the enthusiastic trill of the girls. Link sat there red-faced as Amali declared that it was most certainly bedtime and ushered them all away.

Kass insisted that Zelda and Link stay at the open-air house rather than walk all the way down to the inn. “It’s no trouble. I think we’ll need to keep an eye on the girls.” He shook his head, but was also smiling. “They’ll be trying to sneak out to interrogate you even more.”

There were two slim hammocks, separate but side by side, hanging from the rafters. Kass had thoughtfully lowered them before leaving. Zelda climbed into hers and felt the canvas conforming to her body. She lay there, swinging gently, and watched as Link attempted to get into his without immediately falling out the other side. He was successful, but just barely.

He arched his eyebrows at her. “So… this teacher. Seems like you kept something from me, too.”

“Utano was my friend.” She huffed at his continued stare. “Unlike you, I remember very clearly — there was nothing romantic about our relationship!”

Link grinned. He reached out to hold her hand across the empty space between them. “It sounded like he knew that ours was, though.”

Silence fell for a few minutes. Then, Link spoke very softly. “Do you want to get married?”

Zelda’s heart skipped a beat. “Do we need to?”

“It would be nice.” Another pause. “I want to.”

To marry. Zelda thought about what that meant. Why did people get married in the first place? Alliances and contracts came to her mind, which she dismissed at once. The kingdom barely existed as it was, and 100 years ago it had barely mattered since they were so wholly focused on preserving the future rather than the petty illusion of nobility. What was the real reason for marriage? Zelda could feel Link’s fingers holding hers, his thumb brushing gently across her
They already knew that they would be together for the rest of their lives, if not also in the next. And, they had certainly done everything a wedded couple would have… save the significant step of producing children, as Cree had so thoughtfully pointed out.

“If you’re thinking of leaving me, please let me know sooner rather than later.” Link was only teasing her, but she could tell that her silence made him nervous. Zelda sighed.

“Historically, royal marriages were carefully engineered to make for advantageous matches across powerful families or kingdoms. I know for a fact that Prince Sidon is unbetrothed.” He suddenly squeezed her hand, and Zelda burst out laughing. “Oh, Link. Rest assured, neither one of us will ever join King Dorephan’s family, for better or for worse. Sidon told me himself that he is not of age to even be thinking of this yet. And at 17, I would say I am, too.”

“You’re 117,” Link corrected. “I have no idea how old I am.”

“I believe you were roughly a year older than me.” Though that did not factor in the years he spent running around Hyrule before she joined him again. “Anyway, who even knows how a wedding functions in this age?” She looked over when he didn’t respond. Link stared at her triumphantly. “What?”

“It just so happens that I do know. And I also know exactly where to find the guy.”

She was running out of excuses. Link sat up. The moonlight through the windows backlit his hair like the sun was already rising. It struck the side of his face. Despite, or perhaps because of the scar that raked across his cheek, he was every inch the beautiful hero who had pledged his life to her once before, and now he wanted to again.

He didn’t need to actually ask but did so anyway. “Zelda, will you marry me?”

He was patient as she struggled to sit upright as well. Her answer had to be made as equals, face to face and eye to eye.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

1. Of course Zelda gets turned on in a freakin’ Sheikah shrine. That NERD.
2. The nice thing about writing this fic is that it makes me hop back into the game and play more of it. I ended up finishing a few more Rito Village side/shrine quests while “researching”!
3. Still not above poop jokes. Also, “GET MARRIED, THEN GET PREGNANT!!” has been lifted verbatim from the mouth of a little first grade girl I had the... pleasure of teaching once.

Next chapter, they will stay put in a SINGLE LOCATION because that’s the main reason (next to dialogue) why these take forever. Guys, I don’t like them taking forever. I want my brain to be finally free to do other things than obsess over these two. NEXT TIME. ONE PLACE.
Rejoice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Link had wanted to leave immediately, but Zelda managed to hold him back. After all, their Champion hopeful was really more of a doubtful, and to elope on him would not do his confidence any favours.

The air was cold and biting when they climbed up the spire in the predawn darkness. Teba was already waiting for them, sitting cross-legged upon the round end of the boulder. He was fully armed with bow, quiver, kite shield and feathered edge, ready to fight if needed. He was also eyeing the enormous Divine Beast perched mere metres away with great distaste.

“It moved,” he hissed.

Zelda turned to look. Vah Medoh, upright when they had arrived, had now sunken forward, rendering its body level upon a pair of carved talons. Teba flinched slightly when the shadow of a gigantic wing stretched over him.

“It’s supposed to move,” Link said.

Teba shot him a sour look as they approached Medoh. Zelda put a hand upon the leg of the great bird. She could feel tremors of energy through the thick stone. For all of Teba’s misgivings, the pattern that had appeared with Sidon, Yunobo, and even the Champions of old was still there: the Divine Beast recognising its pilot even at a distance. And the moment Teba touched his new Slate to the Guidance Stone, Medoh launched itself from its perch and rose into the air. The wind took Zelda’s breath away as the world shrank beneath them.

With two guides to show him around the terminals, it was no time at all before Teba had mastered the controls. They floated over Lake Totori under a shining sun. Zelda peered over Medoh’s wing and saw colourful specks of Rito citizens moving up and down the walkways, occasionally pausing. She imagined that they were squinting up at them, wondering whether the Divine Beast’s return to the skies was a good or bad omen.

Teba and Link joined her. The Rito Champion gazed at the ground with newfound reverence, the cold wind ruffling his white and grey feathers in a very rugged fashion. Zelda was sure he had looked down at his hometown before, but the perspective would certainly change with the inheritance of greater responsibilities.

“Alright. I’ll admit it. There definitely is a… thrill, standing upon this thing.” He took a deep breath and carefully stowed the Sheikah Slate alongside his quiver. “I’ve got to tell you, Princess… When you first showed up, I thought you were pulling a prank on me. But after seeing you handle this Divine Beast, I can tell you’re the real deal. Please accept my apologies for the other day. I don’t have good memories with Medoh, but hopefully that will change.”

“Thank you,” Zelda said, “for giving us a chance. You have done your people proud. Generations shall look up to you as they do Revali.”

Teba’s expression softened at her words. “Tulin’s going to want to come exploring up here. I don’t think that’ll happen for quite some time yet, but who knows? He might win me over. I’m hoping he grows up to be a distinguished warrior like Master Revali.”
“He has an excellent role model right here.”

She and Link were still forced to convince him to keep Medoh near the village instead of steering it right back into the Hebra Mountains — despite all, he was still wary of it. Zelda couldn’t help but find this assuring. No doubt that they were leaving Vah Medoh under the watch of a capable and dutiful protector.

When everything was finally over and done with, Link grabbed Zelda’s hand. They hurried down the stair to the landing beside the old shrine, pine trees obscuring it slightly from view. Nobody was there right now, so Link whisked her around, snatching up the Sheikah Slate from her belt in the process.

“Oh, here’s what we’ll do. I’ll go and pick up the last Slate from Purah. It should be ready by now. Then I’ll go unlock the right travel gate and come back here so you can use it. Sound good?”

Zelda nodded. Link kissed her urgently before disappearing in the now-familiar shower of fragments.

She sat down on the edge of the platform to wait. With Medoh peacefully floating over her, she could finally think ahead to what was about to happen. It was difficult — her question last night in the hammock had been a real one. Zelda had no idea what a modern Hylian wedding would resemble. As a child, all she understood was that they were always held in temples and cathedrals, places she had done her best to stay away from. Anyway, they were all ruins, now.

The seconds stretched into minutes. Zelda knew that it would take time for Link to reach the lab and collect the finished Slate from Purah. She pictured him racing up the steep hill and nearly collapsing at the furnace. Purah would demand to know where Zelda was, but they were equals in obstinacy so Link would simply ignore her and demand for the Sheikah Slate… Zelda bit her lip to keep from smiling at the thought. He loved her, and he wanted to marry her. She hugged her arms around her legs and let the red sparrows in the branches above sing their hearts out in her stead.

“Good morning, Princess.”

Zelda looked up. Kass, sans daughters, was standing before her with the bridge behind him slowly rocking back and forth. He held a small cloth bundle in his hands. “Where is Link?”

“He’ll be back very soon.” At least, she hoped so. She wouldn’t put it past him to arrange for more surprises. “How are the girls?”

“Oh, they’re doing perfectly fine. They’ve gone to Warbler’s Nest for the morning.” Kass unwrapped his bundle. The smoky smell of sautéed nuts made Zelda’s stomach rumble. Kass gestured for her to take one. “I gather that we have a new Champion?”

“Yes! He’s come round.” She took a crunchy bite, savouring the warmth and flavour. “And so has the Elder. The idea of reestablishing relations with other nations appeals to him very much. He even asked me when I will rebuild Castle Town.”

“Is that your plan?”

Zelda paused for a moment. First of all, her mouth was full. Second, she didn’t have an answer. It turned her heart (and stomach, considering the monster leavings Link had reminded her about) to think back upon the barren roads of the city and the crumbling walls of the castle. To restore them to inhabitable order would be a massive undertaking. She had not thought that far forward yet; she was only keeping to what she had always loved most: the Divine Beasts.
Kass smiled at her hesitation. “It will be a long process. I wouldn’t worry, however. With all the
good you have spread throughout Hyrule, you won’t be alone. Your allies and friends shall come to
your aid, remaining by your side until we see things through.”

Zelda certainly hoped so. Before they could continue this conversation, the travel gate before them
glowed and the shape of Link reappeared before them.

“I got them.” He opened up her Slate’s map and pointed at a small marker. “Dah Hesho shrine.
You go first.”

Zelda took the Slate back and held it in both hands. She had never used the travel function before.
The map on the screen showed her that the shrine was in Akkala. Clearly, Link wasn’t willing to
wait a few more days of horseback riding, hence Slate travel.

He really wanted to marry her.

“Don’t run off,” Link warned. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“You know, you could simply trust me,” she teased back. His mouth twitched into a sheepish
smile.

Kass quietly stood up, folding up his empty cloth. “I take it that pressing matters are at hand for the
princess and her knight.”

Link and Zelda glanced at each other. “Yes,” Zelda said.

Kass studied them for a moment before folding his wings and smiling wide. “Then don’t let me
keep you. I have absolute faith that we shall meet again. Farewell, Princess Zelda.”

The blue of his feathers quickly melted into light as Zelda brushed her finger against the marker.

Warmth flooded back into her limbs when she rematerialised at her new location. Travelling
through the ancient Sheikah channels was an absolutely singular experience. For one moment, she
was, and then she wasn’t, and now she was once more. Her legs wobbled beneath her like chuchu
jelly, and Zelda gulped down fresh air into her lungs so she could live again.

“Halloooooo, Princess!”

“Bolson?” she squeaked, almost dropping the Sheikah Slate.

The luminary, president, architect, and design lead of Hyrule’s premier construction company was
indeed sauntering up the hill. His striped collar and pink trousers were almost too bright against the
subtle landscape. Bolson came round the shrine and regarded her with satisfaction. “I can see why
you’re such a match for our studly lad. Travel tires most people out but not you, huh? My dear,
you’re positively glowing.”

“Thank you, but I must ask… why are you here?”

He arched a single grey eyebrow at her. “To visit my godson, of course.”

“Your… godson?”

“Mm-hmmm.” He offered a hand to help her off the travel gate. “Oh, and Link mentioned you
would be coming this way, so I decided to pick you up and give you a warm welcome. Allow me
to show off our greatest achievement… so far, at least. Behold, Tarrey Town!”
They walked to the edge of the cliff, and Zelda saw that they were looking across a large lake, the wine-dark surface far, far below them. She looked at the rusty red walls of the steep banks around it, dotted with the famous Akkalan trees with their leaves of copper and bronze. Bolson pointed at a lonely island in the very centre of the lake. It rose round and thick from the waters, reminding Zelda of a cake. Around its edges stood boxy houses that were Bolson Construction’s signature style. From this distance, Zelda could just barely make out the citizens in miniature, wandering round their town’s central fountain that was beginning to sparkle as sunlight broke the heavy clouds.

“You built a new town!”

“Yup. Business expansion, y’know. Our first project. It was ambitious, but I dare to dream big! Linky-boy helped, naturally. A shame he wouldn’t change his name, because he’s become quite the valuable contractor.”

As if on cue, there was a faint hum behind them. Zelda and Bolson turned to see that Link had finally arrived. He ran up to Zelda, cheeks flush with eagerness. She felt it in his fingers when he grasped her hand once more. “Pretty, right?”

“Very.” She allowed him to take her away from the cliff, and they began to walk down the gentle slope of the hill. A worn dirt road streaked through otherwise unbroken green uplands. Zelda had been travelling her new Hyrule for some time now, but only here did she truly feel like it was wild. Save for the cute little town in the lake, there was absolutely no sign of settlement. Nothing but grass, trees, and lonely calls of birds in the trees over the buzz of insects.

Bolson’s lilting tenor joined them. “You’ll soon see the true genius behind the design of Bolson homes — stackable, sturdy and easily removed if necessary! The client has complete creative control over how they wish their homes to be. And they come in a ravishing array of three different paint jobs! Zelda, darling, if you’ve any plans to take your throne in Hyrule Field again, I would love to remind you how easy your city planning will be with these sweet babies along the streets!”

Another expectation that one of these days, she would start Hyrule all over again. Zelda nodded as she fielded Bolson’s questions and suggestions, but she was only half listening. It dawned upon her that this was an issue she would have to confront eventually: did she wish to continue the chain of tradition? A seat in an ancient castle surrounded by her people, smack in the centre of the realm and elevated over all others. She didn’t half like the idea when she was younger, and it made her uncomfortable to think about now. But Zelda had seen firsthand how Hylians brightened at stories and legends. They seemed to like imagining her in a crown… it honestly surprised her that Bolson of all people was part of this group, though Zelda also suspected that he simply wanted a bigger, more ambitious commission.

When they reached the road, Link quickened his step. Zelda hurried to catch up. Bolson panted behind them, his enthusiasm melting into annoyance at the humiliation of, well, exerting effort. “Always racing about! What’s the rush? You two just got here.”

“We need to see Kapson,” Link said.

Bolson’s eyes narrowed. A few steps more, then he stopped in his tracks and screamed, “YOU’RE GETTING MARRIED!”

Link sighed, and Zelda gaped. “How did you…”

“When you’ve been round the block as many times as I have, you just know.” Bolson’s leisurely stroll morphed into an energetic skip. “I gladly accept the position of Master of Ceremonies.”
“We don’t need a—” Link began, but Bolson cut him off.

“So much to do… a royal wedding! Our quaint little village might not look much, but I daresay we have enough to make a splash out of things. You’re right, Link. Let’s get to town NOW!”

A thin land bridge connected the island to the rest of Akkala. Zelda could see a plaster and stone gate very much like Hateno Village’s ahead of her, and when they drew closer the sign hanging from it spelled a cheerful “WELCOME”.

And welcome she did feel in Tarrey Town. The colourful houses were all uniquely stacked, green, red, blue blocks long and rectangular or tall and jumbled, each arranged to display its own personality. Flowers thrived in pointed box beds in front and beside them, complementing the pale birch trees with their golden leaves. When Zelda looked up, she saw the rushing trio of Akkala Falls, a thin Shiekah tower rising out of the citadel ruins, and the red-hot glow of Death Mountain’s summit. There was wood everywhere, from the fences to lamp posts to planks beneath her feet, slightly damp from a previous rain. Bolson promised that they would eventually get round to replacing them with real flagstones.

Their path led to a pool in the centre of town, refitted with varnished decking to match the angular look of the houses. Four wooden pillars rose from within it, water spilling out of the windows cut into them. The natural materials and symmetrical simplicity of the arrangement was so pleasing to Zelda’s eye, especially as one painted pink stood taller and wiser at their centre. It bore a polished brass bell and the carving of a heart suspended over the head of the Statue of the Goddess.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said. Bolson beamed.

“Stop taking credit,” Link told him. “Hudson did all the work.”

“And who taught him design and craft, hmm? I’ll claim that!” Bolson nodded towards the nearest house. “There’s Kapson. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a team to round up.”

Crescent moons marked the building as an inn. Link led Zelda inside. An elderly Zora with burgundy scales stood behind a wooden counter, scratching pencil marks into a book. He looked up and froze when he locked eyes with Zelda.

“Well, well,” he croaked. “The princess with the blood of the goddess. I didn’t think I would live to see her once again.”

“Kapson is a priest,” Link explained to Zelda.

“Was.” Kapson coughed into a bony fist. “I have retired from my role, now living my life free from the material concerns of this world. Especially with the revelation that today’s young grow increasingly distant from following holy doctrine. I can hardly blame them — with all that we’ve been through here in Hyrule, it’s only natural to take on a nihilistic view on life. But I digress. How may I serve your highness? Are you in need of a good sleep or a hearty meal?”

“…no.” Link glanced at Zelda.

She took a deep breath before speaking. “We wish to be wed. Is that something you can help us with?”

Kapson didn’t move. His eyes darted down to their laced fingers and Link’s blushing face. “I see. You’ve done very well for yourself, Link. From one princess to another!”

“I—” Link started, but Kapson waved him off.
“By my fin, you should understand a jest by now. Despite my decrepit state, my mind is sharp and remembers well. You were close with Lady Mipha, but not in that manner. This seems to me a far better match.” He closed the book and set it aside. “Joining two souls is a true honour. Thanks to the benevolence of the Goddess Hylia, I can offer you my services.”

Zelda was unsure if she wanted this sarcastic, sour old man to officiate her wedding. As if he sensed her apprehension, Kapson turned to look her in the eye. “I believe in allowing mistakes of the past to wash away. This includes those of my own: selfish, bitter, resentful thoughts that poison the bonds between friends. After a century of woe, this is not easy to do. But the Goddess has sent me her descendant to right the wrongs that had gathered in my heart, so I am grateful for a chance at redemption. I hope you will believe me when I say that I look upon you and feel blessed.”

Zelda felt the sincerity in his hoarse, gravelly voice. “Thank you.”

The three of them walked outside just to be met by an intervention of Bolson Construction employees. At least, that’s what Zelda could only assume since Bolson stepped forward, hands on his hips. He declared, “No, no! I refuse! As the princess’s appointed Master of Ceremonies, I protest this blatant lack of gravitas in going forward with her royal wedding.”

“You appointed yourself,” Link grumped.

Bolson ignored him. “Think of the history books. Princess Zelda wed to her hero in some slapped-together ceremony without a single flower petal to shower her with. Ah!” He turned to a Goron child hovering behind his knee. “Pelison, that’ll be your job. As many flower petals as you can!” Bolson resumed his rant once the boy had curled up and rolled away. “I won’t allow it. Just give me some time, and I’ll give you a wedding to remember.”

They had no choice but to acquiesce. Bolson clapped his hands in excitement. “Okey-doo, let’s get started! We’re in prep mode, and the wedding goes down in four hours. Link, you’re with me. Zelda, follow Hudson. Everyone else, you know what to do! Look lively!”

A man with a thick moustache and mushroom-shaped hair approached Zelda. He shook her hand with an arm bulky with muscle. “Hey. Nice to meet you. Name’s Hudson.”

“Zelda.”

“I know. I mean, everyone knows.” He brought her to the other side of Tarrey Town. Zelda noticed for the first time that there were long tables set out before some of the houses, functioning as shops for the residents. They passed a glowing sign post with the image of a shirt upon it. Before Zelda could ask, Hudson opened the door of the house behind it and beckoned to her.

Zelda walked in. Like all Bolson homes, the ceilings were lower than expected, but it lent the room a cosy, warm atmosphere instead. She was immediately bombarded with the rich smell of spices and perfume. It tugged upon her soul, the memory of something she loved — and then it clicked once a woman appeared from behind a bookcase. She was very tall, the top of her head missing the ceiling by mere inches. Her bright red hair was pulled into a ponytail, and gold hoops glimmered from her ears. The Gerudo glanced at Zelda. “Ah, this is she.”

“Yep,” Hudson said. “The boss says four hours.”

She shook her head. “That’s nonsense.”

“You can do it.” Hudson squeezed past a table laden with thread, needles, and measures. The Gerudo bent her knees so his lips could reach her cheek. “I’ve seen you patch every last hole in my
work clothes before I could blink.”

That made the woman smile, and she watched him fondly as he exited the house before turning to Zelda. “Sav’aaq. I’m Rhondson. I hail from Gerudo Town, but Tarrey Town is my home now. Even with my husband’s boss dropping this ridiculous demand upon us at such short notice, I am looking forward to dressing you. It’s Gerudo tradition to pass on one’s wedding garments to her daughter, but it turns out that I won’t be able to do so. Might as well give it to a princess.”

Zelda was confused. “Why can’t you pass them to your daughter?”

Rhondson gestured for Zelda to follow her to the other side of the room. Beneath one of the windows stood a wooden bassinet overflowing with blankets. It trembled as they neared, and Rhondson gently picked up the babe inside. Zelda saw chubby arms, skin smooth and brown, and bright red hair, thick and mussed from sleep. The blanket fell away to reveal a healthy baby boy. He blinked at her before crossing his dark eyes.

“A Gerudo voe,” Zelda gasped.

“Yes,” Rhondson said proudly.

“He’s adorable!” Zelda held out her arms, and Rhondson carefully deposited her son into them. He was already quite heavy, though Zelda would guess that he was not even a full year old yet.

“Seven months,” Rhondson clarified.

“What’s his name?”

“Savson.” Rhondson sighed. “In accordance with the Bolson Construction naming guidelines.”

“That’s still a nice name.” Savson looked up at Zelda when she said this, reaching out a pudgy hand and touching her neck. His eyes became squints as he burbled and grinned at her, chin glistening with drool. Still extremely lovable. Rhondson took Savson back, wiping away the spit before putting him back into his bassinet.

“We combined Gerudo and Hylian: good son. And he _will_ be a good son.” Rhondson’s tone of voice dropped, her voice steely and firm. Zelda understood. It was incredibly rare for a male to be born to the Gerudo, and history was complicated when it came to them. So much that one particular voe’s devastating actions had resulted in the harsh laws of Gerudo Town, and lifetimes of atonement weighed down upon the entire race. And this did not even touch what he had done to Hyrule…

Rhondson seemed to be thinking the same thing. “I am very thankful to live here in Tarrey Town,” she said. “In the desert, I’m afraid he would be treated as an oddity or worse, an outsider. Here, he will grow up as different as each of his neighbours and think nothing of it. Of course, I fully intend to raise him in the ways of the Gerudo, but the exposure is important. He must see how Hyrule is shared amongst many. He shall be courageous, wise, and powerful in his pride… he will be a _good son_,” she stated once again, both a threat and a promise.

“He will,” Zelda agreed. “And I love that idea, to grow up right alongside people of all creeds and colours. It was always something that bothered me about Hyrule, that we sequester ourselves with only our own kind in the various towns. I wish more could follow Tarrey Town’s lead.”

Rhondson was very pleased. “Then it’s good that you came here. Now,” she said, the bangles on her wrists clinking as she clasped her hands together, “we must set to work. If I am to see my mother’s heirloom lace worn once more, there’s no time to lose.”
She bade Zelda to stand on a low side table while she measured and mumbled to herself about her available fabrics. Zelda admitted that she would much rather not have the pure white dress. She was quite finished with those. And as expected, Rhondson did not have anything in proper royal blue.

“Who says you must stick with the same tired colours?” she suggested as they surveyed the mess of silk and swatches littered around them. Savson had woken from his nap and was now playing with a spool of thread. Zelda carefully set the pincushion away from his curious fingers. “It is a new era. Princess, may I propose…”

There was a knock on the door. Rhondson opened it to reveal the Goron boy, Pelison. He gave them a toothy grin from beneath his hard hat. “Hi! Link said to give these to the princess.” He held up a bundle of Silent Princesses, fresh and emitting their subtle perfumes.

“Thank you,” Zelda said as Rhondson took them to water in a vase. “Where is he?”

“The funny boss told him to get some guests. They argued for a while but then Link left. That was maybe an hour ago…”

He was interrupted by sudden screams coming from the central fountain. Zelda and Rhondson rushed out to see what was going on. Tarrey Town citizens dived out of the way of a well-familiar machine whose long appendages twisted and stabbed the ground, sending flecks of soil flying up with each lurch. The swirled Sheikah carvings along its stone base glowed blue, not the marred magenta of the Calamity, and its head was completely missing. Instead, someone had hacked off the legs of wooden chairs and cemented the seats upon the Guardian stalker’s body, converting it into the strangest carriage Zelda had ever seen.

A tiny old man sat at the front of it, waving a wrench at the people fleeing from him. “Hm! If there isn’t a shred of sense in these folks! The Calamity’s rid, the Guardian’s blue, and it has four passengers right on its noggin. Hm… Think I’ll park ‘im right at the back, hm.”

Zelda recognised the tarnished goggles with their protruding lenses, the unruly white hair, and his Sheikah researcher’s garb. He glanced over and dropped his jaw in amazement at the sight of her, yanking on a lever affixed to the Guardian’s leg. It shuddered to a stop inches away from colliding into the general store, where the Rito vendor had already snatched up his bow.

“Princess?” Robbie called to her, an unmistakable waver in his voice. “Is that you?”

Zelda ran from the porch steps, her boots squelching on the upturned earth. Before anyone could stop her, she had climbed up the Guardian’s leg and hugged her old friend. When she pulled away, Robbie was already a blubbering mess, shoving the goggles away from his wrinkled face and wiping up tears with the back of his grease-streaked gloves. “Oh, Princess. Sorry for that… hm! It’s been too long! The director sent word for us, but both my lovely Jerrin and I had come down with horrible colds at the time. We’ve really only just stopped these violent coughing fits in recent weeks, but then Dr. Purah said you kids had gone gallivanting around Hyrule again. Hm! Nothing’s changed, I see. But that makes this old man’s heart so glad. When Link said you were here in Akkala, I knew it was a good time as any to try out my new… hm, what should I call it?”

“What about Guar?” Link appeared behind him, perched on one of the seats. “You know, half a guardian… a Guar.”

He grinned expectantly, but Robbie simply furrowed his brow. “Hm. I’ll have to think on that one.”
Zelda helped him down from the… Guar, along with the help of his wife, Jerrin, and their grown son, Granté. To see her friend in his advanced age surrounded by such loving family warmed Zelda’s heart. Granté just so happened to live in Tarrey Town himself, so Robbie insisted that they wouldn’t get in Zelda’s way and urged her to continue with any preparations.

Before she went back to Rhondson’s, Link caught up to her. “Zelda, do you think I shou—”

“NO!” Bolson suddenly loomed over them, his bony but strong arms wrenching them apart. “No speaking with your fiance before the ceremony! You shouldn’t even be looking at her! Do I have to enforce every tradition myself?” He pouted. “You’re so lucky to have me as your Master of Ceremonies.”

There was nothing they could do but part ways once again. Zelda checked the time on her Sheikah Slate. Only two more hours, if the schedule was to be kept.

Miraculously, it was. The skies were a beautiful blue with nary a cloud in sight as Tarrey Town citizens gathered by the Statue of the Goddess. From the doorway of Rhondson’s house, Zelda looked out upon a congregation that so perfectly represented her kingdom: Hylians, Sheikah, Gorons, Rito, and Zora. Hudson bounced his Gerudo son in his arms as his wife helped Zelda keep the hem of her new dress out of the dirt.

Rhondson had finally had a revelation. It seemed that a Gerudo veil was more than enough fabric for a Hylian girl’s skirt. A lilac bodice retrieved from the depths of a chest went over this, with a few loops of shimmering silk sleeves to protect her shoulders. The golden chain headpiece Rhondson had worn at her own wedding now went around Zelda’s waist, allowing for a violet tabard to hang over the skirt. Zelda had helped by stitching small triangles of a shining Triforce upon it herself. There was not enough time to embroider the wingcrest of Hyrule, but perhaps the crimson lining was enough. Even with everything she wanted to reject from her past, Zelda was still royal. So upon her head was a crown, a flowing one of Silent Princesses.

The crowd turned to watch her approach. Link waited with them. Zelda’s heart seemed to stop. Seeing him in that uniform took her back to when she had first laid eyes upon him. The boy clutching the Master Sword in trembling hands, slowly turning around and staring up at her with round blue eyes, just as he was staring at her now.

“You’re really pretty,” Link breathed when she reached him.

“You more than me,” she replied, reaching up and tucking a lock of hair beneath his cap.

“Silence, please.” Kapson looked directly at them. “And I mean everyone. We shall now begin.”

They stepped up before the Statue of the Goddess. It kept its carved eyes closed and hands folded piously, but Zelda thought she almost saw a smile in the smooth stone. Kapson cleared his throat.

“We are gathered here today to join Princess Zelda and her hero Link in matrimony. Link. Before the eyes of these witnesses and before those of Goddess Hylia… do you take Zelda to be your wife, to have and to hold, in good times and in bad?”

Link’s hand found hers and squeezed it tight. “I do.”

“Excellent. Zelda. Before the eyes of these witnesses and before those of your ancestor, the Goddess Hylia… do you take Link as your lawfully wedded husband, in sickness and in health?”

There was the briefest of moments before she answered, a split second of stillness and peace. Zelda could feel the warmth of the sun on her skin and the crisp breeze rolling off the waterfalls, a
combination she inhaled into her lungs for courage. In this wild country, the smells of moist soil mingled with the sweet scent of flowers, reminding her of how humble she was against the power of nature. And yet, the gentle murmur of crickets chirping, pigeons cooing, and even the ducks honking in the lake below seemed to be whispering wisdom into her ear, though they used no words.

Zelda looked at Link and knew he could sense everything she just did. He and Hyrule, she vowed to love them both with all her heart for the rest of her days. “I do.”

“Wonderful.” Kapson raised his voice. “And so, dearly beloved, please help me in greeting this newly married couple. Wish them nothing but the utmost happiness as they set out on this journey of marital bliss!”

“YES!” Bolson threw his arms up towards the sky. Zelda had to laugh as a clump of flower petals landed upon Link’s cap. He leaned in and kissed her while his friends hooted and cheered. When she looked back, she saw Robbie nodding and smiling at them with tears in his eyes. Savson squealed with laughter in his father’s arms as he tried to catch the delicate petals floating through the air.

That was the ceremony: brief and beautiful. Then, it was time for the festivities and fun.

The fountains around the Statue of the Goddess sparkled and frolicked as lanterns were lit throughout Tarrey Town. Both cooking pots were in constant motion as delicious dishes were churned out and placed for the time being upon the shop tables, now cleared of their usual wares. Zelda and Link were commanded by friends new and old not to lift a finger to help, so they waited beneath the joyfully ringing bell.

Robbie, being the oldest, sat with them. “Hm… the director is not going to be happy when she hears of this.” He shook his head. “Not the fact that you’re married, hm, no! More that she wasn’t invited. Mark my words, you’ll be getting a rather shrill earful when you return to Hateno.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be this big party,” Link said. “I just wanted to marry Zelda.”

He wrapped an arm around her, and she leaned into him, feeling secure and content. More Tarrey Town residents came to join them, bringing pillows and blankets and stools of their own. An elderly retired couple waved at Zelda, their dogs’ tails whipping back and forth in unison. A small family were fussing over their daughter while she whined for desserts. Zelda couldn’t blame her. She had already caught the whiff of cream and juicy wildberries, light and airy and chilly sweet, on the air. Bolson had promised a wedding to remember, and he was making his team deliver.

The feast was a culinary affair most unusual but heartily delicious and representative of its chefs. Bolson ordered his subordinates to stagger in with an enormous red-tusked boar skewered on a spit, its roast skin crackling and glistening in the flickering lights, followed by tureens of rice and glazed vegetables. The Goron brothers Greyson and Pelison had concocted an eye-watering spicy curry sauce to go with them, to which Rhondson advised Zelda to cool with her creamy heart soup. Fyson the Rito had joined forces with Kapson in broiling flaky filets of seafood meuniere breadcrusted with fine Tabantha wheat. Link let go of Zelda to take his plate in both hands and devour these dishes down thoroughly.

The Sheikah were the last ones to bring out their food. Jerrin gestured for her son to kneel down next to her before Zelda and Link.

“I know it doesn’t seem much.” She smiled at Zelda, dark eyes bright in a face framed by pale loops of hair. “But it is a Sheikah custom for a newly married couple at their wedding.” She lifted
a cloth off a small bowl, revealing that it was filled with toasted seeds. “All from a single fortified pumpkin, these will signify your blessings to come as you journey through life together. The more you are able to consume tonight, the more abundant they shall be.”

“And a honeyed apple.” Granté’s cheeks flashed dimples like his mother’s as he showed them the second plate. “So that this union will be full of sweetness.”

Zelda could not have expressed her thanks enough. Rhondson’s jewellery clinked softly against her stomach as she reached for a pumpkin seed. She wondered if there were any other Hyrulean traditions to be learned tonight.

It didn’t take long for her to find out. As dishes were rounded up and cleared away, Fyson stood up and grabbed everyone’s attention. He showed them all a small wooden flute. “In Rito Village, wedding feasting is always followed by a dance. There is one song that is traditional to play first.” He glanced over at Zelda and Link. “The bridge and groom are expected to lead, but it’s often assumed that they know how…”

“It’s okay.” Hudson suddenly stood up. He had fixed a bow tie to his neck in honour of the occasion. “You taught Rhondson and me last time. We’ll lead.”

Fyson’s flute was quickly joined by Goron rock drumming, and one of the Hylians produced a viol. Soon, the air was filled with jaunty music. Zelda and Link were dragged to the floor to dance with each other, with others, as a group, on their own, and then together again. Zelda had never been very musical in her life, but the steps were intuitive. She simply followed the steady beat from Greyson’s pounding fists and the clapping of hands. Link found her again in the throng and scooped her up; Zelda threw her head back and laughed when he twirled her around. The Princesses in her hair went flying, shining like fragments of stars shooting through the night sky.

Marriage was not much of a concept in Goron culture due to seeing the entire tribe as one large family, but they were still eager to contribute. Greyson and Pelison excused themselves for a while, only to arrive panting and grunting some time later. They had pried a twinkling ore deposit from a source nearby, and now rolled it to the centre of festivities. The Gorons insisted that Link smash it open to see what were inside. Zelda could have predicted this one very easily.

“Diamond?!” Greyson gasped.

“TWO diamonds?!” Pelison screeched, rushing to wipe off the rubble and hold the glittering gem up high. They showered Link with admiration and praise, gushing over the incredible luck he and Zelda would certainly have for the rest of their lives.

That left Kapson. The elderly Zora sighed and shook his head. “We Zora are rather long-lived compared to all the other races of Hyrule. As a result, our cultural traditions require longer periods of time. For example, betrothed couples are expected to craft an accessory for their beloved to wear upon the day they are wed. I’m afraid we’ve already gone beyond that point today.”

When further pressed, he did reveal an unusual story. “I would not call this a tradition but a trend. In recent years, I have witnessed the most absurd activity occurring at Zora weddings. The groom and other male youths choose to line up at the edge of the lake before diving in together. How it appeals to anyone is beyond me; all it serves is to create a dramatic splash before all the guests…”

He was cut off by Pelison’s piping voice. “Hey! We have a lake beneath us, too!”

Link looked at Zelda, then took off his cap. “I’m down for it.”
He yanked off his boots next as Karson looked up in alarm. “You can’t do this on your own! I’ll go with you!”

“I’m in,” Granté said, grinning at his mother and father as he shrugged out of his Sheikah robe.

“Why not?” Fyson shrugged. “I splashed around at home sometimes.”

So to Kapson’s great chagrin, two Hylians, one Sheikah, and a Rito ended up at the edge of their small island, all four of them peering into the dark depths of Lake Akkala. Zelda thought she could stand to be a little more annoyed that her new husband had just stripped in front of an entire town, but the moonlight shining on his hair was just too distracting, to say nothing of the dashing scars stretched across his muscles.

“So?” Link asked.

“It’s your wedding,” Fyson replied. “Your call.”

Link looked back at Zelda, who simply folded her arms. She would not tell him what to do. Link smirked, then leaped into a dive. He was soon pursued by his friends. Zelda ran over with Jerrin and Bolson in time to see four splashes in the dark water below. They surfaced, gasping and spluttering against the cold temperatures, making hasty strokes towards a cluster of rocky boulders conveniently nearby. Fyson was able to shake water off his wings and fly back up, but Link, Karson, and Granté were forced to swim clear across the lake to the Torin Wetlands. Someone had mercifully left a raft listing in the shallows, so the boys steered it towards the eastern shore and shimmied up the cliffs back into town. It took them a good hour and a half, just for a whimsical moment of defiance and frivolity.

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“Don’t let them know,” Link groaned as they tumbled into the bed, “but I’m exhausted.”

“Me too.” Zelda fought to stay conscious as she pulled the blanket up. “Children can wait. A very long time. I’m in no hurry.”

“Goodnight, my reckless husband.” She pecked him on the chin, but he was already out.

Before Zelda drifted into nothingness, she was struck with the realisation that this changed almost nothing. It had just been a fun day with their dear friends, a celebration of their commitment to each other. Tarrey Town itself had been a blessing, giving her a vision of a Hyrule she actually wanted to rule, a future that she could stand to stomach…

Zelda smiled as she finally slept, peaceful.
1. Even the nicest old Zora in the whole game (excepting Dorephan) is kind of an asshole. I think that they can’t help being a bit assholey. They’re just old and have gone through a lot.

2. A lot of people think Rhondson settled with Hudson. I don’t really agree; she seems much more satisfied and happy with him than when she lived in Gerudo. Even if Hudson isn’t good at much else than his job, he’s REALLY good at his job… he almost singlehandedly built a town from scratch! And, he appreciates a well-hemmed garment.

3. Coming up with different Hyrulean wedding traditions were a treat. I live in a really international city myself and since one of my coworkers is getting married soon, we’ve been talking a lot about our different cultures’ traditions. All I know is that if ever I do get hitched, my spouse is going to have to agree to a full on Chinese wedding banquet because each course holds deep meaning for me. As in, it means a lot to me to have 'em deep in my belly.
Every moment married to Zelda was a joy, a treasure, a life-learning experience. For instance, Link soon learned how bad of an idea it was to have jumped into the frigid waters of Lake Akkala close to midnight in only his underpants.

Granté had been the first to succumb. The following morning after the wedding, they had all reconvened around the cooking pot for breakfast just to find him already red-nosed and sniffling. His attempts at conversation were noble, considering how sneezes constantly interrupted his speech.

“You’ve a fever, dear.” Jerrin placed her palm over her son’s forehead, her brows knotted with worry and consternation. “You’re in no shape to be out of bed, let alone travelling home. I don’t think I ought to go now, either.”

“No, Ma. I ju—” Granté dissolved into a fit of violent coughing. Jerrin practically carried him back into his house.

So it was only Link, Robbie, and Zelda who climbed up into the Guar to trundle off into the wilds of Deep Akkala. Zelda leaned forward in her seat to pepper Robbie with questions concerning his work with the ancient technology. The old researcher gladly gestured to the rickety controls and spoke over the clunking gears in his croaky voice. Link was content to stay at the back and watch cold mist rolling up from the wide green plains, smoothly sloped and empty of people.

Sunset in Akkala was a beautiful time of day, with the fiery red and oranges of the trees matching the twilight skies and Death Mountain in the distance. Still, Link was relieved to see the hulking silhouette of the Ancient Tech Lab as the Guar hiked up the hill. Its furnace released a healthy plume of smoke that disappeared into the gathering clouds above. He was looking forward to the filling warmth of food.

Zelda hopped off the Guar and rushed around in excitement. This was the marriage of two of her favourite things: historical monuments and ancient Sheikah tech. Robbie had built his lab from the ruins of the famed Akkala lighthouse, an old beacon that had become unimportant and unneeded in the time of Calamity. The glass lantern lay clouded and rusting in a pile of rubble beside the bright blue furnace. A wooden crank fixed to the old stone walls hoisted empty shells of decayed Guardians up from the ground, most likely so Robbie would have ease examining and extracting their parts. A breeze blew in from the lonely ocean, causing the vermilion poppies growing in the grass to shiver. Link shivered with them.

Morning arrived grey and very wet. They huddled beneath the leaking eaves of the Tech Lab’s sorry excuse for roofing, which was nothing more than roughly hewn planks of wood to hold up the giant telescope on the second level. Robbie apologised for the discomfort and confessed that this far north, help was few and far between, and he was no longer the sprightly Sheikah mechanic who could afford time on carpentry and bricklaying.

“I understand tolerating this during the Calamity’s hold,” Zelda said, “but now that it’s over, we must do something. It upsets me to see you forced to live like this, Robbie. Link?”

His muscles were aching from the constant shakes, but Link brushed them off and dutifully
transported himself back to Tarrey Town. However, he discovered Bolson too preoccupied with fussing over his protege to take on a new project. Karson had spent the night in sweats and delirium. He was in no condition to lift a finger, let alone a hammer.

“You don’t look so good yourself, stud,” Bolson remarked as Hudson hovered at a safe distance, unwilling to expose himself to any germs that could harm his baby. “Take care, understand? Don’t burden your lady wife by going comatose.”

Link wiped his nose and nodded, though his head felt worse by the minute. Fyson cheerfully waved at him from behind his shop table. Link mildly cursed the natural insulation of feathers before tapping the Sheikah Slate. He arrived before the Lab, took two steps towards the door, and collapsed.

Zelda managed to lug him inside and bury him beneath every single blanket in Robbie’s possession. She was sweet and sympathetic to his miserable state, but otherwise focused her role as carer on recovery rather than comfort or pampering.

“Technically, being cold does not make you sick. But it does make you more susceptible to certain viruses, and altering one’s body temperature so rapidly is incredibly dangerous. Honestly, we ought to be thankful none of you contracted hypothermia.”

Link watched with growing dread as she prepared a restorative elixir. “No thanks,” he muttered when she held it out to him. “It makes my nose feel funny.”

“Incorrect. Your nose feels funny because it’s congested with mucus.” She pushed the bottle against his lips. “Now, drink up. Every last drop.”

So that was their honeymoon: Link spending most of it bedridden and foggy-headed while Zelda had a grand time around the lab. The furnace had difficulties staying lit due to the regular rains of the region, and she was always more than happy to take up the torch and skip off to Tumlea Heights for more blue flame. Sometimes it took her hours, but Zelda would always return with her pockets and mind overflowing with materials and ideas, respectively. These she took to the Ancient Oven to tinker with, clapping her hands in joy when the machine spat out a perfect manifestation of her hopes. When Link’s condition began to improve, Zelda would snuggle up to him and read passages from Robbie’s notes or show him pictures of the gorgeous Akkalan landscape from her Sheikah Slate.

When it came time to go, everyone had recovered. The lighthouse was a hub of activity with Bolson, Hudson and Karson sawing and hammering away at a proper ceiling and staircase for the lab, while Granté helped his parents make last minute changes to the ancient tech blueprints they were sending back to Kakariko with Zelda. The plan was to meet with Impa for a report on their recent travels — and change in marital status — before heading to the Gerudo Desert.

Kakariko Village was just as they had left it those many weeks ago. Link could smell the incense and smoke of torches even before he and Zelda emerged from the wood upon the cliff by the glowing shrine. All was cosy, content, and quiet, no sounds giving away the hidden town’s presence save for the gentle clucking of cuccos and wooden tags rattling against each other as they twirled on the twine strung up between the houses with their black roofs. Sheikah in white robes dotted the terraces, bent over their gardens or tending to other chores. A girl standing before a line of frog statues held a basket of apples in her arms, her silver hair sweeping to the side as she glanced up casually in their direction. Paya’s mouth dropped open at the sight of Zelda waving at her, and Link couldn’t help but to laugh a little when she nearly dropped her basket in her haste to meet them at the foot of the hill.
There was delight and profuse congratulations at the news of their union. Impa was warm, approving, and completely unsurprised. Paya, on the other hand, was reduced to even worser stammers than usual. Link often noticed her staring at the two of them with eyes round as the moon. She blushed whenever caught, and he amused himself by pulling faces back at her until Zelda told him to stop.

“I know that Gerudo has been always near and dear to your heart, Princess, so I implore you to keep your expectations grounded.” Impa tucked her veiny hands into the folds of her robe. “Much has changed in the past century. The desert only became more dangerous in the shadow of the Calamity. The Yiga Clan still have their hideout in the wastelands, often taking revenge by preying upon travellers who journey to the region. The Gerudo remain a strong and vigilant people, but reports of renewed attacks have caused them to become more protective of their own.” She glanced over at Link with narrowed eyes. “They uphold their traditions, only allowing women within the walls of the town. Correct?”

“Yes,” he said. Impa held his gaze for a few seconds before she nodded, still suspect.

“We’ve encountered Yiga several times,” Zelda said. “They are a nuisance, but I think we will manage.”

Impa shook her head. “Those were isolated incidents, my princess. Now, you enter their territory. You must proceed with more caution. Perhaps an insider’s understanding may assist you.”

She motioned to Paya, who stood to open the door. Zelda’s eyes widened in surprise and vague confusion as the broad silhouette of Dorian appeared upon the threshold.

“There’s no point in trying to hide it,” he said. “I am… a member of the Yiga Clan. Or I used to be, anyway.”

Dorian inhaled deeply, avoiding Zelda’s stare by training his eyes upon the fine fringe of the cushions she and Impa sat upon. “I was tasked by the organisation to infiltrate Kakariko Village and learn their weaknesses. Instead, I found my own: the most incredible woman who blessed me with two amazing children. So, I changed my ways and left the clan. But the Yiga… they took my wife’s life as punishment.”

“I’m sorry,” Zelda whispered. Dorian blinked and looked up at her. His eyes were dry.

“Princess, please. Do not be fooled into security by the carelessness of a few young footsoldiers. Their cowardice is the very thing that spurs them to cruelty and vengeance. With Master Kohga gone, I can only imagine that the Clan is even more scattered and violent than ever.” He turned his head to fix a stare upon Link. “Promise that you’ll take the utmost care.”

The following morning, they bid Kakariko a fond farewell and prepared for one of their longest journeys yet. The road would take them through Central Hyrule first. Not much was left from Zelda’s father’s reign, but she was to inherit a great deal more.

Hyrule Field was no longer the vast empty grassland that Link and Chase had raced through with reckless abandon all those months ago. Even before they crossed Proxim Bridge, Link could see them: the new villages that rose out of the rubble of ruins. For that was exactly what was happening — Hylians quite literally rebuilding by using the foundations their ancestors had set into the soil a century before. There were buildings that strived to stay true to the original structures by maintaining stone facades and replacing rotten timber with fresh wood. Others eschewed aesthetic for practicality and used whatever was on hand, resulting in very unique creations. One house had chosen to preserve a pair of ornate metal doors for its log-cabin walls,
clover and dandelions growing on the green sod roof. And, of course, Bolson models sprung up here and there, ridiculously bright in the midst of ancient architecture.

East Post Ruins had been rechristened Proxim Town, according to the young man painting the sign as they entered. As busy and bustling as they were, people paused and turned their heads to watch Zelda ride by. Link would not blame them. There was no way she could reject her title now; the sun itself crowned her in a halo of light around her yellow hair when she nodded in thanks for a simple baked apple from a vendor.

“Yours are better,” she declared as they wandered the ramshackle marketplace, snacking. Many merchants still found the concept of brick-and-mortar shops difficult to grasp, opting to display their goods on blankets, the back of wagons, or simply through the drawstring opening of their knapsacks. Some were waiting for the inevitable rebuild of Castle Town, where they would nab the choicest locations around the glorious new fountain.

Link watched and listened as Zelda carefully sidestepped the questions every time they were asked. How long until she officially reclaimed the throne? What were her plans to rebuild the royal court and government? What suitors, inquired a barrel-chested man who kept smoothing his pompadour back with one hand as he leered towards Zelda, would she be accepting, considering the fact no noble houses remained? And when?

“Oh, I’m already wed,” she replied sweetly, reaching for Link’s hand even as it clenched into a fist. Her fingers pried his apart as the big goon’s face went red as his hair.

The sounds and sights of pioneering faded away as Link and Zelda continued west. Despite the new towns, ruins remained aplenty, such as the scattered pieces of Gatepost Town. The mist swirling around the worn cliffside carvings of the Great Plateau dissipated into the ether as Chase and Cloud galloped through them. It was a long ride, and the focus continued into Gerudo Canyon. The horses picked up the pace, puffs of dust rising from their hooves. Link coughed against their assault on his senses, and anticipated more of the same in the coming few days. There would be heat and grime and deep, deceitful sand. Dorian’s warnings echoed in his bones, and his fingers itched for his sword.

The horses’ flanks were clammy with sweat, and their tongues lolled out as they panted in the wavering heat. Link made sure to wipe Chase down thoroughly before boarding her in a cool, shady stall at Canyon Stable. It was just their luck to have reached the desert at high noon. A gritty grey trail destroyed the perfect symmetry of the rippling dunes, and hunched figures of people marching resolutely onward between here and Kara Kara Bazaar were dark against the pale terrain.

Link kept Zelda close to him as they struck out across the sands. It took a lot of willpower not to push away every person who passed by, though none of them made any moves. Of course not; it would be blatantly stupid even for a Yiga to attempt anything at this time of day. All heads were bent and shaded to avoid the burn of the sun high above. Even the shadows of circling hawks were barely a blip upon the blinding expanse around them.

Kara Kara Bazaar was a relief to behold. Tent walls were rolled up, and beneath their canopies blankets lay upon the swept ground. Shopkeepers carefully sprayed their wares with water lest they dry out. Travellers drifted aimlessly. Armed Gerudo patrolled the edge of the oasis, their sandals spraying sand as they moved, faces unreadable above the cloth guards tied over their mouths. Link ignored them, sidling over to a brown-skinned woman who lounged poolside.

“Sav’aaq!” Lukan greeted as he and Zelda sat down beside her. She sounded cheery, but her muscles remained tense as her eyes roved over the murmuring market. “Don’t worry. I’ve been watching, and I feel safe saying there’s no one suspicious around here. At least not today.”
“There’s more than usual, though,” Link muttered, looking over his shoulder. As usual, Benja’s
team of merchants brooded over bowls of voltfruit juice, but he was surprised at the number of
women who were milling about too. Link frowned when he recognised Traysi crouched against a
lean-to and scribbling away in her notebook. He motioned for Zelda to keep her head covered.

“That’s because of the new ordinances in town.” Lukan reached into her pack and pulled out a
hydromelon, smooth and cool to the touch. Her scimitar glinted as she began to slice the fruit, a
casual warning to anybody watching. “It all started with the rumour that a voe had hoodwinked our
guards into believing they were vai. We know that those Yiga Clan jackals are able to transform
their bodies, so this was a loophole they could very well exploit.”

“But there must be female Yiga as well,” Zelda said. Lukan nodded before handing her a slice of
hydromelon.

“That is true. And with Vah Naboris no longer in commission, they have only become more
zealous. They were bold enough to try to strike Gerudo Town again, so it was decided that it would
be closed to any outsider, vai or voe, until something can be done. The other soldiers are working
day and night to root out the surviving Yiga Clan jackals. I’ve got to do my part too.”

Zelda set down her hydromelon rind. “As do we. I have travelled too far to give up now. If the
chief will see me, I could help bring Naboris back to our side.”

Lukan wished them luck as they stood up. “Sav’orq, friends. I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Gerudo Town was not far, a welcome and majestic sight on the horizon from the large hollowed-
out column that served as Kara Kara Bazaar’s inn. Link dragged Zelda to it, hurrying her up the
ladder so they could hide behind the flapping tapestries that dangled from the rock overhang.
Zelda’s brow creased with confusion in the shade. “…what is it? What are you doing?”

Link opened his pack, removing items until he saw the bundle squashed at the very bottom. No
doubt it would be extremely wrinkled, but he had no other choice. He pulled the bundle out and
gave it to Zelda to hold while everything was stuffed back inside. She unfolded the tissue
packaging. “I don’t think changing clothes will help me. Nobody will believe I’m Gerudo.”

“It’s not for you.” Link pulled his tunic off.

Zelda watched with increasing incredulity and astonishment as he put on the cropped top, billowy
sirwal, and gauzy headdress. By the time he was trying to straighten out the complicated fasteners
on the sleeves, she had gone from dumbfounded to absolutely aghast at his criminal intent. “Shall
we inform the soldier that it’s no rumour? A voe has broken sacred Gerudo law!”

“You’re just annoyed that I look good in it.” He wiggled his toes inside the comfy slip-ons. That,
and the respite from the heat was very welcome.

He shouldn’t have mentioned it because she immediately wanted a set of her own. Luckily, the
vendor was very close by and more than happy to provide. As they walked through the bazaar,
bangles jangling, Zelda made excuses for herself by claiming that it would make things slightly
less suspicious if there were two Hylian vai in Gerudo garb instead of just the one. Slightly.

“You do pass quite well,” she grumbled. The fuchsia headdress fluttered around her braided hair,
almost threatening to fly away into the desert sky. “Who even gave you the idea?”

“Urbosa,” he said at once, and realised it was true. A vision of the Gerudo Champion smirking at
him flashed through his thoughts. His steps slowed and heartbeat skipped at the recollection of a
cold and cloudless night. Sand billowing across the dunes, sharp angles of ancient ruins towering in the darkness, and a voice rich with pride and kindness calmly relaying the histories of the desert to him as moonlight gleamed upon her burnished armour.

Link looked up to see that Zelda’s irritation had vanished. She knew his remembering face well by now. “Again?” she asked softly.

“Yes. It’s fine.” He meant it. Since that fateful day on Death Mountain, more memories had begun to surface. Some of them had been intense, erupting into hungry flames that licked at his heart with scorching tongues of emotion, but most were simply another candle lit in procession to bring the vast, dark cavern of his past to light. He was a long way to the end, but Link appreciated them all the same.

The shifting sands had covered the road to Gerudo Town, but there was no mistaking its location. The waters flowing from its iconic rock formations glittered beneath the glaring sun. Link and Zelda approached the arched gateway with caution, making no sudden movements before the two Gerudo guards who flanked the entrance with grim expressions.

“Halt!” One of the guards motioned her spear so it formed a thin but sharp barrier between Zelda and the town. “By order of Chief Riju, we cannot allow strangers into our town for the time being. Do accept our apologies.” Her tone was brusque and blunt.

“Please,” Zelda said, squaring her shoulders and raising her chin. “I request an audience with the chief herself. Tell her that the Princess of Hyrule has come to speak with her.”

The guards shared side glances. “I am afraid that is impossible.”

“Captain Buliara!” The guards sprang to stiff attention at once. “Yes, ma’am!”

Buliara jerked her head towards the depths of town. “Come. Lady Riju does not have all day.”

They entered Gerudo Town. Link blinked in surprise at the subdued atmosphere. The palm fruit trees swayed and the canals glittered with rainbows as they tumbled and splashed through the plaza, but gone was the usual cheer and babble of trade. The market was strangely empty. All the shops were open, their patchwork awnings and gleaming symbols bright against the tawny sandstone walls, but their keepers looked bored and unhappy. They stirred in surprise as Link and
Zelda passed, but did little to entice them as Buliara marched them by.

“Vasaaq!” called out the clothes vendor half-heartedly.

But not everyone acted discouraged. A very young child broke away from her friends near a waterfall, skipping her bare brown feet on the sun-warmed tiles. She rushed up to Link, the delicate daubs of face paint beneath each eye flattening as her cheeks stretched to accommodate a big smile.

“Sav’saaba, vai-from-out-of-town! Guess what, my garden grew!” Dalia dug sticky fingers deep into a pocket and crammed a juicy red jewel into his palm. “They’re super yummy, so you can come eat the berries anytime you like! It’ll be great!”

His spirits were lifted a little at her pride and happiness as Buliara led them up the stair into Gerudo Palace. A wave of refreshing, cool air swept over them as their feet moved from concrete to plush carpet, the harsh light of late afternoon receding into shadows, and the stifling mutters in the main square to melodious burbles of fountains. Dim lanterns had been set at the corners of the flowing streams that circulated round this great hall. Link and Zelda passed the silver statues of lady warriors standing attention on pedestals. They cast their eyes on the tall tablet before them that had been carved with classic Gerudo proverbs and inlaid with precious gems. The throne set against it was artfully made, thin gold leaf covering the armrests and also set with agate and opal, and richly brocaded cushions making a comfortable seat.

However, the figure awaiting them was instead was much smaller than what the throne’s size clearly intended. She perched instead upon a simple wooden boost that had been fitted over it. The toes of her silk slippers barely grazed the edge of the original chair. She lifted her chin off her fist at the sight of her bodyguard returning with two Hylians in tow, her almond eyes growing round within its thick outlines of kohl. Her neck collar was a thick band of gold, matching pendants decorating it clinking softly against each other when she leaned forward eagerly, the crown in her thick red hair like the spiky legs of a big, shiny insect.

Riju brightened when Link and Zelda came before her. “Ah!” Her voice was clear and echoed in the large hall. “Here’s a face we haven’t seen in a while. Tell me what’s going on out there, quickly. I’m going mad with boredom.”

“Lady Riju,” Buliara reminded, “The ordinance was of your own decree. We are to tend to the needs of the Gerudo before indulging in personal wishes.”

Riju’s smile dropped, and she nodded. The change was sudden and significant as the lively young girl was exchanged for a sombre and serious chief. “I’m sorry. I mean… I welcome you back to Gerudo Town, Link.”

“Good to be back,” Link said.

Riju peered curiously down at Zelda. Her eyes trailed over the Triforce on the belt she had kept over her sirwal, and the Sheikah Slate that still hung from it. “So it’s true,” she murmured. “The legendary princess of Hyrule has returned.”

Zelda looked up at her, a fellow ruler thrown upon a throne long before they had expected to claim it. She unhooked the veil from over her face and smiled at Riju. “Not quite sure if it’s been enough time to constitute as legendary… but a princess has returned. There have been a lot of Zeldas.”

Riju seemed amused. Buliara, however, remained stern. “Declare your business. As a companion of a Champion of legend, we have no reason to disbelieve your claim. But once again, the needs of
her people are the Chief’s top priority.”

Zelda inclined her head. “I will not waste your time. I come to aid you in retaking Vah Naboris in the name of all the Gerudo.”

Riju leaned her cheek against her fist once more to contemplate this offer. Buliara snorted. “You think you have what it takes to control something so powerful as a Divine Beast? The only ones who ever could were Champions like Lady Urbosa.”

Zelda took out the final of the batch of Sheikah Slates that she and Purah had worked on so tirelessly for so many weeks. Buliara gripped her weapon tight but did not prevent her from walking up the carpeted steps to Riju, who accepted the gift with both hands, wonder shining in her eyes. Zelda outlined her plan as the young Gerudo ran her fingers cross the smooth screen. “With this device, one needs no Champion ability to pilot Vah Naboris. Simply the determination and willpower to prove one’s worth to the Beast, and the promise to renew the ancient alliance between Hyrule and Gerudo once more.”

Riju hugged the Slate to her chest. “Princess of Hyrule, I accept! Let’s go first thing tomorrow.”

“Wait!” Buliara pounded her claymore into the carpet in protest. “Lady Riju! I don’t see how you can be so reckless in regards to your safety. The ordinance declared upon Gerudo Town are precisely to ensure that the Yiga cannot dig their filthy claws into us. Exposing yourself this way is dangerous.”

“But as chief, and as a Gerudo, I must find some way to bring back morale to my people.” Riju clambered down from her throne. She straightened her back and lifted her chin, but it was clear to all how small she was, especially compared to her towering bodyguard. “I’m sick of hiding behind these walls. The Yiga Clan have infiltrated us twice, and under my leadership. No one says a word about it… but they must be thinking about how powerless their chief has proven to be. I need to make it up to them.”

Buliara’s expression softened at the frustration on her young charge’s face. “Your desire for action is exactly the sign of strong leadership. But I must also remind you that your decisions are not to be based on desire alone. As our chief, you must represent Gerudo as a nation. When Lady Urbosa accepted the role of Champion, it was received unhappily by her subjects and they suffered great regret in the years to come. Likewise, it may feel an insult if you run into the desert and leave your people behind.”

Riju stared down at the Sheikah Slate. Then, she turned back towards Zelda. She handed it back, disappointment written all over her face. “I’m sorry, Princess. You’ll have to keep this for now.”

“That’s alright,” Zelda said.

Riju exhaled softly, closing her eyes. When she opened them again, she spoke in a calm and collected tone, her expression neutral and diplomatic. “Princess Zelda, thank you for your offer. Buliara is correct. This is not a choice I alone can make. If you still wish to pursue an alliance with the Gerudo, we must appeal to them.”

“I do.”

“Then come.” Riju beckoned to both Zelda and Link to follow her, striding down the carpet towards the curtained exit. Evening had fallen, but Gerudo Town was famous for remaining well into the night. The shops were still open, technically, but sales were no longer on the mind. Wares had been pushed aside for picnicked suppers and cups of safflina-spiced tea, and the shopkeepers
brazenly left their stalls unattended to gossip at other ones. But at the sight of their chief leaving the palace with two Hylians and the captain of her guard, all faces turned, inquisitive and interested.

Riju glanced back and grinned. Link saw traces of the child stealing back into her voice, lilting and playful instead of grounded and formal. “Well then, let’s see just how serious you are. How will the Princess of Hyrule see to our concerns? How may she return a resolute peace to our noble town?”

“Whatever they ask,” Zelda promised.

“They will hold you to it,” Riju warned. “The Gerudo value strength, valour, and honour of one’s word above all else. Prove your worth in their eyes by gaining the trust of the people.”

She turned and raised her hand and voice to the gathering crowd before them. “Fellow Gerudo! My dear sisters, blessed mothers, and esteemed elders. The current sanctions on visitors have been briefly lifted for the Princess of Hyrule and her… um, attendant.”

Link leaned back to avoid the swivel of heads in his direction, but Buliara shoved him forward. He saw red buns and ponytails swing away from him again as Riju spoke again. “She has asked for our partnership upon her return to her kingdom and wishes the restoration of our legendary deity of protection, Divine Beast Vah Naboris. But I cannot give her an answer without the will of my people. Here the princess will make her case before the endless skies and every sister in arms. May the ancestors be listening and guide us towards the right decision.”

Zelda stepped forward, nervously rubbing the back of one hand. She had removed the veil entirely, so it was only the headdress that fluttered gently around her face. Link was momentarily reminded of the Statue of the Goddess, head covered with a shroud of her own. Similarly, Zelda now folded her hands and bowed to the crowd of Gerudo, who stared up at her with frank curiosity and no small dose of skepticism at this foreign vai in their clothes.

“Thank you, Chief Riju, with all my heart. I cannot begin to describe what it feels in my heart to stand here before you. As a child, I loved visiting Gerudo Town. Every trip was an exciting and new adventure. For this is where all corners of the world meet. This square deals not only rupees and materials, but intelligence and philosophies. Witnessing it with my own senses granted me more understanding about the kingdom my family claimed to govern. There was nothing I enjoyed more than to watch over the market and witness pure life in all its complexity and richness, even if it only seems to be a simple conversation about bread.

“But Gerudo Town was also like a home. Sometimes, more than my real home.” Zelda finally relaxed her arms by her sides. “Ancient law has made this place a haven for vai of all races, and it truly was one for me. My talents were challenged, my passions encouraged, and if there was anything in the way of knowledge, seasoned hands lent their strength to help me do away with barriers. I found so much solace and vindication in the sisterhood that is the cornerstone of this society. I hope it’s not too late to thank you.”

Dusk was upon them all, and lanterns lit up all around the plaza. The running water shimmered with under the glow, as did the bejewelled garments of the Gerudo women. They drank in Zelda’s story, captivated by her charisma. Link watched her green eyes, earnest and sincere, looking steadily out over the crowd, and felt awe — not for the first time — at the fact that she had picked him.

“So, you would do anything to run away from that voe-filled castle.” This came from a wizened old woman standing to the side, near the base of the stair where the tumbling fountains pooled. She
leaned on a cane, its head carved to resemble a bug-eyed hightail lizard. “Admit it, girl.”

Zelda shrugged and smiled. “Oh yes. That too.”

Laughter swept through the crowd. Link was glad that the Gerudo veil covered his guilty face. But nobody was looking at him, anyway. All eyes were on Zelda.

“I don’t even remember the first time I came here. I was barely a year old. I had been brought to stay with my godmother. You know her as the Gerudo Champion, Urbosa.” A murmur rippled through the crowd before her. Zelda paused and inhaled deeply, her gaze upon the stone beneath her feet as she drew upon beloved but surely painful memories. “With the absence of my own mother, she cared for me and held my hand through many dark and difficult trials throughout my childhood. She taught me, guided me, disciplined me without hesitation whenever I needed it. She gave me precious advice, like when to stow my pride. And to… and to value those I love. And who love me.”

Her eyes darted over to him at those words. “Even when I was humiliated by my own hubris, Gerudo Town is where I learned humility and generosity, and to use my station to build others up. I owe so much of my life and character to you.

“I lay no claim to the affairs of your city and people. That is not my place. But I still care about all who live within Hyrule. Instead, I pledge to you my services. My skills lie not in a powerful hand or a courageous heart, but I will use every ounce of my wit and wisdom to do right by all the Gerudo here today, and tomorrow as well. Tell me what I must do to earn your friendship.”

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” The old Gerudo woman had taken a seat upon the ledge. She grasped her lizard cane with two bony hands. “The Yiga Clan. Get rid of them for us, and we’ll surely be in your debt.”

Zelda blinked a few times. She certainly hadn’t expected this proposal. But the crowd was buzzing like a hive of courser bees, alert and attentive to her every reaction. Link grimaced from under his veil as he thought of the Yiga. Jackals, vermin — all appropriate language to refer to them. Infiltrating their hideout had been nerve-wracking and dangerous, but only for the sheer strength of the blademaster brutes who gorged themselves senseless on mighty bananas. Their obsession with the fruit reminded him of flies: plentiful, obnoxious, and easy to quash save for the fact that they always. Came. Back. To eradicate them entirely was a fool’s quest, but he knew Zelda was smarter than that…

“Okay,” she said.

Riju’s crown glinted under the lanterns as her head jerked up in surprise. Link thought he had heard incorrectly. But Zelda — a scholar, a princess, his wife — nodded again and announced, “I shall end their terror once and for all.”

The old Gerudo chortled, tapping her cane against the tile. “And how will you do that, my proud vehvi? You’ve a silver tongue, that’s for certain, but how will it fare against the curved blade and poisoned heart?”

Zelda smiled. “I shall use that very tongue to convince them to join me.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then, the old crone burst into cackling laughter, banging the side of her cane against the mosaic tiles and splashing water everywhere. “Yes!” she hooted. “That, I cannot wait to see! Have at it, Princess. The best promise we’ve had yet!”
With that, all the Gerudo gathered before them began to call out their approval as well. Soldiers pounded their spears, merchants nodded and chattered with one another, and even the little girls stomped their feet in glee. The excitement was catching, and Zelda was aglow with their encouragement and cheer.

Riju’s mouth had fallen open, and she stared at Zelda in deep admiration and undisguised disbelief. Buliara closed her eyes and shook her head. And Link wanted to rip off his pretty little veil and scream.

Chapter End Notes

Surprisingly, I don't have any remarks for this chapter except... AN ACCEPTABLY MODERATE WORD COUNT, FINALLY!

Thank you, as usual, for reading. Your presence is felt and always deeply appreciated!
Oh hey, updating on Valentine's Day! What a happy coincidence. As the penultimate chapter and quasi-climax of this story, I took a little more time to make sure it was polished and did not skimp at all on the words. So enjoy this long long chapter and eat some chocolate!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Link was very displeased. Zelda could tell. He stalked back into the palace, and the beads hanging from the sashes around his waist shook furiously with every step. The turquoise sleeves lost their plump balloon-like quality as Link folded his arms tightly across his chest, blue eyes narrowed over the matching veil. It wasn’t until Buliara showed them to a guest chamber for the night and drew a curtain across the open entrance that he turned to her, fuming.

She quickly spoke before he could. “I know you don’t like this idea—”

“I hate it.”

“—but please, think about it. It’s impossible, not to mention immoral, to eradicate an entire clan… especially one with such technology and perseverance. Diplomacy is truly the best option. It was the only thing I ever did right before the Calamity anyway. If we pull this off, think of the lasting effects for Hyrule.”

“If we pull this off?” Link sat down on the bed, yanking off the Gerudo headdress entirely and clenching his hair. “Zelda, these are the people who tried to murder both of us multiple times. And got damn close to it, too. You don’t know how much I nearly died the first time I got into that Hideout. I should have, weren’t it for Mipha and a few fairies.”

“Precisely. You’ve been and understand what we’re up against. I am sure we can solve this together.”

He threw his hands up in exasperation and flopped back onto the soft covers. “You’re impossible, sometimes.”

The cloth over his mouth had fallen up in a bunch over his nose, and he didn’t bother fixing it. Zelda leaned over to kiss his exposed lips, but jerked away when a voice piped up from the entrance.

“You really should be more careful.”

Link bolted up at once, fumbling with the veil as the headdress slid from his shoulders. It slipped through his fingers and floated to the floor. Completely unperturbed, Riju skipped into the chamber, picked it up, and handed it back to him.

“You’ll never know who might come walking in,” she said cheerfully.

“You could knock,” Link grumbled.
“How?” Riju pointed back at the entrance. “There’s no door!”

Zelda laughed. Riju grinned. Outside the magnificence of the palace’s main hall, her youth and short stature were more pronounced. Removing all the regalia and ceremonial make-up revealed the soft cheeks and bright eyes of a child who was eager to make friends, not just political allies. Zelda smiled at her. Riju noticed and stood up a little straighter, a blush appearing under her bronze skin.

“I bid you good fortune and safety upon your journey tomorrow,” she intoned, that sombre, courtly manner returning for just a moment. “It would even delight me to join your mission… but as this is akin to a trial, that would not be proper.”

“I would never ask you to,” Zelda promised. “I take full responsibility. Link had no idea I was going to suggest this.”

“No idea,” he repeated, having fixed his clothes. The veil fluttered as he let out a long sigh and stood. “Look. If we’re really going to confront the Yiga, we need to be prepared.”

“Is there anything I can provide?” Riju asked.

“Not really. I just need to restock back at our house.” Link held out a hand, and Zelda gave him the Sheikah Slate.

“Thank you,” she said.

Link simply stared at her for a few seconds before he bent down and kissed her forehead. Then, he touched the screen, dissolving into blue sparks and leaving Zelda and Riju alone in the chamber, where the oil lanterns flickered and fountains streamed steadily over gleaming tile.

Riju kept shooting her quick, furtive glances. It was not unlike the way Paya had been around Zelda during her first week in Kakariko Village, but with one significant exception. Riju was not at all shy. She plopped down onto the bed beside Zelda — bouncing upon the mattress once or twice for good measure — and fired off questions with a frank, forthright earnestness.

“Was it strange, coming out from that castle after 100 years?” Very strange, but also exciting, rewarding, and inspiring. “Where have you been staying since then?” Well, Zelda had required some time to readjust to having physical needs again so she recuperated in Kakariko Village first, cared by the Sheikah. Then she joined the Ancient Tech Lab in Hateno Village to continue studying in order to better serve her people. But for the past several weeks, she had been exploring the continent with Link. “What is it between you two, anyway?” She was his wife. They were wed just a little while ago.

“Ah!” Riju said. “A warm congratulations to you both. You do seem like a good match.”

“We do?”

“I have not met many voe, but Link always seemed like a particularly restless one. We never know when he might suddenly show up, wander around, fix all of our problems, then disappear again. I think he feels unfulfilled when he isn’t helping somebody. You strike me as someone similar.”

Zelda was impressed at Riju’s maturity. Though the pitch of her voice revealed her age, there was also a fine, velvety tone in it that reminded Zelda of Urbosa. Much about Riju reminded her of Urbosa: the thick red hair, keen eyes, attentive air, and impressive balance between serious and pragmatic to playful and teasing.
Riju paused, tracing the outline of a fluffy sand seal embroidered upon her skirt. “Can you tell me more about what Gerudo Town was like 100 years ago? And of Lady Urbosa?”

Zelda described the teeming town of her childhood: her carriage sharing the dusty desert trail with wagons and carts that sagged beneath the weight of precious cargo to be traded at the mighty Gerudo marketplace. She would come every year and stay in the palace, walking down the perfumed halls every day to the library, where she consumed shelf after shelf of books. Her heart panged with tender nostalgia at the memory of learning how to ride a sand seal under a sweltering sun, attendants weaving sapphires into her braids to alleviate the heat while an instructor explained how to steer her steed. It had taken place at the racing grounds outside the city — not the dangerous track itself, but just around the stands where palm fruit trees splashed green against tawny sand. Zelda had finished that glorious lap with cheers ringing in her ears, and looking up to see the Chief waiting with a smile and open arms. Standing so tall, strong, powerful, and wise.

Riju had fidgeted excitedly at the description of a sand seal race but stilled at the mention of Urbosa. “You speak of her with such love,” Riju murmured. “And pride. What a blessing to have known her personally.”

“Yes,” Zelda agreed.

Riju stared at her fingers. Her nails had been painted a lovely rich lapis blue but the varnish had started to chip at their tips. Riju picked at these almost mindlessly. “Ever since I became the chief, the people in town have been a lot nicer to me. But if I look carefully, I can still see the worry in their eyes. It seems more common than when Mother was Chief… she was beloved and deeply respected.” Riju exhaled slowly. “And Lady Urbosa, you know well how strong of a leader she was. I ask them both each day for guidance, but there are times where it’s hard to bring myself to sit where they used to. I feel like I don’t deserve it.”

Zelda was struck once more at how young this girl was — and still she carried the fate of her people upon her slender shoulders. A wave of sympathy and remembrance flowed through her. “I grew up studying the acts of my predecessors,” she said. “It was required of me. At the time, I couldn’t help but compare myself to their successes and thought myself as a failure. Now I can see that every single Zelda had an entirely different situation upon her hands. Some were forced to escape, some to fight, some to surrender, and many more lived their lives in peace. We’ll take what our forbears learned and provided to establish our own legacies yet.”

Riju curled her fingers into fists and placed them on her knees firmly. “Yes. We shall. I mean… you already have!” She smirked a little. “Sealing the Calamity, marrying the hero, and soon, waltzing right into the Yiga Clan Hideout. They shall certainly write songs about you, if they haven’t begun already. But that means you must promise me you’ll come back safe.”

“I will,” Zelda promised. “After all, we need to get you to Naboris. It awaits your guiding hand.”

Riju lit up, her eyebrows shooting high upon her forehead. “Me? Really?!” Her voice squeaked on the last syllable, and embarrassment flashed through her young features. “I mean… as Chief, and as a Gerudo, I gladly rise to the challenge. I will do my ancestors, Lady Urbosa included, proud by steering our ancient protector to glory.”

Zelda couldn’t help it. She began to giggle, and Riju joined in. It was such a relief to simply let things go and be themselves without the weight of crowns.

Riju bid Zelda goodnight and left her to rest. She curled up under the covers to wait for Link’s return, but it was so comfortable and she felt so safe. He was beside her when she woke. Sound asleep, still wearing the vai clothes, and with one arm stretched over her like she still needed
guarding in the safest town in all of Hyrule. But it was true that they were soon to leave these protective walls.

Three women were waiting for them when they emerged by the northwest exit with Zelda holding onto the leads of their rented sand seals. “Sav’aaq,” Lukan called out warmly. “I heard the news! Let us be off at once. It’s time those Yiga Clan jackals are finally rid!”

She introduced her colleague, another soldier named Barta. She was fully bedecked in Gerudo armour, from the colourful enamel guards upon her arms and shins to the ebony mask secured beneath her nose. She shook hands solemnly with Zelda. “I’ve been a prisoner of the Yiga before,” she explained. “That place is dangerous. If you so insist on entering, I would like to come along too. Not to offend, Princess, but I believe you could use all the help you can get.”

“None taken,” Zelda said. “And thank you.”

The third Gerudo was none other than Risa. “I came back just in time to hear your speech in the plaza,” she said. “A very good one. I commend your bravery.”

“Thank you,” Zelda said. “Er… how and where is Rartek?”

Risa puffed up excitedly. “My love is very fine! He wishes to establish a tavern in Hyrule Field. I shall join him once I collect my things from Gerudo Town. Though he has not proposed yet or even acknowledged our relationship, I am confident that my constant presence will remind him to soon!”

“Oh… I see,” Zelda said.

“Now where is your voe?”

As if on cue, Link appeared from behind the shrine, shoving handfuls of cloth back into his pack and ignoring the clinking of jewellery as he did it. For this sweltering morning, he had dressed in what could only be the traditional Gerudo armour for voe: lightweight trousers tucked into gleaming greaves that wouldn’t sink too much in the sand, a sleeve protected by a spaulder studded with sapphires, and a headband that drew his long hair up into a spiky ponytail. The sleeve failed to cover his scarred arm. That was enough to pull Zelda back from gawking at her gorgeous husband to the task at hand: ending Ganon’s influence once and for all.

With the sun bearing down on them, they flew north. The sand seals barked and bayed as they plowed through the wasteland effortlessly. They rode for most of the morning, even through a monstrous sandstorm. Zelda was thankful for the protection of her veil as the gritty particles peppered her skin.

When they emerged from the clouds of dust, the seals were already weaving through spindly stone pillars that dotted the entrance to a valley of steep rock. Lengths of twine hung with wooden tags stretched between them — a sight so familiar but jarring at the same time in this empty desert. Zelda felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. As they slipped into the shadows of the canyon, she recognised the hunched figures of frog statues. They were lined up along the edges of the cliffs, and Zelda imagined them staring down at her until she realised that cloths covered their faces, cloths marked with the upside-down Yiga eye.

The sand ended at a rocky ledge. Link helped Zelda up over it as the Gerudo touched their weapons warily. They formed a vanguard around her as they advanced, the sightless frogs sitting witness to their mission. Wind howled through the lonely chasm. It was a truly desolate place. She found it very hard to believe than an entire tribe lived here.
That thought was soon banished upon the appearance of the first archer. Lukan cried out and rushed forward, but Link was faster. His arrow struck the Yiga in the bicep, and they screeched in pain as a Gerudo soldier came whaling upon them with all the ferocity of her people. When the dust settled, there was no sign of the Yiga save for a banana peel and some scattered green rupees nobody bothered picking up.

Lukan kicked the tattered paper in disgust. “Sa’oten! If the coward stayed even a second longer, the ground you see before you would be littered with their guts!”

“No,” Zelda said. “Please. We mustn’t take any lives.”

Her friends seemed peeved to hear this. Link touched her wrist. “Dorian,” he reminded her.

She understood, but cutting a bloody swathe through this valley would not put them in a favourable light when entreating with the Clan. Link stayed so close that his knuckles brushed against hers as they walked. The Gerudo gathered tight around them. The air was thick with anticipation as the valley narrowed. Zelda could already see a shadowy entrance cut into the stone wall in the distance, flickering lights visible through it.

Lukan stopped short, whipping out her shield. “They come!”

More Yiga Clan heralded their presence with the bright orange glow of their transportation magic, the smell of singed paper accompanying them. Lukan snarled as she blocked arrows while swinging her scimitar. Barta unarmed another easily with her long-reaching spear, knocking the wind out of them with the flat of her gleaming blade. And Risa casually walked towards the final defender who made the grave mistake of hesitating before she struck a fierce blow upon their chin, right when they least expected it.

But that was it, only three sentries to defend the entire Hideout and disappearing almost as quickly as they came. Zelda and her team crossed the threshold cautiously. They were inside a small, circular room with a raised podium in its centre surrounded by smouldering torches. They illuminated the towering walls where canvas scrolls stamped with the upended Yiga eye hung over shallow alcoves. Sand collected in the corners of the stairs, hinting at a neglect in upkeep. Most surprising were the statues that surrounded them on all sides, distinct in style and posture: straight-backed and alert with stone fingers clutching carved blades. Gerudo swordswomen, blindfolded much like their Sheikah frog cohorts outside.

“The seven heroines,” Lukan murmured, anger seething in her voice. “These fiends! See how they infest even our ancient sacred spaces!”

“But there are eight statues,” Risa observed. “I wonder why?”

There was only one way onward: a narrow corridor that ascended steeply into the depths of the cavern. Zelda turned to her faithful Gerudo friends and bowed low. “I’m forever grateful and in your debt for your help and generosity. I know I can never repay it. But Link and I began this together, and we’ll finish it the same way.”

“No. She had already come so far.” Barta nodded reluctantly. She went to stand lookout with Lukan near the entrance. Risa had already put away her weapon, peering at the symbols worn into the
grainy walls with deep interest. She nonchalantly waved as Zelda and Link scurried into the Yiga Clan Hideout.

The corridor ended at an overhead walkway. Zelda leaned over the edge to look down at the Hideout, but Link pulled her back. There was a small cell here with a wooden gate that hung open and crooked, the rope hinges frayed and useless. Link motioned for her to get behind it.

“Before we continue, please put this on,” he said. Zelda felt the smooth material of Sheikah gear pushed into her hands. “And if they still spot us, use the Slate to get back to Gerudo Town right away. Okay?”

“We will be fine,” she assured him. He refused to smile. So Zelda quickly wiggled into the skintight suit, pulling a scarf over her nose and tying her yellow hair up. Once upon an ancient age, another princess bearing her name had done the same.

Link had also changed back into something more subtle than glaring emerald armour, though it was just his Champion’s tunic. He reached behind him and took down something he had carried beneath all his other weapons and shield. Zelda removed the wraps from the large, curved bundle and heard her breath catch at the sight of the bow of light, ivory and gold and shining ethereal in the dim shadows of their hiding spot.

“Hopefully we won’t have to use it, but I’d rather you have a good weapon,” Link said. “You gave it to me, anyway, so it’s yours.”

Yet another Princess Zelda had wielded this very bow beside her hero, too. Its touch warmed her back as she put it on with respect and reverence. Now having followed the example of her ancestors, Zelda followed Link down into the Yiga Clan Hideout itself.

They were very careful in the first room, treading slowly and deliberately, sidling around the edges of square pillars. She accorded the silence to the stealthiness of the suit, but when they reached the bottom of the stair, nobody was there. Link frowned suspiciously at the empty doorway as Zelda checked their surroundings. She saw an open but bare chest in one corner and a splintered pile of wood fallen against a wall. Otherwise, nothing of note.

The next room was just as still and silent. Zelda recognised the architecture of the platforms and doorways, from the paper screens and sloped gables to red lanterns and swirling patterns whitewashed upon rocky walls. It was as if they were in a mirror Sheikah town that dwelled constantly at night. Zelda had a strong feeling that this was exactly it — a valiant attempt to recreate Kakariko Village, so far away from the misty mountains. Her heart panged with homesickness on their behalf.

Link wasn’t having any of it though. “Where are the gems?” he hissed as they walked gingerly past blocks of stone and crates piled up here and there. Some of the lower ones were still spread with trenchers coated in dust and mugs lying on their sides. “And the bananas?”

By the third room, it was clear to Zelda that the Hideout had been abandoned. And ransacked. Chests hadn’t just been emptied but turned over. Scuff marks stained the floor, the signs of frantic searching. Some of the lanterns had been ripped, straw mats rumpled, uncooked grains of rice scattered about and even arrows jutting out of the wooden posts that held up canvas canopies. She threw caution to the wind, climbing up the pedestals and righting crooked banners while they investigated.

“I don’t get it,” Link muttered behind her. He had recovered from the shock of no patrols and was now annoyed — perhaps even offended — that their apprehension had been for naught. A portion
of the wall didn’t seem to match the rest of the room. On Link’s instruction, Zelda pushed the hidden exit open with the Sheikah Slate and they stepped back into the open valley.

For a moment, she was taken in by the lonesome beauty of the place. The cliff walls, sculpted by eons of natural wear, were composed of sinuous rows of sandstone strata like layers of honey and butter and cream and wheat. Hammered into them were more black-thatched gables housing lanterns dimmed by the Yiga flag wrapped around their ribbed cases. Red tags and lanterns stretched between these on twine, and the afternoon sun bearing down from above set the distant snowy highlands ablaze with light. Zelda was so captivated that it was a while before she noticed the enormous hole in the centre of the clearing, perfectly round and bordered by metal sheets hammered thin. She dared to peer over its edge. It looked like a bottomless pit, warped and winding.

“HEY!”

The shout echoed across the great canyon. Link immediately yanked Zelda back from the hole, his fingers squeezing hers tightly as there was a blur of black and scarlet within a cloud of paper seals. A tall shadow rose menacingly within, still shrouded in fog. “Who the heck are you?” demanded a nasal voice.

“We could ask the same,” Link shot back.

The Yiga waved a hand, and the cloud dissipated. Zelda blinked. The figure standing before her was a skinny beanpole of a person. This was accentuated by the stiff, starched collar framing their face, which was, of course, hidden by a smooth mask decorated with small flame-like tendrils. Except that the mask was slightly crooked and too small — a pointed chin could be seen jutting out from beneath it. Occasionally, they would pull self-consciously on the material of their bodysuit, as if they were unused to its touch and deeply uncomfortable to be wearing it.

Zelda felt surprised. Disappointed, too. Dorian, Barta, and Link had made such a fuss over her about the likes of… this?

They spoke again, anxious and confusing. “The lookouts all came back almost as soon as they had been dispatched, screaming something about a Gerudo army on the doorstep. Just when all the Blademasters abandoned us… wait a minute!” The Yiga jumped back, rubbing fruitlessly at their mask and setting it even more askew. “That thing on your hip… it’s a Sheikah Slate! That means you’re that Goddess-damned Zelda!”

“Yes,” she said. “And I’m here to—”

“Here to what? Banish us again?” The Yiga’s fingers curled into shaking fists, their tone going from worried to cold. “That’s right. I recognise those clothes. For hundreds and hundreds of years we have been humiliated and shunned by our high-and-mighty cousins. Hyrule’s loyal dogs who can’t even control their own technology. The royal family who condemned us just for the pursuit of knowledge! Don’t think we’ve forgotten, Princess!”

They spat out the final word with true venom. Link bristled, his fingers twitching to grab his sword. “Hey,” he snapped. “Answer me. Who the damn hell are you?”

“I am Kohgin!” they cried, suddenly striking a dramatic pose with fingers splayed and legs spread in an unsteady stance. “The one! The only! Heir of Master Kohga himself! I’ll send you to join my father, and you can offer your apologies to him and the rest of our clan in person!”

Kohgin reached behind them and pulled out a horrible weapon, a ring of pure steel studded with
spikes. Zelda could see their arms trembling with exertion to keep the heavy blade aloft. Link growled and pushed her behind him. Kohgin grunted as they tried to swing the demon carver, but they tripped over unsteady feet and nearly impaled their own toe. Kohgin gave up and clumsily lunged at Link, who easily blocked their grasping fingers with an annoyed swing of his shield. The new Yiga Clan leader yelped in pain as their fingers came in contact with metal then fell to the ground, whining.

“Stop!” Zelda cried as Kohgin cringed under her hero’s glare. “Don’t hurt them.”

Link shot her a look of pure exasperation but obeyed. Not before kicking the demon carver into the pit, however. Kohgin fumbled with their mask, trying to right it with little success.

“I would like to speak with you plainly,” Zelda said, daring to move closer. They slouched their shoulders over their clutched hand, sulking. “Before we throw ourselves into fighting. Let us put aside our differences for a minute and examine the facts of the situation first.”

Kohgin laughed mirthlessly. “What facts? Everyone has their own version of events. It’s us against you and the rest of Hyrule. I doubt anyone truly is interested in the so-called facts.”

Zelda took in a deep breath. She had wanted to be forgiving and perhaps even offer the benefit of the doubt for the Yiga, but Kohgin’s responses were grating upon her nerves. Their attitude was extremely detrimental to rational discussion. She recalled the clues in Kohgin’s behaviour, particularly before they had recognised her. “The Clan numbers very few right now,” she tried.

“More than just two arrogant children,” they retorted. “You haven’t seen anything yet of the great Yiga Hideout! Those rooms were just the beginning. This whole valley is ours!”

“The Clan is divided. You said so yourself, the Blademasters have left you.” Zelda tried to scrutinise Kohgin’s face, but it was difficult with a mask in the way. “And they looted your treasury before they did so.”

Kohgin was shaken for a moment, but recovered quickly. “So? We don’t need them! Stupid muscleheads and their bananas! They never shared them with us anyway. Good riddance!”

“That means you could use other allies right now, isn’t that correct?”

Kohgin stood up and leaned in to study Zelda’s face. She stepped back without thinking, and they laughed bitterly.

“You don’t want to ally with us,” they scoffed. “You want to use us. I know about you, Princess. You’re a greedy little girl who will do anything to resurrect her precious Guardian army again. The Hylian obsession with power! Nothing ever satisfies them.”

Link’s hand flew up to seize the hilt of his sword, but Zelda grabbed it first, squeezing his fingers. Insults she could take for the sake of Hyrule. “That’s not true. The time for war is over. I don’t want any more of it for as long as I live and afterwards.”

“Like we should believe anything a Hylian royal would say,” Kohgin sneered, folding their arms.

Zelda gripped Link’s hand tightly. She looked at Kohgin and felt all the anger, reluctance, fear, and anxiety beyond the mask. Frustration welled up within her. They didn’t know how much she understood what it was like to be pushed into upholding centuries of expectations. If only she could somehow relay this, and the fact that neither one of them needed to play into the faulty reputations that their parents had foolishly built for them. The fate of so many people rested in their hands.
“I want to help you!” she cried. “Let go of your stupid pride and think about those you lead! There is honour in asking for help, don’t you see?”

“Never!” Kohgin bellowed, puffing up their chest and tugging up their sagging suit at the same time. “We’re the Yiga Clan, and have been for hundreds of years! We’ll never back down from our ultimate goal: revenge! Revenge on the Sheikah, the royal family, and all of Hyrule! I’ll fight you myself if need be!”

Zelda’s patience had run out. “Fine.” She let go of Link’s hand and in seconds heard a slither of steel that could only be the Master Sword unsheathing. Kohgin went rigid at the sight of the shining blade. “Here is the sword that seals the darkness, wielded by the hero of Hyrule. And here is the bow of light, crafted by spirits themselves from the sacred realm. Ganon stood no chance, let alone your father or anyone who sought to ruin the peace of this land. Do you really want to do this?”

Kohgin was silent. Zelda continued. “I may be a princess with no throne, but I do have the promise of three other great nations in addition to the Sheikah. The Zora, Goron, and Rito have pledged to stand at my side should I need their help. Hylians may have scattered and few, but they are wise enough to know that the evil power over this land has been broken. Their enemies remain slain, and they are ready to face over 100 years of Yiga bullying with courage.” The arrows upon the string burned fiercely in her grasp. “Again, do you really want to do this?”

Zelda and Link exchanged looks. Link rolled his eyes, putting away the Master Sword and folding his arms. Kohgin barely noticed, thrashing pitifully before them. Their wails were beginning to echo round the valley.

“I didn’t want to! But after the big fight and they took all our stuff… just because I’m Kohga’s kid! Oh Goddess, you’re going to kill me. Just do it quick!” They pressed their face into the dirt. “I submit!”

“Get up,” she said. Kohgin just bawled harder. “Quiet. STOP!”

They froze at her command, then crawled back onto their knees, hiccupping. “Mask off,” Zelda said.

Kohgin fumbled with the ties. The bloody Yiga eye fell away to reveal a very pale, frightened youth. Zelda stared, shocked, into dark red eyes that squinted back up at her tearfully. Kohgin also had stringy silver hair that flopped over their forehead, and a smattering of acne across lean cheeks and a long hawk nose. They could not be much older than her or Link.

Zelda put away the bow of light and knelt down. She patted Kohgin on the shoulder. “You needn’t bend to the dictations of history or what people believe. The Yiga Clan threw their lot in with the wrong side, but they still survived. Now you can reclaim the name and show Hyrule that you do deserve another chance. After all, don’t you find this perpetual spitefulness rather exhausting?”

“It is,” Kohgin confessed, wiping their nose with the back of one hand. Zelda flinched at the string of mucus that came away with their fingers but didn’t lean back. “I’m… I’m not even a footsoldier. I just work in the lab.”

“What? What lab?”
“The research lab,” Kohgin said. They blinked at the look on Zelda’s face. “Where we make the seals and try to study the ancient texts. The operative word being try, because it’s hard forging tech when you have no materials. The fighters were allowed to leave the Hideout to hunt down the hero, so we asked them to bring back more parts. Instead they only brought bananas to please my father and threw the peels at us when we complained.” They scowled. “I don’t miss them. Or him.”

Zelda pushed back her growing excitement. “May I see your lab?”

Kohgin sighed and clambered to their feet. “I guess.” They pawed through their belt and produced a handful of small clay balls, no larger than an acorn and incised with tiny markings. Zelda’s heart skipped a beat when she noticed how they glowed a bright blue, like the ancient cores. Kohgin pulled out some red paper seals, quickly scribbling some characters upon them with a pen of black ink. “These will take us there,” they said, fingers working to attach the seals to the clay.

“How?”

“There are small doses of ancient energy stored inside. Breaking the shell will activate a portal and the distance written on the seal ensures you arrive at the right place. One use only, though.”

“Hold on,” Link said. He pulled Zelda away and hissed in her ear. “This could be a trap.”

Zelda looked at Kohgin. They were standing quietly, almost resignedly, and waiting for direction. “I believe them,” she said. “And I really want to see this lab.”

“Of course you do,” Link sighed. He followed her back to Kohgin. When Zelda touched the clay, she heard a familiar hum and suddenly, the world was nothing but blazing light.

She came to almost instantly, gasping. The clay ball had crumbled into particles that so fine that much of it was still floating to the floor, eddying in swirls around her along with the burnt tatters of the seals. Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Zelda looked around the Yiga research lab.

It was nothing more than a large cave, natural and drafty and dim. Water dripped from stalactites above to the uneven ground below. Dry areas housed low, rickety tables piled with objects. There was paper, for seals and binders of notes, and metal, like rusted Guardian parts and mechanic’s tools. Hunched around them were people staring at her with undisguised shock and fear. They sported robes of grey and black with the unmistakable Yiga eye printed on the backs.

Two more poofs sounded behind her, and Zelda turned to see that Link and Kohgin had made it too. Link coughed and wiped his face of red dust, but Kohgin simply loped by and reached for a pair of spectacles sitting on a shelf. They put them on, blinking owlishly through smudged lenses. “Welcome to the lab, Princess,” they said.

These words did not quite translate into the mood of their fellow researchers, who shrank away when Zelda wandered around their workstations. She could not tell what kind of projects were being carried out by the items shown, so she asked, kindly and gently, the closest researcher to tell her more.

The Yiga trembled like a leaf before responding. “I’m… I’m on communications. We found texts documenting how the Hyrulean royal family had found a way to enhance pieces of ancient Sheikah stone and used them as charms to speak over long distances. With so many footsoldiers in the field and unaccounted for, we’re trying to keep them in touch and bring them back.”

“What a brilliant concept,” Zelda told her. “What have you tried so far?”

The Yiga seemed gobsmacked by a positive response. Then, she smiled and the rest of her words
“Well, it stands to reason that all ancient Sheikah tech, no matter which era, draw their power from the energy network under Hyrule. Since we’ve been able to extract some for the transporting seals, there must be a way to etch them into communication charms too. We just need to find the right runes, or make some ourselves.”

“How do you get the energy out? Do you have a furnace here too?”

The Yiga girl pointed. A very worn Guidance stone sat in the centre of the lab. It seemed to be carved from stalagmite. “You can bypass intermediary sources if you dig deep enough. We take the energy directly from the network.”

Zelda walked over to it. The other researchers, emboldened by their peer’s successful conversation, came closer. “This must be how the shrines activate.”

“Yeah, we think so too.” Kohgin had joined the crowd now. They shifted their weight around guiltily. “Which is why, uh, we stole the heirlooms and ancient orbs. If we could only access that plane, the one that is the source of all this magical energy, maybe we could better understand how it manifests and flows into our realm. But of course, nothing worked. There’s only one Sheikah Slate.”

This was true before, but not anymore. All the researchers crowded around her to see the new Slate she had made for Riju. Zelda saw dark eyes full of hunger reflecting the bright glow of the Slate’s screen and heard their excited whispers when they saw how many shrines dotted the map of the continent. None of them were evil murderers. They were scientists, inventors, and scholars. Zelda felt a strong wave of kinship with them.

When she had put the Slate away, the crowd drew back in reluctant disappointment. A girl came forward and to Zelda’s surprise, crouched down before her. She dipped forward until her forehead touched the cold ground. “Please, Princess. Let me go with you. I’ll work for you and make anything you ask. And if I ever go back on my word, may the Goddess smite me in my sleep!”

One by one, all the Yiga Clan present followed her lead, bowing to Zelda and begging for mercy and acceptance. Even Kohgin quietly sank down to their knees again. She fought between compassion and discomfort at their desperation, not feeling worthy of such worshipful surrender. Link made his way through the grovelling people and stood beside her, still frowning.

“Stand up,” Zelda said. “Please.” Stools scraped and feet fumbled as the Yiga hurried to comply. “If I’m to rebuild the kingdom, I need a trustworthy and dedicated team who can assist me. No secrets will be kept and respect will be given to all. We will work to restore peace and harmony to every village, province, and settlement that houses a living being. If you agree to these conditions, I’ll be happy to bring you with me back to Hyrule.”

Link spoke up for the first time since arriving. “Not to be a downer, but this isn’t all the Yiga. What about the ones who don’t like the idea of peace and harmony, and would rather keep on terrorising everyone?”

“Well, that’s the purpose of a united kingdom and alliances. I promise as your princess that you won’t be left to fend for yourselves if the remaining rogue Yiga try to do you harm. We help and protect each other.” Zelda glanced back at the table full of seals. “Tell them where your allegiance lies now and see how they respond. Perhaps some are just as sick of being hidden away as you are. Others will certainly try to continue the cycle of revenge but that doesn’t matter — we’ll be ready for it.”

The lab was a flurry of activity as the Yiga rushed to relay the news abroad. Zelda took Link’s
hand and dragged him to the other side of the cave. A few Yiga huddled there, away from the
workstations and messy bookshelves of the researchers. Their duplex bows looked battered and old
in a heap beside them. They had peeled off their suits, revealing bruises and wounds that they were
cumbersome trying to bandage. One of them passed around a bottle of potion, but there was only
enough for a single sip each. Zelda dug around her pouch until she found another and gave it to the
nearest footsoldier.

“Thank you, Princess,” he muttered, eyes darting fearfully over at Link. Zelda nudged him until he
apologised for hurting them earlier. It might have been a lie through gritted teeth, but it was
enough.

Soon, the cave was filled with flashes of light and puffs of red smoke. Footsoldiers were returning
from where they had been lurking throughout Hyrule. When they cast off their masks, they gawked
openly at Zelda and Link, but Kohgin’s squinty-eyed glare cowed them into collapsing onto the
benches, groaning and rubbing their sore muscles. There was even a single Blademaster who
grimaced upon his arrival. But even he bowed his head stiffly and retreated to the back of the cave
to nurse a mug of voltfruit juice.

When the activity died down, Zelda counted roughly three dozen Yiga Clan gathered before her.
She knew that there were more who had ignored the summons, choosing to pursue their vows of
vengeance for Kohga and Ganon over peace and reconciliation. But as Kohgin officially
proclaimed the end of Yiga exile and renewed loyalty to Hyrule, there was such a cheer of relief
and gladness that her heart swelled at the sound. It was not much, but it was a start.

Link turned to her as the Yiga embraced each other and chattered about finally leaving the desert.
“Did you even need me here?” he asked.

“Of course,” Zelda replied. He finally relaxed into a smile and pressed his lips to her cheek.

“You did this, so you can do anything,” Link whispered in her ear. Zelda felt the praise wash over
her like a warm breeze from the sunny world above, even as they stood amongst strangers in a
cold, subterranean one.

“Good,” she said, “because there’s a lot to do.”

It must have been a terrifying sight to the Gerudo Town guards — Zelda, Link, Kohgin and the rest
of the Yiga Clan appearing in a great storm of lightning flashes and clouds of red smoke before
their very eyes. Zelda stepped forward to see Riju running out of the entrance, staggering in the
sand with her red braid flying. She threw her arms around Zelda and hugged her tightly as Buliara
shoved Yiga away from them. After a few seconds, Riju quickly let go and stood back, her flushed
cheeks betraying embarrassment.

“Um. Princess Zelda! I am pleased to witness your safe return. And united with your hero.” She
gazed out at the pale-skinned Yiga Clan standing before her, awkward and nervous in the open.
“What happened on your mission?”

“Don’t worry, Lady Riju! All is well.” Risa spoke up from where she stood by the cluster of
footsoldiers. Lukan and Barta were with them as well, still coughing and shaking their clothes free
of the clay dust. It had taken a fair bit of coaxing for them to use the transportation seals, the tools
of their long enemy. But as they took in their hometown walls before them, along with their Chief,
the soldiers finally relaxed.

As the sun drifted down towards the horizon, Zelda explained what had commenced in Karusa
Valley. Riju and Buliara listened with grave expressions. The Yiga waited for their sentences quietly behind Link and Kohgin. They had all agreed to leave behind their weapons, were they vicious sickles, gusty windcleavers, or even simple letter-openers, in a gesture of good faith and submission to Zelda. But it was the Gerudo they needed to answer to first, as their presence in the desert had caused many troubles over the years.

Riju’s crown glinted in the setting sunlight. Her chin jutted out as she looked up at Kohgin, who said nothing with their head bowed. “Justice still needs to be served to those who crossed our borders and broke sacred Gerudo law. The Yiga Clan has done so repeatedly over decades, if not centuries.”

Kohgin swallowed. “I know.” They shuddered a little as Buliara drove her golden claymore into the sand in front of her, a point made very clear. “I… I’ll take the blame. Master Kohga was my kin. I have his blood. He led the Yiga Clan and gave the order to infiltrate Gerudo Town and take the thunder helm. So you can exact your punishment on me.”

Riju and Buliara exchanged glances. There was begrudging admiration in the crease of the captain’s brow, and hesitation flitted over Riju’s face for a moment. “Perhaps we should some take time with this,” she said. “After all, you are now a Hyrulean subject under the princess’s authority. We’ll talk later to decide how the Clan will pay for their transgressions. Because…” She grasped Zelda’s hands excitedly. “We must tell the town of your victory! Come on!”

Link agreed to stay outside to watch over the Yiga with Barta. There was a small debate over whether Kohgin deserved to enter Gerudo Town, but once it was confirmed they were not a voe, they agreed to take Lukan and Risa as watchful escorts while within the town walls. Zelda walked beside Riju through the tunnel, hearing the whispering leaves of the palm fruit trees and musical burbles of the canals. Heads of gem-spangled red hair turned in their direction as they proceeded towards the palace, and heeled feet followed them to the palace’s glittering arch.

Riju threw her arms up triumphantly. “My sisters and mothers! It gladdens my heart to give you great news from the outside world. Princess Zelda has successfully tamed the infamous Yiga Clan, gaining their fealty and a sworn promise to never use their abilities against innocents ever again. We have their leader in our custody to determine the future of the desert between us both. But most importantly, Gerudo is once more an ally to Hyrule. By my mother’s sacred soul and the great spirit of Lady Urbosa, I vow to uphold this ancient friendship for all my life and after. Let the ancestors hear these words and hold me accountable. If I fail, may my days end swallowed in the sand.”

The response was shattering. Strong hands came together in thundering applause, and voices rose in joy and pride. The Gerudo bellowed their approval for their young chief, who was radiant with their support. Mothers and daughters alike kissed each other and danced with delight. An elderly vaba even reached up and yanked hard on her beehive hairdo and bared a smooth-shaven head defiantly as she tossed her wig into the air.

“And!” Riju cried over the bellows and applause. “The ordinances will be lifted, effective now! Tonight we shall celebrate the union of all Hyrule, for the first time in 100 years!”

The news spread fast. Travellers flooded in from Kara Kara Bazaar. The women blushed and grinned as they were welcomed back into the famed haven, and men firmly rejected if they dared to try and sneak past the guards. Most were savvy to Gerudo law and simply brought along their own blankets and firewood to stay warm and awake through the chilly desert night. The celebration of Gerudo Town would be both inside and outside the walls tonight.

The Yiga Clan huddled together on their own, shy and unsure whether they were allowed in the
festivities. Zelda took pity on them and resolved to provide accommodations. Eyes widened in wonder as she and Link came over with several platters of fried bananas. The entire notion that a mighty banana’s delicious flavour could be improved upon was absolutely astounding to them all, and soon even the most awkward of the outcasts were animated and uplifted by the food and drink.

Zelda and Link chose to remain in the desert rather than the comfort of the plaza to show solidarity with their new allies. Buliara consented to Riju’s plea to join them, and they were soon comfortably lounged around a roaring bonfire with spicy peppered drumsticks, roasted zapshrooms and chilled hydromelon wine. Smoke and laughter floated up to the star studded night sky.

Link, ever popular, was often called away by friends who recognised him and insisted that he share libations as a toast to the good fortune of the evening. He never resisted, and soon came stumbling back with an unmistakable reddiness across his cheek. He flopped down onto the blanket, staring at her with such intensity that she became alarmed and asked him what was wrong.

Link looked deeply and earnestly into her eyes. “I love you.”

“Oh.” Zelda was awash with embarrassment, fully aware of Riju’s hysterical giggles and Buliara’s awkward silence. “I love you, too.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“I love you…” He leaned in until their foreheads almost touched. She could feel the heat of the alcohol emanating from his flushed skin. “I love you so much.”

Zelda meant only to kiss him lightly, but Link pulled her in so quickly that she almost lost balance. He lifted her onto his lap and wrapped his arms tight around her, crushing his mouth against hers and even daring to sweep his tongue across her lips in full view of everyone.

Riju’s voice cut into Zelda’s foggy mind like a piercing ray of light and just as gleefully unrepentant. “Hey! Don’t get too comfortable. You are in the presence of a Gerudo Chief… think of my innocence!”

“Master Link,” Buliara said calmly, “how much have you had to drink this evening?”

He pulled away reluctantly, shrugging and pressing his nose into Zelda’s neck. She was mortified but also privately enthralled. Zelda patted Link’s hand and laced her fingers around his. He responded with a satisfied sigh.

“I recommend you switch to a different beverage.” The captain was not smiling, but her eyes twinkled in the light of the fire. Riju, on the other hand, was falling apart beside her. Barta, who had volunteered lookout, caught Zelda’s eye and shook her head woefully.

“Maybe I should head out and look for my special someone, too,” she sighed.

Inebriated Link was indeed very entertaining… at first. It took Zelda and Kohgin far too much time and effort to force him back into the vai clothes so he could actually make his way back into the town. But some time during the small hours of the morning, Zelda finally managed to get Link up all those stairs and onto the bed, where he lay watching her undress.

“I love you,” he repeated when she stretched out beside him.

“I love you, too.” Zelda reached up to brush his hair back and he drew her close. This time, she let
him have what they both truly desired. It was like being back in their house in Hateno, comforting and safe and full of hope for the future. Zelda smiled as she squeezed her eyes shut and kissed Link with all of her might.

Clouds never seemed to gather in Gerudo, making for an endless expanse that soaked up all of the heat of the sun. Great puffs of dust rolled across the dunes in the distance, faint smudges standing in for objects obscured in the depths of sand. Zelda imagined countless of eroded statues, weathered ruins, carved cliffs and even bleached bones of leviathans buried throughout this desert. She watched them pass beneath her from the towering heights of this great mechanical beast, shaded by its stone bulk and cushioned by blankets and pillows. It was both a memory and an experience, right now with Riju and Link.

Riju’s eyes gleamed as she swept her fingers across her new Slate. Vah Naboris stalked on, the deep sand no trouble for its swaying legs. The Divine Beast moved with efficiency and grace much like its previous pilot, power and strength in every stride. Zelda felt the crackling hum of electricity coursing through the stone beneath her. She looked over at Link, who sat hunched over with his face in his hands. He had suffered a headache for most of the morning.

But Zelda felt jubilant. Elated. Victorious. She saw Gerudo Town, small and sparkling, growing larger with each step Naboris took towards it. No doubt that the Gerudo within had spotted them and were preparing a grand welcome for their beloved Champion and Chief. There were tents erected just outside the walls, loose grey canvas that rippled beneath the burning sun. The Yiga waited for Zelda too, ready to start over and follow her on to redemption.

Riju was the one to finally voice the ultimate question. “What’s next, Princess?”

Link looked up, blinking those blue eyes that matched the skies around them. Zelda took his hand and kissed his fingers. He smiled, and she felt her heart sing gladly.

“Vah Naboris is the last of the Divine Beasts,” Zelda said. “And so, this is the last of the new Slates. I guess it’s finally time for me to stop putting it off. Time to go back to Hyrule.”

Chapter End Notes

1. Riju is my favourite new Champion! She’s so cute and lively, and her backstory/motivation is very compelling. And as you guys know fairly well by now, I truly enjoy writing children.
2. Zelda has found her people… FELLOW NERDS. I actually came up with very detailed explanations for the Yiga's other abilities (ie. disguises), habits and projects, but there was no good reason to include them in this chapter. That’s writing for ya! 2/3 of the stuff you come up with actually ends up not being used but still contributes so much to how you envision the characters.
3. It’s pretty obvious what happened at the end of the Gerudo party but I don’t think it warrants a rating change. They’re drunk and married and very happy, so let's just let it go. Hehe.
Chapter Notes

Extending the chapter count to one more, because in classic Comix fashion, this portion ended up taking a lot more space than I expected. In the end, I think that the remaining story works much better separated as there are different themes and POVs. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back to Hyrule. Rebuilding the kingdom. Where would they even begin?

Link decided that his first step would be to clear out the castle once and for all. Zelda refused to let him go alone, assigning a squadron of Yiga under his command. It had been extremely awkward at first. Link tried to be nonchalant as they crossed the moat and went through the rusty silver gates together. His team were four footsoldiers and the big blademaster, who still carried his heavy windcleaver in its spotted-fur scabbard upon his hip.

Guardian turrets turned their pale blue eyes upon them. There was a breathless moment as the laser beam scanned their bodies. Not able to detect any malice, the machine whirred and clicked back to its original position.

“Okay,” Link said, causing the Yiga to start and stare at him. “The monsters are the easy part. We’ll use the Sheikah Slate to navigate, but it’s gonna get confusing. And since malice isn’t holding them together anymore, some structures might be really unstable. So be… uh, careful.”

He was relieved when they settled into the work, staying silent for better sneaking and communicating with hand signals instead. They made good progress into the depths of the castle. The archers whittled down the enemy at a distance so Link and the blademaster could finish them off in melee. Their success lifted the soldiers’ spirits as they collected loot and piqued their curiosity with every new room. Link watched the wonder upon their faces when they gazed up at the vaulted ceiling and stained glass windows of the Library.

“It sure is a lot easier fighting with the hero of Hyrule than against him,” he overheard one of them whisper.

The real challenge was the lynel still brooding inside the first gatehouse. Link heard the footsoldiers gasp with fear when it turned, all blue fur and bulging muscle and snarling fangs. However, the blademaster did not back down. He strode forward and swung his sword with both fists. The gust of wind failed to knock the lynel over but did force it to stagger a moment before its eyes lit up with rage. Link grabbed his shield and darted in to assist.

The footsoldiers didn’t dare enter the fray and Link couldn’t blame them. It was already dangerous with the two of them concentrating hard not to accidentally injure the other while everything was a
blur of legs, mane, and horns. The edge of the lynel’s shield caught on Link’s sleeve. He heard tearing fabric as he struggled to free himself, unable to dodge the massive hoof that came smashing into his ribcage. Link skidded across the gatehouse floor and felt his sword sliding out of his fingers before all went black.

He came to with pale faces crowded over him. The Yiga blinked and stammered, moving away hastily. One of them carefully set down the Master Sword beside him first. Link saw bandages around his chest and the body of the lynel at the other side of the room. It was lying on its side and riddled with arrows. The blademaster walked over. There was a single mighty banana offered in a black-gloved hand.

“Thanks,” Link said, gulping it down.

He felt self-conscious as dark eyes regarded him carefully. “I think,” began the blademaster slowly, in a voice low and rumbling, “we should stop now. Have we got them all?”

“No,” Link said. He laughed at the consternation on his face. “It’s a big castle. We’ll have to come back.” He looked over at the footsoldiers, who had finished retrieving any unbroken arrows and spoils from the lynel itself. “But we did do most of it today. Good job, everyone.”

It was strange to be complimenting the Yiga. Link knew it was equally strange for them to be accepting it. The blademaster inclined his head. “Thank you for your leadership, hero.”

“Link.”

The blademaster hesitated for a second, then grasped Link’s outstretched hand. “Bufol.”

Bufol would easily master the trial of the royal guard, Link thought to himself as his new friends began preparing to leave the castle, scribbling out on fresh seals the coordinates to where Zelda waited.

They reappeared in the field just west of Mabe Village Ruins at the fall of night. It was the temporary base of operations as they slowly worked towards making Hyrule Castle hospitable again. Grey tents had been erected around the remnants of old houses, and the Yiga had hung up their traditional red lanterns along the broken walls that glowed in mid-air like embers from a cooking fire left to smoulder. Other footsoldiers kept watch for the rogue members of their clan around the perimeter. There had been one or two attempts on the journey here, but each one was foiled easily. To the south, some of the buildings still had their foundations wholly intact. One of them was even raised high enough to include a staircase and arched walls, and that was where Zelda currently held her court. Link took a single step towards it.

“Look out!”

A Guardian Stalker came lumbering by on its regular patrol around the area. His footsoldiers scattered at once, and even Bufol jumped back. Researchers came rushing by hot on its trail, ducking beneath the spindly, twisting legs and trying to jot down their revelations in journals at the same time. Link spotted another cluster of Yiga squatted beside a decayed Guardian shell, pulling out parts and examining them carefully. Those that could still be used were reverently laid aside.

He finally made it to Zelda. She was conversing with another group of Yiga. They looked down at papers gathered upon a desk they had dragged up the stone steps, pointing and making modifications with stubby pencils. The crowd parted to let him through.

Zelda looked up. “And how fared the inspection, Sir Knight?”
“There are some rooms we didn’t get to, but it’ll be clear by tomorrow.” A loud beeping sound
interrupted him, and they all looked over to see that the researchers had managed to stop the
Guardian stalker. It spun its head around in confusion while they poked and prodded at its body. “Oh,
and there are a lot of those too. They didn’t bother us, so we didn’t do anything to them.”

One of the Yiga looked eager. “That’s hundreds of ancient parts right there!”

Another disagreed. “But that’s a loss of valuable defense. And we need original, working
mechanisms to study if we want to replicate them.”

The discussion flared up again, passionate, loud, and with much gesturing. Zelda held up a hand
and it stopped immediately. “Once Link and his squadron are finished clearing the castle, we will
enter and carefully survey all of it before making any decisions. Every small detail will be
documented. Only then can we understand what resources are salvageable and what work needs to
be done, architectural or otherwise. This includes the Guardians. Perhaps if they are in prime
condition and strategic locations, we won’t have to touch them. But I do not expect any more
battles in Castle Town for a long time, so not all of them are needed.”

The gathered Yiga murmured assent, except for one girl who raised her hand. “Excuse me,
Princess. But you did say that we could… in place of our old one…”

Zelda laughed. “Oh, of course! The new Royal Ancient Tech Lab will be within the castle this
time, rather than outside of it. There ought to be a chamber big enough. Don’t worry.”

Satisfied, the Yiga retreated back to their tents for the night. Link couldn’t help thinking how easily
their loyalty had been swayed… Kohga was no true master compared to the allure of science.

Zelda finally turned to give Link all her attention. She kissed him sweetly and hooked her fingers
into the string laced up over his sternum. “Thank you for the housecleaning,” she teased. “I look
forward to returning to a tidy home.”

“Tidy is too strong a word,” he said. “And it would be really rude of me to remove the gifts left by
moblins. They’re very… personal.”

She made a face which melted back into a smile as she wrapped her arms around his middle. Link
flinched when they brushed against his injury, and she noticed at once. “You’re hurt! Why didn’t
you say anything?”

“I’ll live.”

“You’d better.”

Link looked over to where a girl was fastidiously organising the papers on the desk. Her silver hair
fell over one shoulder, and the eye tattoo on her forehead was wrinkled in concentration. Once
Kakariko Village had received the reports on the status of the Divine Beasts, readmission of the
Yiga, and upcoming plans for Hyrule, Impa had dispatched Paya to Zelda at once. Every ruler of
Hyrule needed a Sheikah by her side. Zelda was delighted to see her dear friend, welcoming her
with a warm embrace. Link was pleased to see Paya too, and not just for the delivery of honey-
baked apples that came with her.

Zelda might have forgiven the Yiga, but it would take a much longer time for the Sheikah to accept
the Clan back into the fold of their snowy white robes. The moment they saw Paya awaiting them
at the ruins, bedecked in the dark stealth armour of her people, Kohgin had recoiled at the sombre
tattoo staring them down. They reacted stiffly and with badly disguised reluctance when Zelda...
introduced them and moodily turned their back once formalities were finished.

Kohgin’s presence in the princess’s court was nothing more than a stroke of kindness. Zelda had interceded on their behalf during Gerudo trial, convincing Riju to permit full-time service to the Hyrulean throne as penance for the Yiga Clan’s crimes. This was something Paya barely understood, only seeing a sea of enemy surrounding her sworn sovereign. It was tense and terrible on that first day. Paya, the furthest she had ever been away from her home village, continued to stare at her feet and bowed at Zelda’s every word. Kohgin took advantage of her averted eyes to sneer and mutter behind Zelda’s back. It was very subtle, veiled, and carefully skirting the line. Paya said nothing about it, but her red face and shaking fingers revealed more.

Finally, it all came to a head. Zelda had finished settling in her followers and sending out missives to the other leaders of Hyrule requesting help for the rebuild. Link was preparing to enter the castle for the next morning. It was a humid, rainy afternoon filled with nothing but waiting and whiling away seconds. Paya was clearing up Zelda’s desk after all the writing while Kohgin stood behind her, watching like a hawk for any mistake. They were soon rewarded when her hand knocked over an inkwell, flooding the gathered papers in black.

“Oh!” Paya covered her face as Kohgin looked smug. “I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t worry, Paya,” Zelda said. “Accidents happen.”

“They sure do,” Kohgin mumbled. Paya glared at Kohgin, who wrinkled their nose in return. Their shoulder knocked against hers as they swept past her towards Zelda.

Paya whirled around. There was a dangerous CRACK as she grabbed Kohgin by the collar and slammed them against one of the pillars. Rain splattered against their spectacles, blurring the wide, terrified eyes as Impa’s granddaughter held the gleaming point of a sharp knife just a hair’s breadth from the bridge of Kohgin’s nose.

“The only reason you remain alive is by the goodness of the princess herself,” Paya snapped. “Yet you act as if we should be thankful for your existence! Why should I trust you?”

Kohgin squeaked. However reformed, they were still their parent’s child. Paya pressed harder, and broken chips of stone tumbled down from above.

“The Shiekah Tribe has served the Hyrulean royal family for eons. The Yiga Clan have committed treason a thousand times. I’ll obey the princess but if you make any move towards her that even remotely resembles an attack, you can be sure I won’t hesitate. I’ve been trained by the best warriors in my village, and we believe that the best way to defend is to counter-attack. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Kohgin gasped.

Paya released them and stepped back. Without looking at the desk, she stabbed a paperweight so hard that the wood split down the middle. Kohgin whimpered audibly as the two halves clattered off the table. Paya stalked down from the platform, a storm in her dark red eyes. Link was speechless. And Zelda calmly turned the page of her book, a small smile on her lips.

From then on, Kohgin carried themselves deferentially around Paya, generous in assistance and even voicing a compliment or two. She ignored everything they did until the fourth day of camp. Kohgin awkwardly sidled up to her with a perfectly ripe mighty banana. “For you,” they said.

Paya stared at the fruit suspiciously before accepting. “…thanks.”
Kohgin grinned and sat down. Paya looked pained as they began to chatter in her ear with several buoyant gesticulations. When Link pointed this out to Zelda, she put down her cup of tea and looked over with deep interest. “I do believe Kohgin’s developed a little crush.”

“That’s weird.”

“No, it’s cute! You know how much the Yiga love their bananas. That was a very meaningful gesture.”

“She could do better,” Link mumbled.

Zelda smirked. “Be consoled, you were still her first.”

Right as the meal finished, a commotion came from the road. People stood, exclaiming as another Guardian stalker came marching into view, its head removed. Two small figures clad in white with hair to match were perched in the seats. Link could see the red rimmed spectacles from here, and he also heard her voice, shrill and loud like a keese’s cry.

“How! How DARE! How dare you! How dare you two!” She thrust a finger at Link and he winced, even at 100 metres away. “Running away to get married without inviting me?! And Bolson was there instead?! BOLSON! This is absolutely unfair!”

Paya waved. “Welcome, Auntie Purah!”

“I renounce you as my apprentice,” Purah said to Zelda as Robbie steered the Guar into the ruins. “After all I’ve done for you, revealing my deepest secrets about the Slate and slaving away at four additional copies to show my undying loyalty as a Sheikah… it’s a slight I will never forget, Princess.”

Zelda smiled and held out her arms. “I’ve missed you too, Purah.”

Purah flounced down from the Guar and begrudgingly allowed Zelda to hug her. She now stood taller than before, almost on par with Zelda herself, and had traded the cutesy, childish frills for a slightly longer dress. It seemed that there wouldn’t need to be an aging rune, after all.

She turned upon the gathered Yiga researchers, all of whom were cowed into gaping silence from her overwhelming personality. “So this is the lot! They certainly do look like they’ve been living in caves. Well, the princess claims that your progress is still worthwhile. Show me. If I am impressed, then perhaps I might teach you the ways of the runes and the Sheikah Slate. But let me warn you, I have very high standards.”

It was a supremely ridiculous sight: a gangly preteen appearing out of nowhere on a dismembered Guardian who had promptly screamed at the hero and princess before demanding to learn the Yiga’s most harboured technologies. Of course, the researchers nearly fell over themselves attending to the Royal Ancient Tech Lab Director. Purah walked amongst them with her chin held high, nodding as the seals were shown to her and barking out terse questions that caused stammering and sweating from the interrogated. Link could tell that she was absolutely exulting in the spotlight.

Robbie was far more laid-back about the entire ordeal. He stayed near the Guar, cheerful and encouraging to any Yiga who approached him in curiosity. Notepads were again pulled out of robes as he patted a wrinkled hand upon the hull of the Guardian, even prying open a panel to show them how the circuits could easily be overridden.

But they could not indulge for too long. Hyrule Castle loomed above the small band of surveyors as
they marched in to face the truth. Link glanced over at Zelda as they entered through the main gate. Her expression was carefully neutral. She kept her voice calm, but her eyes were shiny and wet.

Link had had enough of examining every chamber from the trips he had taken with the footsoldier crew. He volunteered to stay behind and help in clearing out the lower level rooms first. It was simple, straightforward work, hauling rubble and rubbish into heaps piled onto the great stone paths outside. Crows came swooping down to peck at the discarded food from the Dining Hall, or even the yellowed piles of bone that were tugged outside with the rotted carpet. Generations of monsters had lived in this castle, but no more.

That single hall alone took up most of the day, and yet it was far from finished. The Yiga busied themselves with sweeping and wiping, scarves tied over their noses this time not to threaten and obscure, but to combat spores and dust. Link had wiped his face with his last clean cloth when the Guar came trundling up the path. Many Yiga paused and smiled at its silly little trot, the metal claws tapping on the cobbles.

“Princess asked for you,” Robbie said. “Let’s go and find out what she wants, hm!”

He brought Link up past the Guard Chamber, through the first gatehouse, and across the southern courtyard to the western ramparts. Link glimpsed Zelda waiting for him upon the stair as the Guar lumbered upward. When he was close enough to see her full figure, he saw that she was rubbing the back of her hand uneasily.

“I…” Zelda inhaled shakily when he reached her. “I haven’t been yet. It’s so foolish, but I can’t do it by myself.”

They both turned to look up at the tower rising over them. The stair crossed back and forth until it ended at a balcony where the curved wall had caved in on itself, revealing a shadowy recess. Zelda held his hand tightly as they slowly ascended into her old bedroom.

It was the same mess that Link had seen before. But the last time Zelda had been here, she had awoken in the bed that now lay buried beneath the pile of droppings and debris. The wall of shelves were mostly empty as their contents had crumbled into dust after decades of decay. Only one of her books had survived in readable form, and it was sitting upon the splintered desk at the corner of the room. Its pages were yellowed and stained with spots of mould. Zelda brushed a finger shakily over her old diary.

“Did you read it?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

The edges of her mouth trembled for a moment, like she was trying to convince herself to laugh about it. But there was no humour in finally seeing the literal destruction of one’s childhood chamber. Zelda floated around the chamber, cheeks wet, looking at the cobwebs in yawning portrait frames, the gnawed legs of an armchair, and the dirty panes of windows that still formed the holy Triforce of her family.

She wiped a sleeve across her eyes. “I’m being childish. They were just… just things. I don’t need them. I barely gave a thought about it before I got here. Why am I doing this?”

“You’re allowed to miss your things.” Link held her as she cried some more for the memories that had been attached to items now lost to cruel time and merciless nature. It would always hurt to realise that some things could never be retrieved, whether they were belongings or beloveds.
He bid her to wait as he climbed the wall where the shattered remnants of a spiral staircase remained. Zelda inched her way up on a rope he threw down, and they walked across the walkway to her old study. A skywatcher’s shadow flitted over their heads. Tucked away from everything else, the furniture had fared ever so slightly better, though there were still piles of unidentifiable junk in the corners. Many of the items on the desk were simply covered in dust, though Link wouldn’t have tried any of the bottled elixirs even if you paid him a million rupees. Zelda gently closed her open journal of research notes and picked up a lumpy rock sitting nearby. She turned it over, revealing the untouched, shimmering insides of a geode. It made her smile.

Yet another Silent Princess had managed to sprout in this ruin, feeding upon the mulchy remains of waterlogged textbooks. Link plucked it, tucking it into his princess’s hair as she selected a few small objects to take with her: a magnifying glass with a rusted handle, a miniature Statue of the Goddess made from clay, and a gold signet ring, still bright and smooth after all this time with the fine details of Hyrule’s royal wingcrest engraved upon it.

Over the next few days, the traffic between Mabe Village and the castle was nigh-constant. Teams took turns spending days at the castle cleaning up and setting aside objects and furniture that could be saved or throwing out those that were beyond repair. The Yiga researchers worked hard with the hopes that this could be their new home, though they never complained about staying in the camp. Purah claimed the smaller, lower platform as her classroom. She had even brought a small easel with her in order to display diagrams as she lectured at length on the history of the Sheikah, inscriptions of runes and their uses, the hard mechanics of Slate recreation, and alchemical theory. Her students paid rapt attention, those more daring weathering her glares if they tried to raise their hand in the middle of a speech. Robbie’s lessons, in comparison, seemed incredibly easygoing. All he had them do was to help him convert the nearby Stalker into yet another Guar so it could assist the castle clean-up process.

Before they had left the Gerudo Desert, Zelda had met with the Yiga to discuss the full extent of their research. Not all of them were fixated upon the ancient technology. Zelda had perked up at the mention of electrical experiments — the attempt to harness energy generated by lightning. Metal was a highly conductive material, and those who had the misfortune to be caught in a thunderstorm with steel upon their persons were always shocked at the results. Only Link laughed at this.

“He didn’t do anything except give the order,” grumbled a nearby footsoldier, their arm still in a sling from the attack on the Hideout. “We should stop giving him credit.”

It was good enough for Zelda, who remembered she had a promise to fulfill to Prince Sidon. And so, a small band of Yiga were sent to Zora’s Domain with instructions to insulate Vah Ruta properly. They were accompanied by a few volunteer Gerudo guards — including Barta, who did not hide her hopes that she might meet a handsome Zora knight in Lanayru. This had been the first show of confidence Zelda placed in her newly acquired subordinates.

And now, Sidon was returning the favour by issuing seasoned Zora architects to assist Zelda. They arrived about two weeks into the steadfast schedule of cleaning and studying. Their scales glinted as they emerged from the moat. Jiahto, head stonemason of the Zora Council, and Dento, the Domain’s master blacksmith, shook out their fins upon the docks. Their apprentices stood at attention holding toolkits, and they were escorted by a young soldier who saluted Link with his
spear. There was a brief moment of tension as the elders came before Zelda. But they slowly bowed before her, grimacing not with rudeness, but slight discomfort for their old limbs.

“Thank you for being here,” Zelda said to them. “I’m ashamed that you had to make such a journey in your golden years just for this. Your coming has been much anticipated and appreciated.”

Jiahto regarded her with rheumy eyes. “I follow the command of my prince without grudges. His request is my pleasure.”

“And we gladly represent the Domain’s goodwill towards our allies,” Dento added. The lines in his face creased with every word. “I am honoured to provide my knowledge, Princess.”

They were diligent and dedicated to the task at hand. After a full tour with as much time needed to inspect every room and corridor, testing the foundations and taking note of damages, identifying material and elements of design, they retreated into the library to determine the next step.

The tables in the Library were still in very good condition, carved from solid blocks of oak. The Yiga had wiped them clean of filth and grime. A cluster of them were gathered at the far end of the chamber, surrounded by ancient books which they handled with great care. Those that were in too delicate a condition to be rescued from the mildew and damp had to be copied page by page, word by word. Link couldn’t fathom how that was at all appealing, but apparently there had nearly been a fight over who would have this incredible honour. They were definitely Zelda’s people.

They talked and debated about the castle for hours. Many chambers would retain their original purposes and required simple renovations: this library, the Dining Hall, the Guard Chamber, Armoury… not including the assorted meeting rooms and personal quarters throughout the castle. The biggest changes were to the Sanctum itself, which was no surprise as the Calamity had claimed it for 100 years. The entire floor would need to be repaired, but Zelda wished to accommodate access to the massive laboratory hidden below. She suggested that there could be some sort of elevator between the two levels installed.

“Perhaps it could even be powered by electricity, or with ancient Sheikah power,” she said. Her eyes lit up and she turned to Link. “Much like the portals to the shrines! There’s one downstairs. We could examine it.”

He remembered the glowing weapons wielded by the Guardian scout: a sword, spear, and battle-axe all swinging at once. “Maybe not that one.”

Dento cleared his throat. “In any case, Princess, our conclusion is that these renovations will take several years to complete. I advise to work from the ground up. But do not worry. The foundations remain strong.”

Jiahto nodded, his thin head fins swaying. “We shall need a great deal of resources, but even more importantly: many more pairs of hands. Strong, sturdy ones that understand stonework well.”

Zelda sent word to the Gorons immediately. Not just the smiths who had helped her in Eldin, but also to Greyson and Pelison in Tarrey Town. Their friends came as fast as they could, beaming widely with their slab-like teeth and pick-axes at the ready… and somebody else.

“WHY?!” wailed Bolson over the enthusiastic greetings of his employees. “Why did you leave me behind, Princess? I offered, begged for you to use my expertise and skill. Were you disappointed in my work? Did Tarrey Town not impress? Is the house I restored for you and Link, with Karson’s bare hands, not a good enough example of the Bolson commitment to craft? Tell me! I can take the criticism!”
“Please don’t fuss,” Zelda said. “Bolson, of course I appreciate your work. But this is the renovation of an ancient castle. I felt that your style didn’t match the architecture and wouldn’t want to suppress your artistic expression. I understand that’s important to you.”

Bolson planted his fists on his hips and stared her down, bright pink trousers and all. “Well, I’m here now. And turning away the luminary, president, architect, and design lead of the best construction company in the entire kingdom would be an utter travesty. You do not want to precede your reign with such a mistake!”

Zelda sighed. “Let’s discuss this one on one, shall we?”

And that was how Bolson came bounding out of her tent in triumph. When Link was able to peel off the paper that had been thrust into his face, he saw that Zelda had appointed Bolson the official city planner of New Castle Town. Holy Goddess save them all.

“The Bolson family extends its arms to any who pine for a taste of achievement, the ecstasy of creation, the very feeling of godhood itself!” Bolson rubbed his hands together. “And who are willing to change their names. But that’s simple enough. Time to advertise! How will those souls dying for the chance to be a part of history itself know where to find me?”

“You should say that it’s a sonstruction company,” Link said.

Bolson pouted at him. “Don’t you dare ridicule our traditions. Your honourary status could very well be revoked, you know!”

Link shrugged his shoulders. Bolson scanned the skies. “Any Rito come by lately? They’ve started up this message delivering scheme once again. Mighty useful, I’ll admit.”

However which way, word spread fast. After all, an entire encampment upon Hyrule Field would attract attention soon enough. Once it was clear that Castle Town was to be rebuilt, people began to pour in. They came from all corners of Hyrule and from all walks of life. Bolson insisted that any newcomer be directed to him upon arrival. He assigned lots to new citizens based on size and need — Zora would have priority access to streams and pools, Rito were offered upstairs living complete with an open-air balcony ideal for taking off and landing, and Gorons had the option of digging their own underground abodes as long as they first submitted blueprints in full accordance to city construction guidelines. Many Gerudo were eager to pair up so they could split costs on new homes. And Hylians, there were so many Hylians. Adventurers who recognised that their days of wandering were over, elders who wanted convenience and comfort for the rest of their lives, parents who hoped for bright futures for their small children, and of course, the merchants with rupees sparkling in their eyes. Their shops thronged Central Square. Link was very glad when he passed through and spotted a familiar face. Beedle deserved his prime location right in front of the castle.

Zelda was deeply moved when she arrived and saw Gorons mending the fountain with the assistance of Zora who were showing a Gerudo how the jets would work once water filled the basin. Two Rito and a Hylian were busy arranging flowers in planters that would line the area once ready. Her vision, inspired by Tarrey Town, was coming to life at last.

But it was a very chaotic vision, full of complications and controversies just as expected. Link tried to convince Zelda to leave the rebuild in Paya, Kohgin, Purah, and Bolson’s capable hands and take a break from the stress of running so many operations at once. She was hesitant to do so even when he reminded her that the entire point of having advisers was to delegate. She argued with him and made so many excuses that finally, he simply grabbed her hand and pressed her finger to the Sheikah Slate himself.
When he joined her at Myahm Agana shrine, Link already saw the difference. Zelda breathed in the calm of the country in relief. She relaxed at the long-missed sounds of restless crickets chirping within green fields of rice, smells of apple blossoms in the crisp air, and the sight of the red roofs and white walls of their beloved Hateno Village. They walked, hand in hand, across the bridge spanning the rippling surface of Firly Pond towards the rustic one-room house that still stood behind a sign bearing their names.

“Tomorrow, I’ll get Chase and Cloud from Dueling Peaks and we can ride to the beach,” Link said while opening the door.

“I would love that, thank you.”

Tasks and to-do lists disappeared in the simple goodness of a homecoming meal. Zelda put away her royal blue field clothes and threw on a simple cotton shift before joining him in bed.

“We can’t return to the way it was before,” she confessed to him. “We can’t stay here all the time. I’m sorry.”

“I know. Don’t be.”

“We’ll come back as much as we can,” she promised, her hands cupping his face. Link pressed his forehead against hers.

“I’ll be happy wherever I am, as long as it’s with you.”

“Me too,” Zelda whispered. She kissed him and snuggled against his collarbone.

The lights went out, revealing stars shining around a moon soft and yellow like a ripe round cheese. Link wrapped his arms around his wife. Nothing could return to the way it was before. He was sorry, but not as much as he thought he would be… because it was true. He was happy wherever she was.

Link silently bid farewell to the past, and smiled when he thought about his future. It would be so good.

Chapter End Notes

1. It’s extremely unlikely that Paya would ever reciprocate Kohgin’s feelings, but they can still try.
2. I have my own mini Statue of the Goddess that sits on my windowsill at home and I loooove it. If any of your friends ask you what you want for your birthday, direct them to FaithAprilArt on Etsy! :3
3. Holy cast of characters, Batman. But I had so much fun writing them all! Seeing how all the threads can finally be woven together was a delightful challenge that begot so many ideas, hence the speed at which I was able to get them into words.

The final chapter will be uploaded very, very soon — this weekend. Thank you so much for continuing to read on.
A crisp breeze rustled through the green branches of the gnarled trees around Zelda. It picked up the skirt of her dress and flicked it around, blowing right through the fine cambric to the petticoats beneath. She smoothed it down with gloved hands so the mischievous wind was forced to play with her trailing sleeves instead. Like long blue banners, they flapped back and forth, causing the gold detail to wink in and out of the shade.

She could hear the sounds of New Castle Town behind her. The pace of the city was steady, strong, and never ceasing even under the mellow sun. It was coming onto three months since they had moved back to Central Hyrule, and the construction rate was astounding. If Zelda turned around, she would see the building-block houses already rising above the old city wall. Link had stationed the footsoldiers at as many remaining towers as there still were, telling them to use their transport seals to navigate any crumbled or caved in areas. There was still so much to do. She felt slightly guilty for leaving it behind for even just one day. But pause she would, for it was her coronation day.

Many people had insisted upon it: her subordinates in the slowly-repairing castle, allied peers corresponding from other provinces, even her simple neighbours back home in Hateno thought it was imperative that she rise from princess to queen. It was only right, considering the state of the kingdom. They needed a leader, and she was it.

But in Zelda’s mind, that title was synonymous with her mother, even at well over 100 years. She doubted that she could live up to it. There was comfort in being a mere princess. Queen inspired fair visions of loftiness, someone ethereal and unreachable by very nature. Zelda held precious and beautiful memories of her mother, but she also recalled the way people had treated the Queen with reverence, almost like she was a goddess. She had found herself falling for the same trap many times after her passing, and now it worried her.

Mere weeks before the ceremony, Link had stolen her away to Hyrule Ridge for a little day trip. He did this every so often — springing sudden escapes from their new tumultuous lives upon her without much warning. He had to, because there was no way Zelda would agree to vacationing while issues remained unaddressed. After the initial complaining, she was very grateful.

Most people had chosen to settle in the level and fertile fields of Central Hyrule over the rocky, rainy ridge, so they were alone. The hike up Satori Mountain was steep but not difficult. Goats scampered out of the way, scrambling up boulders with little effort thanks to their nimble hooves. Mushrooms peeped out of the soil, doffing their bright caps of red, green, and orange. The air was rich with the scent of ripe apples and wildflowers. They were rewarded at the top with the shade of a flowering tree, miraculous and hale in the brisk winter air. The ground and water both were covered in fallen petals. They gathered thick against Link’s trousers while he sat against the trunk of the tree, snacking on his fourth apple. Zelda lay down and rested her cheek on his knee, looking up at him.

“All that’s going to happen is people are going to call you by a different word,” he said between bites. “Your actions and position won’t. You will still be you.”

“That’s what worries me,” she said. “I will be just the same, but nobody will see it that way.”
Link brushed back her hair. “Have more faith in your friends and subjects. They’ve seen enough to know you’re no untouchable deity in a crown. You’re an overworked girl with too many ideas and who cares too much to let anything go.”

She sat up, but he caught her hand before she could protest. “Don’t deny it. You’ve always been like this.” Link pulled her back to him. “Which is why they — and I — love you, so much.”

Zelda leaned back against his shoulder and breathed in the sweet air of the mountain. “Fine. If I must be the Queen, I get to decide what that means. I am the Queen, and the Queen is me.”

Link stopped smiling, his eyelids flickering ever so subtly. After a few seconds of silence, he slowly nodded.

So now, she waited for her guests. The field before her rippled back and forth like a wide grassy sea. Only a few tents remained at Mabe Village Ruins. Many of her Yiga followers were eager to move to quarters in town to be closer to the developments of the new lab, or ease in their guard duties. Purah and Robbie were there with them now, overseeing the renovation and research. Only Kohgin had joined her today, hovering behind Zelda’s left shoulder and frequently glancing over at Paya, who was attending to her grandmother.

Zelda turned and smiled at Impa, who rested nearby upon several cushions. She needed to reserve as much energy as possible for the ceremony. Cado and Dorian stood quietly in the shadows. They had borne her on a sedan chair through the wetlands from Kakariko Village, a painstaking journey for their centenarian leader. Never before had Zelda seen her longest, dearest friend look so… much her age. Impa’s head was bowed beneath the wide brim of her hat, hidden from the midday sun. She wore her robes loose upon a small, frail frame.

She opened her eyes as Zelda knelt next to her. “Could I fetch you something? A drink?”

“I need nothing, Princess.” Skin like crinkly wax paper rested against hers as Impa reached out and touched Zelda’s cheek. “I feel fine. Peaceful, even… at long last.”

Such a statement made her heart tremble, but Zelda simply nodded. Impa withdrew her hand, sighing as she tucked it back into her sleeve. Paya continued to adjust her robes as the Sheikah guards stood stioic watch. Dorian deliberately did not look at Kohgin. Kohga’s heir had apologised so profusely to the Sheikah, with many kowtows and so close to tears that Impa had actually bothered to lift her hand and assure them that having pledged their lives to the princess, the Yiga Clan’s transgressions would be pardoned.

“In due time,” she had clarified, glancing over at Dorian. The old man gripped the hilt of his longsword and stared into the distance. Yes, it would take time.

The bright note of a whistle pierced the quiet. Zelda spied figures moving across the grasslands. It was Link and the first of their guests coming in from the east.

Prince Sidon’s scales sparkled from a distance, most certainly still wet from his swim down the Hylia River. He dropped the whistle back onto the frilly cravat at his sternum, waving his arms enthusiastically at them. “Princess! Greetings and heartfelt salutations! What a delight to see you once more! I cannot thank you enough for what you’ve done for Zora’s Domain. Your scientists have done a stellar job on Ruta. She glides through the water with nary a spark, and even the youngest of hatchlings have conquered their fears of the Divine Beast! I do wish you could see it for yourself.”

He had reached them by now. Sidon took an elegant knee to kiss her fingers while his loyal knights
lined up dutifully behind him, none of them even a bit as tall as their prince.

“You’ll have to thank my subordinate,” Zelda said, indicating Kohgin who looked petrified. “They lead the very clan that studied and created such technology. We hope to continue the research for all of Hyrule to benefit.”

“Indeed? How interesting.” Sidon bared his teeth in approval. Kohgin blanched at how they gleamed like freshly sharpened knives and let out a fearful moan when their hand was swept up into a vigorous shake. “Honoured to meet you at last. On behalf of all the Zora, I sincerely express my deepest respect for your work. May the Goddess continue to bless your fine minds!”

Zelda watched as Sidon continued to shower compliments and gratitude onto poor Kohgin, who was clearly overwhelmed, embarrassed, and incredibly confused by such positive regard. It occurred to her that the Zora would not be the only race they would be meeting for the first time today.

Their second guest made an appearance shortly afterward. Sidon and his men were resting their fins in the waters nearby while chatting cheerfully with the Sheikah. Then, the pleasant calm was suddenly shattered by a great commotion in the trees above. Sparrows and squirrels burst from the leaves, chirping and chattering in a frenzy. Zelda caught a flash of orange light through the thick trunks. Paya’s silver hair whipped around to see what it was, and the Zora Knights snatched up their spears in suspicion.

Link walked towards it and peered behind a trunk. Zelda saw his shoulders relax. “Hey, you made it. Come on out.”

“Oh!” The voice was bashful and boyish. Branches trembled once more and the round bulk of a Goron came into view. Yunobo blushed and bowed to the gathered group, apologising for causing trouble. The tuft of white hair on his head drooped as he leaned forward, the chain round his neck clinking as he moved.

“It’s alright,” Zelda said, patting his beefy arm. The metal braces around his biceps and wrists were warm to the touch, as if they enclosed some of the heat of Death Mountain itself in them. “We’re so happy that you’re here. Is it just you?”

“I-I’m afraid so, goro. Boss thought about comin’, but his back really messed him up this morning.” Yunobo gulped, lacing his fingers together. “But he loves having Rudania around! We use it all the time, goro!”

Zelda noticed he was still shaking. “What’s wrong? Don’t worry, we’re very safe here.”

Yunobo shook his head. “Oh, no! I’m not scared, goro. It’s, uh, nothing.”

He shivered again as another healthy breeze brushed past them. Zelda suddenly understood. A few words to Paya, and soon they had wrapped up their Goron representative in a warm woolen blanket as he babbled sheepishly about never having been so far from Eldin’s burning temperatures before.

Yunobo was snug and growing comfortable with the cooler climes of Hyrule, but then the bright sunlight vanished for a looming shadow. There were gasps, admiring and awed, as the form of Divine Beast Vah Medoh passed above their heads. Kohgin hastily wiped their spectacles and blinked up at it. Zelda could see the enormous propellers beneath every wingtip churning the air furiously and glowing a brilliant blue. Colourful figures could be seen through the glass windows of the great bird’s belly, but the panes were too smudged for her to see exactly who they were.
Vah Medoh glided smoothly towards the pasture below it. Zelda and Link hurried to meet the Rito who now appeared upon the Divine Beast’s back. They too spread their wings and sailed to the ground below, ruffling their tailfeathers upon landing and looking around the field with deep interest. The parents stooped down to allow their children to slide off their shoulders.

Zelda went directly to the last Rito to land. Teba didn’t even bat an eye as he hooked his Sheikah Slate back upon a leather belt. He was dressed for combat, with the bright feathers of his epaulettes slightly crumpled and the steel plate over his breast covered in scratches. “What?” He folded his wings defensively. “You made me responsible for the Divine Beast. Then you asked me to come all the way here. Naturally, the only option was to bring it along. And anyway, we were able to make sure that everyone arrived together safely.”

Teba gestured towards the other Rito who were already moving towards the gathering of guests. Kass glanced back at Zelda with a smile, the squeezebox strapped to his back and all five daughters dancing around his legs. Teba’s own son, Tulin, proudly carried a small swallow bow, standing tall as his short stature allowed beside his mother as the Rito Elder, Kaneli, hobbled forward on a cane to shake Impa and Sidon’s hands.

“Princess Zelda!” The piping trill of Kheel cut through her thoughts. Zelda turned to see the fledgling girls waving at her as they tugged at Link’s arms and tunic. “Did you do it? Did you marry him?”

“Yes,” she said, and had to laugh when they burst into delighted song. Cree clutched Zelda’s leg and sobbed into it out of sheer joy. Amali scooped her up before her dress would be stained with her tears.

“When will you have babies?” Notts asked anxiously. Her mother herded her away, too.

They had not expected so many children to be present — just the one. And she came to them in a blaze of glory, heralded by a great cloud of dust and waving manes of horses with solid coats of striking colours from glossy black and rich chestnut or creamy dun. They arched their necks and pricked their ears as they pulled along the magnificent painted chariots that bore Riju and her Gerudo guard. Captain Buliara herself drove the palomino pair hitched to the Chief’s carriage, a thing of beauty with slender pillars twisting into a pointed roof painted with the rich colours favoured by the Gerudo: scarlet, emerald, alabaster, and gold. The spinning wheels had spokes like flames of the sun that flowed from a bejewelled core. The entire platoon stormed across the field like searing hot streaks of lightning, perfectly embodying their home’s element.

“Princess!” Riju bounded out of her chariot, her braided red hair swinging like a a pendulum. “You look so grand. I’ve never seen such a… long dress.”

Zelda lifted her arms to reveal the velvet lining on the inside of her sleeves. “Traditional Hylian formal wear really is rather fond of layers. I do appreciate it on a warm winter’s day, however.”

“I think it’s more like early spring,” Riju remarked. She stretched and rubbed her sides. “Finally seeing more of Hyrule was a delight but I am also glad the ride is over. Your roads are very bumpy. My backside must be bruised!”

Zelda and Link laughed, but Buliara looked up sharply. “Lady Riju! Do not be rude to Hyrule’s princess. After all, she is about to become your Queen.”

Riju struggled to compose her face. Zelda smiled. “No, it’s not rude. The roads really do need attention. It’s been a very long time since so many visitors have trod upon them. And I understand completely your feelings about sitting in carriages — I always prefer horseback.”
“But I have never ridden a horse!”

“You can learn,” Link said. “We’ll give it a go later.”

Riju clapped her hands happily, the bangles along her wrists ringing like chimes. Before she could continue the conversation, Paya appeared at Zelda’s side. She bowed politely and apologetically to Riju. “Thank you for coming. Did you bring the…?”

“Yes.” Buliara joined them, a thin box in her strong hands. It was the size of a small chest, but flat topped instead and seemed to be made of laquered wood. No symbols or script could be seen upon it.

“Thank you,” Paya repeated, taking it carefully. She turned to where everybody else was watching them. “We will begin shortly. Please take your positions.”

They moved as one into the trees, walking over the broken pathways to the Sacred Ground Ruins. The ravages of the Calamity had done its best to destroy this vulnerable sanctuary, but nothing diminished the noble and elegant design of the ancient holy spring. Zelda’s friends arranged themselves around the cracked columns that cast jagged shadows over the glittering waters beneath them.

Her new Champions stood before each column closest to their provinces: the Rito in the northwest, Goron to the northeast, Zora at the southeast, and Gerudo by the southwest. Kaneli leaned forward on his cane beside Teba, smiling at the way soft light filtered through the leaves. Buliara still held onto her great golden claymore from where she guarded Riju. Yunobo looked sweetly silly, still huddled in his blanket as he tried not to stumble into the spring itself. Sidon signalled to his Knights to retreat to the further bank like all the other additional guests. They could not all fit upon the platform. Zelda heard the Rito instructing their children to be on their best behaviour, watching and listening quietly as they sat down around the tree roots. The Gerudo soldiers’ armour clinked while they took formation.

Link came up between Yunobo and Sidon, bringing two more people into the inner circle. Zelda caught the beaming smiles of Reede and Rozel as they were offered a place amongst the Champions and other town leaders. She thought back to the day she had finally approached them with her news.

“I want to apologise,” she had said to them in that cosy farmhouse kitchen back in Hateno Village. The weather outside was a slow drizzle. Despite this drowsy atmosphere, people outside were going about their business as usual, strolling to and from homes to shops, their minds on the tasks of the day like mending fences or sharpening tools as they waited for warmer weather to return to the fields.

Rozel glanced quizzically over at Reede, who scratched his beard. “Whatever for, Zelda?” he asked.

“Hateno and Lurelin were the only Hyrulean towns that survived the fall of the kingdom. You both have worked so hard to ensure Hylian tradition lived on without any reinforcement or help. Now I’ve come back to take authority once again, though I never intended… I mean, I don’t want to undermine your leadership.” Zelda took a breath again, clasping her hands together so her skin wouldn’t get rubbed raw. “You see, I’m going to rebuild Hyrule.”

There was a stunned silence for a few seconds. Zelda’s stomach sank as another log in the hearth splintered under the heat. Then, Reede stood, his arms wide.
“That’s wonderful, Zelda!” He walked over and hugged her in a proud, fatherly fashion. “I am honoured to serve under you.”

Rozel laughed, slapping his knee. “You made it sound like something terrible was going to happen!”

“You’re the mayors of your villages,” she tried to explain. “I was concerned that I would be stepping on your toes…”

“Mayor?” Rozel chortled, his eyes reduced to squints in his mirth. “I’m just an old man who likes looking at the sea. There aren’t any duties for me. Why, that’s the whole reason why I could just up and leave Lurelin for three whole days to see my Ralera. You can take over any time, Princess!”

So here they were, to represent Hylians at her coronation ceremony. She still considered them just as important as Sidon or Riju. They stood with quiet pride and fealty as Cado and Dorian set down Impa’s sedan chair in the centre of the platform. Paya helped her alight from her seat, and Kohgin quickly arranged the cushions again so that Lady Impa, leader of the Shiekah, could perform her final public action in service to the throne with dignity and comfort.

Zelda walked up the shallow stair. She lined her toes up with the Triforce carved into the stone beneath her. Even after all this time, the symbols of Din, Nayru and Farore were distinct within each triangle, and the royal crest spread its wings proudly. Zelda lifted her head when Impa began to speak.

“All who are gathered here know well the events that led us here. I need not repeat the sad story of our suffering under the Great Calamity’s hold. I henceforth banish it to the pages of history, for today we refuse to give any more power to that ancient evil.

“Instead, we elevate our princess. She who has been steadfast and strong in secret and silence, just as the lands around us have regrown and healed under the impression of ruin. She is Hyrule itself, the life force of the kingdom, that flows through the blessed blood in her veins. Only a descendant of the Goddess knows when to stand and when to sacrifice for the sake of her people. Could we do anything more to repay what she has done for us? Our performance is a paltry pantomime compared to her century of service.

“This crown is not a reward. It will not bring ease and luxury to her life. She will be forever beholden to her throne, thrust upon a pedestal of expectations. There will be no end to the needs of the many who will watch her closely until the end of her days, holding her accountable for every small action.

“So it is of utmost importance that I tell you this: she chose us. She chose us over the allure of anonymity. Nothing compelled her to but her own compassion. She has grasped her destiny like a rope to pull us out from our misery, not a chain to bind her to lesser will. We stand her by her grace and selflessness, knowing well that it is an honour to see the return of the royal family of Hyrule. May it live forevermore.”

There was no applause, but the very air seemed charged with every word of Impa’s speech. Zelda bit her lip to keep from crying. Impa remained seated, but her back was straight and voice clear and balanced. Her eyes shone with a steely grit, revealing the wisdom and wit of King Rhoam’s right hand general.

She held out her veiny hands. Paya knelt down and pressed the clasps of the lacquered box. It opened to reveal a satin interior, upon which a golden crown lay shining. Zelda’s breath was taken away at the familiar wings curving upward on either side of the circlet. A sparkling diamond had
been set in the centre, surrounded by smaller trillians of ruby, emerald, and sapphire.

Impa held aloft the crown, her thin arms steady. “Come, my princess.” Zelda knelt. “Are you willing to take this crown?”

“I am willing.”

“Will you promise and swear to govern the peoples of the kingdom of Hyrule, whether present now or in distant fields, according to their respective laws and customs?”

“I swear.”

“Will you, to the utmost of your being, maintain the laws of this kingdom and those of the Goddess Hylia, your ancestor, who came to our realm in a mortal form to ensure the endurance of her land and people?”

“I will, with all my heart.”

She felt a weight pressed down upon her head, not unpleasantly so, but still a heavy reminder of her promises. “Arise, Queen Zelda,” Impa said. For the first time, a quaver affected her speech. “Knowing the future is securely within the hands of the Goddess’s kin, those of us who remember the days of the old kingdom can now pass on without fear.”

Zelda picked up her skirt so she wouldn’t trip as she turned around, now as a Queen. Somebody standing amongst the trees began to clap, and soon the Sacred Grounds were reverberating with applause. She knew she was shaking, not from fear or shame, but the overwhelming meaning of even such a short ceremony. Butterflies floated over the few unbroken columns, and for a moment Zelda thought she glimpsed a fluttering leaf twirling round upon one of them as if performing a delighted little dance.

She held up a hand. “Wait. We’re not finished.” She looked directly in front of her, where he stood by himself upon the southern pathway. Paya drew close again with the box.

Link slowly walked forward. The royal guard uniform, cleaned and pressed to perfection for this day, already made him look regal. He knelt, removing the white cap as she picked up the second crown. It was smaller, simpler, and delicate, but beautiful all the same. “Are you willing to take this crown?”

He said nothing for a few seconds. Then: “Fine.”

“Link!” Sidon admonished. Riju laughed.

“…I am willing.”

“Will you, to the utmost of your being, promise to help me in the government of my kingdom, protecting the good and innocent, maintaining peace for all peoples in and of Hyrule?” Zelda couldn’t keep her face straight. “Will you stay with me, even when I’m being frustrating and difficult and very bothersome?”

Everyone was smiling now. Link looked up at her, and her heart stopped at the sight of his passionate blue eyes.

“Yes.”

He closed them when her fingers brushed his head, carefully arranging the circlet in what she
hoped was a comfortable way. “Arise, Prince Link.” Zelda leaned down and took his hand, pulling him to meet her and embracing him lovingly. “And thank you.”

“Hero was much less embarrassing,” he said into her ear.

“Only our friends are here,” she replied, pinching his shoulder. “And after today, you’ll never need to wear this crown again. I promise.”

He offered her his arm. As they stepped down from the sacred spring’s platform together, the rest of their friends surged around them, congratulatory and joyful. It was almost like a second wedding. Paya, failing to hide the return of her tears, shoved the now empty box into Kohgin’s hands so she could stay close to her Queen. Riju was helping Yunobo fold up the blanket, assuring him that inside the city and castle was warmer, probably. The fledglings twittered how beautiful her crown was, and even Teba gave Link a thumbs up. Sidon stood at the back, generously allowing others to get into procession before him, flashing those ivory incisors everywhere.

Zora Knights and Gerudo soldiers flanked the cobbled path, saluting Zelda and Link with their spears and scimitars so they walked beneath a canopy of sparkling metal right into Castle Town.

The world exploded with sound. Her people greeted her with roars of praise and well wishes. They crowded the street, stood in windows, climbed upon fences and vendor’s carts just to be sure to see her pass on by. Zelda glanced over at Link, whose eyes had widened with alarm at all the attention. She moved her hand to his, and despite the suggestive catcalls he looked at her with soft eyes.

Her non-Hylian subjects bellowed with approval when they saw their own kind following behind her. Sidon smiled, nodded, and waved to the appropriately swooning crowds, accustomed to such greetings. Yunobo flushed a deep red, prompting Riju to tug at his hand, her lilting little voice encouraging him to keep walking. Teba ignored every hoot and holler, keeping firm his grasp on Tulin’s legs as the little fledgling boy craned his neck round, wide-eyed at the sea of smiling faces.

Infinite falling petals fluttered down to caress her cheek. Zelda looked up into the skies and saw them floating in from the north, where she knew a deep forest was in full bloom, from the greatest tree to the smallest flower. She plucked one from the air and kissed it, hoping that the spirit of the Lost Woods knew that her heart overflowed with gladness.

They reached the castle gates. All rust had been scoured away by hardworking hands leaving behind a pure silver sheen. A Yiga, her white hair blinding under the sunlight, peeped over the ramparts.

“It’s the Queen! Open up!”

The doors swung open using a mysterious magnetic force, and Hyrule Castle stood before all. Her birthright and birthplace, the royal seat where her ancestors had ruled from since time out of mind. Zelda’s heart flickered at the dark memories when her only companion here had been hate and anger, but it melted away at the squeeze of Link’s fingers. The castle was still in a state of severe disrepair, with gaping holes in the roofs of towers and chipped crenels upon the ramparts, but upon this particular day none of that mattered. The castle continued to stand, and it did so proudly despite the century-old battle scars, and Zelda imagined that the chanting crowd behind her was also for this great old monument.

Most of it was unsuitable for use, but her hardworking crew had managed to finish the lower southeast portions of the castle — namely, the Dining Hall. Thank the Goddesses, for any guest would be expecting a feast at minimum after travelling so far to see her. And as Zelda stepped
across the threshold, she was moved at the finery around her. The floors, formerly covered in rags soiled from decades of monster matter, had been scrubbed clean before new carpets of a resplendent royal maroon were laid down. The chandeliers that had hung crooked from the ribbed ceiling were now fixed and lit with dozens of candles. They illuminated the walls where banners unfurled with the insignias and emblems of every Hyrulean race: the Sheikah’s tearful eye, a spiky Goron ruby, the Zora triple-crescent, Gerudo’s cunning mask, the Rito’s bird in sweeping flight, and finally the Hylian wingcrest with the Triforce itself appliqued in gold leaf.

Purah, Robbie, and Bolson were waiting for them. Zelda’s appointed city planner seized her arm from Link as soon as she reached him, ignoring the princely crown for the stately one on Zelda’s brow. “My dearest Zelda, our lovely Queen! As the most senior official with actual experience in interior decoration, how do you find your new dining quarters?”

“It’s perfect, Bolson.”

He made a big show of drawing out a tall chair carved with a crown at the top, gilded legs and plush upholstery completing the royal look. “I believe this calls for an promotion for your obedient servant. Or at the very least, an additional name to his title—”

“No business tonight.” She rapped the oak table firmly. “By order of the Queen.”

Even he had to smile at that. “So be it, your Grace.”

The afternoon merged into evening into night, and Zelda could hardly tell from the constant activity and emotional highs. There were speeches, prepared and practised or impromptu and rambling. There was dish after dish of gourmet food, so much that even Link started to refuse them. There was music, sweet and harmonious as it spilled from the beaks of children, and dancing. She was twirled from partner to partner, losing herself in the sweeping rhythms of Kass’s accompaniment and feeling overwhelmed by the sheer love in the room. Her dearest friends and closest allies, all there for her.

Zelda’s cheeks ached from smiles and laughter, her throat hurt from talking and thanking, her stomach was bloated with the delicious fare, and the soles of her feet were throbbing from being upright for so long. She leaned against a table to steady herself, and Link noticed. “What is it?”

“I’m ready to lie down and not move for several days.”

He studied her for a moment. “Let’s leave.”

“And go where?”

“Anywhere else.” Link looked about to see if anyone was watching them, then pulled her into the corridor. Her renovators had been honest when they said that the Dining Hall was the only area ready for the public eye. The corridor was still mostly a mess. At least anything broken and ruined had been discarded, but it left everything stripped to the stone. There were marks on the walls where portraits had hung, and miniature wagons of rubble were parked in a line beneath them, waiting to be taken to a quarry to deposit.

They sneaked past the other doors, muffled music leaking through the cracks. Once they were far enough away, there was a sudden shift in the air. Link grinned and took off at a quick trot, still holding tight her hand.

Zelda gathered up her skirt, heart pounding as she went back to the last time she and Link had taken
off at a run down this hallway… to escape a feast, as well. But the situation couldn’t have been more different. Then, the Sheikah had been on the verge of leaving the castle, but now they celebrated the reinclusion of the prodigal Yiga Clan. Banquet conversation had been rife with her failures, not praise for her wisdom and leadership. And Link had been forced to stand silent behind her, not next to her like the equal partner he deserved to be.

This is very different, Zelda thought again as they tumbled down the corridor. If only Link actually knew.

As if on cue, Link spun her into the Observation Room. The wingcrest statue was only half there, the damaged side tenderly bandaged with paper. Link gripped her hand harder as they flew up the stairs two, three steps at a time, and Zelda was gasping when they finally burst out onto the balcony.

Link laughed at her while they collapsed onto the bench against the wall. His hair had fallen into his eyes but his fingers were still curled tight against hers. He wrenched the golden circlet off with his other hand. “How did you stand wearing this all the time as a princess? I feel like a cork finally freed from a bottle.”

“I didn't. It was awful.” Zelda reached up and took off her crown as well. Setting them on the bench, they moved towards the balcony's low wall. Link ruffled her messy hair and she returned the favour, running her fingers through his long tawny locks that had escaped the tie holding them back. She moved them to his shoulders when he pressed her flush against his chest, feeling his heartbeat drum soothingly against her ear as she gazed down at the city.

Castle Town was ablaze with lights as its citizens celebrated into the night with her. Zelda saw the glitter of the fountain in Central Square, and shadows of people dancing around it. All she could hear was a general buzz of excitement, though a few snatches of phrase could be heard now and then. Toasts to her health, calls for more drink, and to her surprise, a familiar melody rising over the raucous revels.

“That’s one of Hyrule’s oldest hymns,” she said. “Reputed to have existed from even before the era of the sky. I believe it was the first song I ever learned as a child.” Zelda took a deep breath and joined in. “Oh youth, guided by the servant of the Goddess…”

“Unite earth and sky, and bring light to the land.”

She lifted her head in amazement. Link shrugged at her. “Anyone who grew up in Castle Town had to hear that every holy day.”

Zelda had never gone down into the streets herself but had watched, from the towers of the castle, the procession snaking through the streets. The sage in their orange robes tied with a scarlet sash trailed by shuffling docents, playing the harp while their rumbling contralto echoed past the blue-roofed houses to the clouds above. Yes, they would have walked right by Castle Town Watchtower…

“You remember?”

“Most things, now.”

Zelda’s heart began to beat fast. “Like what things?”

Link’s eyelashes had captured some of the light from the lanterns, glowing almost gold under the velvet night. “Like getting wet in the sword chamber just for you to yell at me. Reading homework
at your command. Carrying your crutches because you never wanted to use them after you got hurt in Gerudo. Waking you up when I would run—” He pointed to the west, trailing a path with his finger over the walls. “—for training. Which I didn’t even know about until months later.”

Zelda felt lightheaded. Even she had not thought of these memories in a long time. Link smiled at her. “Being slapped around in Hateno Village on your every whim… so I made you climb a mountain to find me.”

“Purah was the one giving most of the orders!”

“Not that time.”

“True.” They smiled together at the memory.

His melted away. “Scaring a guy into leaving just because he took you out of my sight.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.” He sighed. “Not proud of that one.” Silence from both of them for a few seconds. "Holding you as you shivered, completely soaked, in Akkala."

She was unable to move. Then Link said, in a voice so soft Zelda stopped breathing to hear it: “Watching you, listening to you, falling in love with you more every single time. I remember it. I swear, upon my sword.”

She knew she was blushing. “I believe you.”

“I’ve always been in love with you. And when I die, I’ll find you in the next life and fall in love with you again. I won’t even have to try. We’ve done it before, haven’t we?”

She couldn’t speak, just nod. Link smiled, and suddenly it was like it was 100 years ago, when she was nothing more than an anxious, flighty girl who had just fought with her father and run out on his courtiers with her handsome knight attendant, desperate to know all about him and his heart and his thoughts…

Zelda closed her eyes.

And this time, Link did kiss her. He kissed her like that earnest, charming boy who was so kind and loyal and passionate and ever her ardent protector, who would never leave her side no matter how much she argued or asked. But then… had he ever been anything else?

Around them, Hyrule was alive with its celebrating inhabitants — not just the people feasting the night away, but the creatures who darted through the wild forests, dove within the crystal waters, or raced across the endless plain on swift hooves like the wind. The insects who vibrated beneath the soil where seeds forced life up to the surface, sprouting leaves would unfurl and soak up the sun. Even the empty deserts and freezing mountains were alive, giving depth and breadth to this world with their extremities, where one found impossible beings with lolling tongues, scaly tails, thick manes or undulating bodies that sailed through the skies, generating pure elemental energy before they returned to the secret realms from whence they came. They were alive, and Hyrule was bright and beautiful. The future was bright and beautiful.

But that was the future. Right now, all Zelda could think of was the beautiful boy who kissed her with such tenderness and love, and the fact that he remembered her.

It had been one complete year since she had emerged from this very castle and stood in that green
field to finally be with him again. They would parted no longer. Destiny was much kinder than she had always thought. For the first time in not just over a century but her whole life, Zelda thanked it for bringing her here.

Now. Then. The future.

Zelda. Link.

Together, always.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, I’m surprised that we only needed this many chapters — though to be fair, some chapters were ridiculous lengths.

Don’t know if anyone pays attention to these (I do, because I’m a details-oriented obsessed person) but I released the first chapter of HYD exactly a year ago today. And it’s been a really wonderful year of Breath of the Wild. I wrote stuff I am still impressed with, made good friends, and had endless fun. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for being part of that!!

So it is with simultaneous delight, sadness, and gratitude that I announce this series to be finished. I won’t be posting anything new for at least several weeks/months because of pressing offline demands, but there are a few one-shot concepts in my back pocket. I also entertained an extension of Paya’s Diary for a lighthearted spin-off set in this series, but it’s no more than an outline right now (and it would mess up the tidy exactly-one-year dates recorded here!! Maybe on February 24th 2020? ;P )

In the meantime, you can catch me on Tumblr (though it's 90% reblogs) or Twitter (though it's much more about my original writing) if you'd like to stay in touch. I'm very, very happy to chat in DMs!

Goodbye for now, and may the Goddess smile upon you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!