Lotus Jewel
by HermioneSparta

Summary

They never saw it coming, even after they were too far gone to stop it. And both knew....they wouldn't change a thing.
The First Signs

Title: Lotus Jewel

Author: HermioneSparta

Rating: M

Disclaimer: The characters and canon situations in the following story belong to Shigeru Miyamoto, Takashi Tezuka and Nintendo. I am not making any money from the publishing or writing of this story.

Summary: They never saw it coming, even after they were too far gone to stop it. And both knew...they wouldn't change a thing.

Warnings: Female and male same-sex relationship, sexual references, adult language, drug abuse, child sexual abuse, suicide attempt, torture and mention of historical incest.

Chapter One

The First Signs

It had been years since they'd left the castle.

For her safety, for the safety of her country, Impa had spirited Zelda from the only home she had known. Guided only by the bright stars and a half-formed plan, neither knew where their journey would take them. Neither knew what would become of their land, of their hearts.

But...even then, as the white mare raced across the dark land, they knew change had come. Not what change, nor why, only that it had arrived.

As they hid within the deepest caves within dawn, Guardian and Charge could only acknowledge the deeper truth. While many changes had occurred within the last few hours...the most drastic were to come once they returned.

Some said they were destined for each other; they said it was Fate.

Zelda said it was as worthless as fake Rupees.

Link said it would never happen.

Impa said nothing.

Through the years the prophecy of Link and Zelda's intimate relationship would be whispered when neither party was present; it would become the gossip of Hyrule. And over time, Link and Zelda would no longer acknowledge such words...until the day when silence became a weapon against them, rather than their defense.

She had been under Impa's care since she was a child, since birth. Her father doting yet distant and her mother dead, there was no others she called family. She had servants whom she considered friends and teacher who were as impersonal as the books they used to teach her...but none of them
were family.

Many considered it odd that she smiled at this seeming "lack".

Years of observation from her gilded perch allowed her to see the agony of grief, of loss. Even in her youngest years, Wisdom had been a constant within her mind and soul. Understanding beyond her peers was a heavy mantle, one which made her realize she had no wish to experience the pain of the mourners.

Impa and her father were her family; they were the ones she loved and it would remain that way. Within the scant decade of her life, she had become firm in this view. As she grew older, her small family grew to include a handful of others. Even then, only one other would be as close to her heart as her Guardian and sire.

With each passing year, many people asked Zelda who Impa was. They would remark on how she was so rarely seen, how they weren't sure she existed.

To their perplexed expressions, she would only smile and say, "She is Impa."

From the shadows of her watching place, Impa would share that amused smile when she heard these simple words. They explained far more about herself and the young Hylian than most would understand.

Though charged with Zelda's care from her birth, regret nor indecision never plagued Impa regarding the younger female. Eleven years had passed since they'd first "met", though the child had not yet been born. For over a decade, her entire world had been centered around the princess.

Those questioned her position, her motivations, did not understand. What had once been common knowledge had become such obscure legends, only a handful understood exactly what she was

Any adult could become a child's guardian, but only a few could ever be true Guardians. Her official title fluctuated between Maderone and Celestial Guardian depending on the addresser, though she had only heard the latter used a handful of times. Most often she was simply called Guardian Impa.

Many said Guardians were picked by the Goddesses themselves. The majority of them did not understand how true such legends were. She existed for the sole purpose of protecting her Charge. With every breath she drew, she watched it grow and thrive every day. Her heart beat to sustain the strong spirit which resided in the small body.

How odd it was, to know such a vast spirit resided within a tiny shelly. There was no need for the powers Spirit, Time, Light or for the Triforce to tell her what most would never believe. Her heart, her soul…it told her the truth, and that is what mattered

There was talk, as there always was. Impa knew the rumors, the whispers that she took her duty too seriously, that she was obsessed with the girl she considered her daughter and sister. She never commented on such tales; Zelda was the one she answered to.

The Goddesses had given her life to care for the girl, and care for her she did.

She was her nurse and mother, her caretaker and trainer. She was the one who fled with Zelda during Ganondorf's attack upon the castle. And months later, when the Dark King had been forced away by the other Sages, she was the one who brought her back.

She was also the one who found Link, the boy who quickly became one of Zelda's closest friends.
Or more accurately, she is the one who found Link after Zelda discovered him during her morning run through the marketplace. The princess had spoken of a boy dressed in green lying near the castle's lake. Upon inspection, Impa did in fact find a boy. He was soaked to the bone, his wet clothing weighing nearly as much as he. She carried him back to the castle, aware of the sickly heat which poured from his skin much like the water dripping from his tunic.

She took him to the infirmary, and with the healers' help, managed to bring his fever down. It wasn't until she saw Zelda hiding in the corner that she realizing her Charge had heard the boy as he screamed in panic at his nightmares and saw the wounds made from whom- or whatever had left him in the water.

Later that night, she held the princess as she shook with sobs, unable to understand how such a young boy could endure so much. Despite Impa's attempts to shield her from the true horrors of life, Zelda was quickly learning what it meant to be a princess and future ruler to a country in the midst of war. She kept the princess company, as she always did, during the meetings with her father.

This is not to say Impa did not trust King Daphnes, merely her Charge came first in all matters. Some would ask what she meant when she said such a thing. Her answer would always be this:

"I exist, live, breathe for my Charge. Princess Zelda of Hyrule is the reason I walk the earth and the reason my eyes open every day. She is the blood in my veins and the heart in my chest. She comes before family, before the country, before any and everything else. Some would say they would die for those in their care...but would they live for them? Would you endure the worst torture, the horrors of darkness and pain beyond agony to protect someone? I would.

"She is all that I know and ever will know; I will protect her with everything I am and shall be, even when she does not wish me to. I am a Guardian and that is my duty...but also my passion. She is my daughter and sister, my friend and partner. You may misunderstand my words, for what a Guardian and Charge are to each other goes beyond what I can speak...but know this: No matter the circumstance, she ALWAYS comes first. I will never know anything else."

Silence would meet her words, along with disbelief and astonishment. The king and his daughter would never doubt her words, nor be shocked by them. They understood with perfect clarity what she meant. Though the years would forge a bond between Zelda and the Link, it would never match the power of the Impa and Zelda's bond.

Her natal day, a day of joy for many across the land, was also one of mournful observance. Before she had even drawn her first breath, her mother had taken her last.

Faced with an impossible task so many years ago, neither King Daphnes nor the midwives could not decide who to save...the laboring queen or her unbon child. Impa, barely out of training, took the decision from their hands. The queen gave her a smile and closed her eyes. "I trust you with her, Guardian, make me proud," she whispered for Impa's ears alone.

The Sheikah touched a knife to the older Hylian's stomach as she took her last breath. As her heart stopped, her flesh parted under the sharp blade. A stream of crimson tears bathed the table as her child was freed from the cord which choked her. Impa cradled the baby as the midwives worked to revive the bleeding woman and find something to wrap the newborn in.

Hours passed before the King saw his daughter, and when he did, he knew. He could tell by the lullaby's perfect pitch which fell from Impa's lips, by the way Zelda stared at her with such rapture, that the right choice had been made. He buried his wife with a lighter heart than most, knowing she had given her life for their child's.
From then until she stumbled upon that unconscious boy, the Hylian king knew Zelda and Impa had something no one could understand. When Zelda cried at night, barely a month old, it was Impa who rocked her to sleep or spoke to her about things a child could not hope to understand.

When she was a toddler and then a child, it was Impa Zelda ran to when she was hurt.

As she neared her tenth birthday, it was Impa who heard her cries of pain and fear before the statue of armor fell on her. Though the length of the castle was between them, King Daphnes had watched as Impa whispered his daughter's name and vanished from sight seconds before the crash of armor echoed through the halls, quickly followed by a child's shrill scream. He knew his late wife would approve of Impa's vigilance over their daughter, just as he knew she would approve of the boy now in his care.

Though barely ten, whereas his daughter was almost eleven, the young boy seemed nearly as old as the king himself. He carried his small weight like a stone, as if the world rested on his shoulders. When he spoke his name, it was broken sound, almost as if he had little energy to force the words out. Zelda had taken his hand and given him a hug of such affection the king had felt tears in his eyes. She had always possessed a gentle heart, despite her warrior-like mind. She was often compared to a lily, fragile and beautiful. But Impa and the King called her a rose, a seemingly delicate flower which possessed thorns sharp enough to draw the blood.

The boy, Link, would soon agree with them. While he noticed her beauty, he also saw the sharp mind which hid in wait. He knew when she saved him she was different. Link quickly learned the young heir had no time for those seeking power and would quickly dismiss all those whom attempted to gain such from her, especially when she learned they spoke lies.

He grew to love her as a sister, despite those in the kingdom aiming to have them court and marry. He became her best friend, aside from Impa. He is the one she told her secrets, the things she could not tell Impa for fear of her reaction. He is the one who found her many years later, bloody and wounded from battle, and trying to run from the truth. He kept Impa from her, assuring her as Hyrule's Hero, that his Princess was well; he would do everything he could to keep her safe. He knew she did not believe his words, but he would never understand why she trusted him enough to leave her Charge in his care.

What he didn't know was Impa had never left them alone; she had watched from the shadows.

Over time, his pseudo-sister and her father would become his family. Although he was the kingdom's Hero, he would refuse the King's offer for the status as Prince, for he neither wanted such a station nor Zelda's birthright taken from her. As his familial love for the Time Sage grew, so did their bond. Hero and Sage often spoke with their minds, fighting as one rather than two. Though he was not as close to Zelda as Impa, Link often knew where the princess was and could sometimes tell of her wellbeing. While she often kept her physical and mental state from him, he did know when she was harmed.

It was this knowledge that made him run through the halls. Only ten years of age and having been at the castle nearly two months, Link was often called a speed demon, for he was always running as if racing Epona. He halted in front of the private garden which served as Zelda's training area and carefully opened the door. What he saw caused him to rethink his action.

Impa and Zelda all but flew across the vast area, their swords nothing but blurs. He watched, fascinated as the blond girl leaped into the air and clung to a window, sheathing her sword in the process. He stared at her bleeding shoulder, amazed at the strength which held her.

"Watch out!" he called as Impa took to the air, her sword aimed for her Charge. Startled, Zelda lost
her hold on the windowsill and fell. Without hesitation, Impa dropped her sword, caught the girl and landed without a sound. She slowly turned to face the boy, her red eyes narrowing with anger. She gently set Zelda on her feet and stalked over to the door. Frozen with fear, Link did not move as she opened the door and pulled him inside.

Silence filled the garden, his pounding heart the only sound he heard.

"What. Do. You. Think. You. Are. Doing?" Her voice was soft and steady as she spoke, though her anger was clear. He swallowed.

"She...I felt...she was hurt..." He flinched back from the lightning in her eyes, closing his eyes to hide from the truth. He prepared for the blow that did not, and would not, come. After several moments, he peeked at her.

Zelda watched from near the wall, her gray-green eyes clouding with pain. She pressed a hand to her shoulder, wincing when the pain of the torn muscles made itself known. She heard Impa speak, and Link reply, but she knew not what they said. As the world began to spin, she leaned against the wall and slid to the ground. Her breathing became ragged as the pain grew, the adrenaline of battle no longer shielding her from the truth.

She didn't see Impa set Link on his feet and run to her side, nor did she see Link run from the room in search of a healer. All she saw was the dimming sunlight as her eyes fluttered closed. She barely heard her name being whispered aloud and through her mind. She felt Impa lift her...

And then there was nothing.
Zelda remembered the day Link spoke of. She placed a gloved hand on her shoulder as if to check for the long-healed wound. A smile graced her lips as Link looked down, knowing the young Hero had never forgiven himself for interrupting her training.

He stared at his boots, wondering once again how those who lived in the palace can stand his filth. He barely moved his eyes, comparing her pristine boots to his own mud-covered shoes, silently scoffing in disgust. So focused on his self-scrutiny, he didn't see Zelda shake her head.

A hand rested on his shoulder, causing him to jump. The unmistakable warmth sinking through his tunic meant it could only be Impa.

"Link, you're family. You're also a teenage boy intent on training harder than the army's General. No one, aside from yourself, cares that you are muddy."

Impa smiled softly as the boy blushed. Though fifteen, some considered him more of a child than adult. King Daphnes would often remind them being a teenager meant one was caught between childhood and adulthood. Unlike Zelda, Link had never perfected the ability to fully hide his emotions.

This fact never failed to amuse Zelda or the kingdom, for Link's face showed his emotions as clearly as words were printed on paper. As his embarrassments turned his face red, the she couldn't help but pat his head.

"You've made a mess again. Bad puppy." She giggled softly as he rolled his eyes and held his hands against his chest as a puppy would hold their front paws. The guards and servants had often called Link Zelda's shadow and puppy when they were young. The healers would sigh in relief when one of the children would run into the infirmary, since they always knew where the other was due to Link's shadowing.

Impa's smile grew as her Charge and pseudo-son continued their banter, momentarily untouched by the weight of the throne which rested on Zelda's shoulders. She shook her head, reluctant to call an end to their free time but knowing she must.

"You've made a mess again. Bad puppy." She giggled softly as he rolled his eyes and held his hands against his chest as a puppy would hold their front paws. The guards and servants had often called Link Zelda's shadow and puppy when they were young. The healers would sigh in relief when one of the children would run into the infirmary, since they always knew where the other was due to Link's shadowing.

Impa's smile grew as her Charge and pseudo-son continued their banter, momentarily untouched by the weight of the throne which rested on Zelda's shoulders. She shook her head, reluctant to call an end to their free time but knowing she must.

Zelda nodded, understanding without a word being said. She kissed Link on the cheek, turned on her heel and strode towards the weapons room. Her sad smile became a mischievous grin as she began to run, her boots hitting the stone floor with light steps. She grasped the door handle and turned it, spinning behind it with a dancer's grace.

The warmth of Impa's love and amusement bubbled in her chest as she moved around the room. The shadows moved in time with the flickering wall sconces, a gentle breeze created by her flowing dress causing the flames to move violently for the barest second. As her own silhouette stood before her, she reached above her to unclasp her headdress. The gold links jingled softly as she laid the item on the marble counter. Soft footsteps sounded behind her and the warmth in her
chest seemed to hum at the nearness of another, the other.

When the heat of Impa's body soaked through her dress, she reached behind her. She felt calloused fingers slide up her arm and under the band which held her gloves in place. Without missing a breath, she pulled her arm forward, her glove sliding off with ease. When both gloves were removed, she laid them next to the headdress. As she moved her hair aside to unclasp her semi-decorative armor, she looked in the silver mirror.

Impa's red eyes met her gray-green ones and she smiled softly, a hint of a grin causing the corner of her mouth to twitch. She knew others would and did view their rituals as too intimate. Neither cared.

As her armor was eased from her shoulders, she took it gently from Impa's hands and also laid it on the counter. Although the Hyrulian banner would remain in place, the hip sheath and sword would be removed in time. Her fingers brushed Impa's and she giggled as Impa twitched from the static. So absorbed in unknotting the sheath, she failed to notice Impa's eyes narrow in speculation, just as she was unable to see the thin line her lips made.

As Impa watched Zelda, she took a few steps back. Knowing her Charge would be seventeen in six months, she wondered if now would be the best time for the discussion they needed to have. As she was the closest maternal figure in Zelda's life, she and the healer's knew the duty fell on her. With a silent sigh, she let her eyes drift over her Charge's body. As the young woman danced around the room, oblivious to her dilemma, she noticed the bodice of her dress strained across her chest. Where most would call it fitted, Impa knew it was tight. There was no other explanation for Zelda's sudden breathing troubles.

"Zelda…" She hesitated as the younger woman paused in her dancing to watch her, curious. "Is your dress snug?"

Startled by the question, Zelda laid a hand to her chest. Trying to catch her breath, she realized the material was in fact a bit too tight. While the dress had several layers, including a thin layer of leather armor just above her underclothes, it should still be loose. She ran a finger over the ties in back, frowning. Turning her head, she pulled her hair to the side and saw the laces were not only near their ends, but that the hooks were also pulled taunt.

"I…I suppose it is," she admitted softly, unable to believe she had not noticed before. A soft, startled gasp escaped her as she leant forward to unlace her boots, the floor an unmistakable blur. Icy fingers ran down her spine and crept along her skin. She reached behind her, desperate to loosen the restrictive ties. Her numb fingers grasped the strings only to drop them.

Impa felt her heart squeeze in fear as she rushed around the benches to catch her Charge before she fell. She wrapped her arms around the silk-covered torso and gently lowered the gasping Hylian to the floor. As she laid Zelda's head to her shoulder, she looked down her back and noticed the corset was laced so tightly the panels were touching. She frowned and worked quickly on the knotted ties, knowing the maid who helped her dress would not be so foolish.

"Keta, these are…mekaa!" As the curse fell from her lips, she reached behind her. Dagger in hand, she carefully maneuvered her arm forward. The silver blade seemed to glow in the fire light as she slowly pressed it against the cords.

For a single moment, past overlaid present. The echo of a newborn's cries drifted through her mind as Zelda drew in a large, choking breath.

Her skin tingled and her body pulsed in time with her racing heart. Zelda drew more and more air
into herself, unable to get enough of the life-giving substance. Her lungs burned as they expanded, no longer trapped by the prison called fashion. She put a hand over her heart in a vain attempt to still the beating. The shadows on the wall held her attention while her body adjusted to the extra oxygen. She watched the play of light and darkness, entranced by the story forming in her mind. Oblivious once more to Impa's thoughts, she was startled when she heard her name. Her eyes remained on the ceiling as she answered automatically. "Yes?"

Impa ran a hand through Zelda's long hair. "Are you feeling better?" she questioned softly. She touched her tongue to her dry lips, her brow furrowing as she continued to wonder if she had made the correct decision. As she slid the dagger into its sheath once more, she thought in the back of her mind how easy it was to cut the ties, and how vulnerable the act made her Charge.

Zelda nodded and hugged Impa tighter for a moment. As she felt their hearts beat in synchronize, she pulled away and looked the older woman in the eyes. When the Sheikah looked away, the Hylian frowned and touched her shoulder gently. "Impa, what is it?" Instinctively, she touched her chest to feel the bond. When the sickly heaviness of worry filled her stomach, she tried to catch her Guardian's eyes once more. Her breath caught in her throat at the chaos which filled her heart and mind. "Impa…please, talk to me." She hated the weakness she heard in her voice, the wavering which spoke of hidden tears.

"I'm sorry Zelda," Impa heard herself say. She stroked Zelda's hair once more, the repetitive motion calming her thoughts and bringing peace to her troubled heart. "I want to ask you something." She knew that despite her attempts to hide it, Zelda could feel her heart pounding a desperate beat. Her breath became unsteady as she forced herself to speak. "I think…I think we need to talk about something."

Zelda wove her fingers in Impa's and spoke softly. Whatever had upset her friend was important, and now was not the time for questions. "What did you want to talk about?" She watched Impa lick her lips again and blink quickly, her red eyes reflecting the fire in the scones. The princess instinctively stroked her thumb over her Guardian's knuckles, wanting to give her any comfort she could.

The Sheikah took a deep breath and met her Charge's eyes gray once more. She squeezed the hand holding her own and smiled softly. "I didn't mean to worry you," she admitted. "I…find it time for a discussion, one I'm sure you'd rather not have." Her smile became one of amusement as Zelda's brows furrowed in confusion.

"I don't understand. Why in all of Hyrule would I not want to speak with you?" Exasperation made her roll her eyes as she stood, pulling Impa with her. When the older woman began to laugh, Zelda's boot collided with the floor in a stomp. "What is so funny?!” she asked with the same annoyed tone, her physical age asserting itself for just a moment.

Brushing tears of laughter from her eyes, Impa gently grasped the front of Zelda's bodice and pulled it upwards. As her Charge began to blush profusely, the absurdity of the situation caused her to laugh even further. As Zelda clutched the purple bodice to her flushed body, Impa pulled a lace from her own leather under-armor. Although she shook with silent laughter, it didn't take long to lace the dress once more.

Though lacking in comparison to a fully laced bodice, the improvisation held her dress in place while still allowing her to breathe. She smiled gratefully and began to thank her, only to huff in annoyance. "Imp-a," she whined, "It's not funny!"

Impa shook her head, crying from laughing so hard. It wasn't until she felt the annoyance buzzing around that her thoughts begin to change. The buzzing slowly became a fog of heavy pain. She
wiped her eyes and took Zelda's hands, pressing them to her heart. Though the irony still amused her, the tears shining in the gray eyes of the other woman kept all laughter far from her mind. "Oh Zelda…I'm sorry. Please stop crying."

Strong arms wrapped around her and Zelda laid her head on Impa's shoulder. Sorrow filled her aching heart and she did nothing to stop the tears. As the salty liquid burned her cheeks, she felt her throat constrict with all the words she could not say. "I…I didn't mean…I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice as soft as the breeze outside the castle walls. Disappointment in herself consumed her thoughts as she cried silently.

Her heart broke at the desolation thrumming through her Charge's heart. Her soul grieved when she felt the bond become heavy with secrets. Respecting Zelda's privacy, she did not pry into the hidden thoughts, though she worried at what could cause distress. When Zelda spoke, Impa shook her head to make sure she heard correctly. She grasped Zelda's shoulders gently and pushed her away to look in her eyes.

"Zelda, why are you sorry?" she asked, worry voiding any other emotion from her words.

Zelda looked down, watching her hands as she twisted them together. "I…shouldn't have cried. It was stupid."

Wondering where the other woman had gotten such an idea, Impa shook her head once more. "No, I shouldn't have laughed. It was amusing that you, the holder of Wisdom, didn't understand immediately." She brushed a strand of hair behind Zelda's ear. "Sometimes I forget you're only sixteen, a young woman…one who can still be hurt by cruel words of a jealous person." She sighed softly and pressed her forehead to Zelda's. "Tell me keta, what did you think when I cut the ties?"

Brow furrowed and lips pursed, Zelda stared into Impa's eyes, unable to look away. She blinked slowly, needing a moment to compose herself. When she opened her eyes once more, she gasped silently at the sadness shining in the red eyes before her. "I-I…I felt relief. I could breathe again. Should I have felt something else?"

If it hadn't been for the hesitation, for the catch in her breath, Impa would have dismissed Zelda's tension as trying to calm her still flowing tears. As it was, she watched the other woman's eyes waver, heard her beg through the bond not to ask anything else. "Be honest with me, please. What are you keeping from me?"

Zelda pulled and turned away, staring at the wall once more as she tried desperately to block the older woman from her heart and mind, frantic to keep her privacy. "No-nothing of importance. I was just remembering when I was caught on the horse. I couldn't help but think how frightening it was when I was cut free."

She laid a hand on the cloth-covered shoulder before hugging the young woman. Deciding not to push, not to dig for those secrets, some part of Impa did wonder how Zelda could keep secrets from a bond such as theirs. "That was a frightening day. Was relief all you felt?"

Puzzled, Zelda turned and faced Impa once more. "Why are you asking me this? Why won't you ask what you want to know?" Annoyance and defiance crept into her voice as she struggled to contain her quick temper. "Am I too young, too stupid to be asked directly? Must I be lead like a child to the answer you want?"

With a sharp exhale of breath, Impa closed her eyes. She murmured a prayer of strength to the Goddesses. "You're sixteen now Zelda. Aside from me, you spend most of your time with Link. Most of the Guards who follow you are male." She opened her eyes once more and pressed her lips
to Zelda's forehead. "I worry about you, worry if you're ready for the world...for having to deal with its challenges."

She didn't speak for several minutes. Zelda thought, letting Impa interpret her silence however she wished. "You think they...that they'll try something, don't you?" She stared unto the red eyes of the woman she'd come to trust more than anyone. "You're afraid one of them will hurt me."

"Yes," Impa whispered. Reluctant to admit the truth, she kept her voice low, wished she could keep her thoughts to herself yet knowing it was impossible. "I'm worried they will try something, even Link. I'm worried they will catch you unaware one day and do more than hurt you. I'm worried they will break your mind and heart while they take your body."

She took a shaky breath, aware of how husky her voice sounded.

"And this is why, from today on, Link will no longer join us in training. No one will, even the other Sheikah. I have taught you how to fight like a warrior." She swallowed deeply and turned to stare in the mirror, watching Zelda's pale reflection. "From now on, I will teach you how to fight like a woman and a warrior. If there ever comes a day I cannot be with you, cannot get to you in time..." Her voice trailed off as the weight of such thoughts took the air from her lungs.

Zelda laid a hand on her arm, squeezing it gently in comfort. "I'll be fine Impa." She looked at her armor. "I won't be using that in training, will I?"

Impa also looked down. "No. It's decoration. Since you're dress was too small, the armor I've had made should fit." She walked to a wood cabinet. Her fingers brushed the engraved symbol of the Royal Family before she pulled open the door and stepped to the side. Nearly identical to the armor Zelda had removed earlier, the gold shoulder pads and belt shined in the firelight. When she lifted it, she held out a hand for Zelda. "It's made of a harder metal, Goron forged, and laid over with gold." She handed the armor to Zelda for her to test its weight. "I will take your headdress and have a new one made. Although the one you currently have was your mother's, it is not suitable for you. Not only is it ill-fitting, it is too dangerous. The combs are nearly as sharp as your knives and the corners are fragile."

The princess laid the armor back in the cabinet and look at the gloves hanging from pins. "And the gloves?"

The Guardian touched them gently. "Skulltulasilk, threaded for Goron gold. Not impenetrable, but harder to cut than regular silk. Your new dresses will be made of the same, the bodice's double layered." She turned to Zelda once more, her expression one of fierce protectiveness. "For today you can fight in the under armor if you wish. Unlace the sword but bring it with you."

She circled Zelda, thinking. Without warning, her hand shot through the air.

She didn't think, only reacted. Zelda spun, one hand grabbing Impa's wrist and the other going to the dagger between her breasts. Impa pulled her close, grabbed the dagger and threw it across the room. She resisted the urge to cry out as arm was twisted so her wrist was between her shoulder blades. Her other arm was pinned to her side, useless. "Break my hold," she heard Impa whisper in her ear. As she lost feeling in her arm, Zelda drove the heel of her boot into Impa's Achilles' tendon and jumped. Using the Sheikah's weight, she moved behind her and flung the other woman to the ground while breaking her hold. Before she could run to the door which led to the training room, a hand wrapped around her ankle, tearing her dress. Panic filled her as she feel face first towards the stone floor. She twisted to land on her side and grabbed at her sword.

As the weapon slid from its sheath, Impa pushed off the ground and straddled her hips. She flung
the sword across the room, pinning Zelda's hands above her head. She knew the rage on her face was scaring the woman under her, but she clung to the rage, the one thing which pushed her enough to make her continue. "Fight me," she growled.

The hoarse words fell on deaf ears as Zelda struggled in vain. As her head began to ache from pressing against the cold stone, she bucked her hips. "Get off!"

"I did not train you to lose your head, Princess! I trained you to fight and win, to fight and live another day! Now use your knowledge and fight me!" She choked on the dizzying emotions from the bond before pushing them away. Her heart pounded in her chest as Zelda clawed at her hands and drove her knees into her kidneys.

Her thoughts slowly faded into nothing as she remembered the nightmares a young Zelda used to have, nightmares caused by Ganondorf's evil presence. She remember the screams of soul-deep terror, the blood-curdling sounds which filled their quarters without fail ever night until the monster left the castle. It was those memories she used to fuel her rage. "Fight me Zelda. You are not helpless, you are a warrior. I worry for a reason. Hyrule is not a haven, it is a country. There are crimes in the city surround this castle, crimes which should never be thought of, yet alone committed...yet they are, every day. Fight!"

And fight she did. As her ankle hit Impa's spine, Zelda used her other leg to gain leverage. Her hips dug into Impa's thighs and she rolled them, so Impa was under her. She sprang to her feet and ran for the room, barely entering the training room before she was grabbed. As the hand wrapped around her neck, she blindly brought her fist down. Although the metal of Impa's armor shielded her arm, Zelda knew her attack met its mark when Impa let her go. She spun in a round-house kick.

Impa barely raised a hand in time to stop the boot from hitting her face. Stumbling from the force of the blow, she staggered back, relying on her fast reflexes to dodge Zelda's wrathful attack. Though it saddened her to know she had caused such terrified anger, she did not stop. She fought back and attempted to grab Zelda again and again, intent on making her point.

It took three hours before Impa could pin Zelda's once more. As they both grasped for breath, Zelda's rage continued to boil in her chest. While she peeled off the shredded gown and inspected her under armor for damage, she ignored Impa. She ran a hand over her head and ribs, assuring herself the throbbing was from bruises rather than broken bones. So consumed in her task, she didn't realize Impa was behind her until she felt the hand on her shoulder.

The sound of pure disgust, fear and rage which escaped Zelda did not surprise Impa.

What did surprise her, however, was the way Zelda shrugged off her hand before moving several steps forward so as not to be touched again.

She dropped the towel and set a flask of water on the ground beside the younger woman. "You did well today. I'm sorry if I hurt or scared you. There will not always be a warning Zelda, not always be time to understand what's going on." Nary another word passed her lips as she walked from the chamber. With Zelda's rage so high and the bond closed tightly in spite, she never heard or felt the whispered, "I know," from the woman she left standing in the room.

They didn't speak to each other, nor be near one another, until later that night. As Impa finished stoking the coals to keep the barrel of water warm, Zelda slipped into the room. Both were dressed in their usual wash gowns, although Zelda knew they both wore them out of habit and not modesty.
She sat by the fire and took the cloth offered to her. Without looking at the other woman, she dipped the cloth into the basin of hot soapy water, rung it, and began washing herself.

Others would find it odd for the heir of the throne to wash as a servant did, instead of in a large tub filled with scents, but she preferred the basin; a tub was exposed. After having Link walk in during her bath when she was twelve, and not looking at her for a month after, she had forgone the tub.

Only once had she taken to a tub since she was a child.

It was a night seared into her mind, despite all attempts to forget. Even as she denied the memory, she dug her nails into the cloth and roughly ran it over her skin.

Impa turned her head towards Zelda, listening to her sudden furious whispers. "Damned blood… will never leave…screams will always be heard…"

She knew the day Zelda spoke of, the battle which resulted in bloodied fields and mass graves. Though she had done her best, it had become obvious the young woman would never accept the truth.

Beheading, by Zelda's sword or any others, had saved the very people they'd fought against.

Souls were twisted and destroyed under Ganondorf's control, his evil a merciless absolute. The children's angry screams still echoed through her dreams.

She tried not to think about it.

For a long while, neither woman spoke. As Impa carefully rinsed the scentless soap from her hair, she watched Zelda.

Zelda kept her eyes on her bucket of water, refusing to acknowledge her. So consumed in her task, she barely heard Impa's voice. As the petal-soft words filled her ears, she clutched the rag all the tighter.

"I'm sorry," echoed through the room in a deafening whisper. Neither reacted for several minutes despite the tension growing between them.

Impa never flinched as Zelda's wash basin flew across the room and smashed into the wall. As stone and water rained to the floor, she slowly raised her eyes to look at the teen. Her breath caught at the agony she saw, the pain which remained hidden from their bond. She touched her chest, unwilling to admit how much distance she had caused between them. She knew their relationship, their closeness had changed; she could see it in Zelda's eyes.

Her chest heaved as she attempted to keep her rage under control, as any good monarch would. Zelda stared in Impa's eyes, even with half the room's distance between them. Even as her vision blurred with tears, she could not look away.

"How-how could you?!" she growled as her tears fell.

A silent howl tore itself from her as she leapt to her feet and ran towards the kneeling woman. She fell to her knees and pounded her fists against Impa's unprotected arms and chest. As sob bubbled passed her rage as strong arms wrapped gently around her.

"I'm sorry Zelda, my keta, so very sorry," she said in that same soft tone. She pressed her cheek to Zelda's head, blinking back her own tears as she felt the young woman shake. She mourned the loss of youth, of the trust her Charge had for the world. She knew her acknowledgment of Zelda's
physical maturity had taken more than a day's happiness from the princess; it had taken her comfort. Even as Zelda tried to keep the bond as closed as a chest in the Water Temple, the despair and confusion which filled her heart betrayed them both. She hugged the crying heiress tightly. "You will never know how sorry."

Another sob escaped her throat, the sound filled with grief and pain. "H-h-how do I l-look at them…after what…" Her throat closed for a moment at the images her mind conjured. "After what you sa-said?" She felt Impa's regret tighten her heart and whined. "Y-you really don't think-do you?"

Impa shook her head and closed her eyes. As the firelight shown through her closed lids, she sighed silently. "The men? No, I don't. Not Link, not the Guards, not the army. I wish I could tell you they won't…"

She struggled to form the words, her body tensing with the need to kill them all. Any threat to Zelda could not live.

With a ragged breath, she ran a hand down Zelda's back, trying to comfort her.

"They hate me," came the murmured statement after a comforting silence. Impa pulled back to lift Zelda's face.

"No one hates you Zelda."

Zelda shook her head and wiped her eyes. "The officers in the army…they hate me."

Impa pressed her lips together. "You outrank them; you are their Princess, the second in command. You train harder than any of them, as you've proven time and time again. They do not hate you, they resent the power you hold over them. They feel mocked by your strength, yet they could not be further from the truth.

"Don't take their anger to heart Zelda, it is directed at themselves, not you. They are Hylian, mostly men; I am a Sheikah, a Guardian. My fellow Guards are also Sheikah. Our bodies are naturally stronger and more agile. I have trained you to fight as a Sheikah warrior, not a Hylian Princess."

"Except this afternoon," Zelda whispered, lowering her eyes.

Impa swallows once more. "Except this afternoon. And this training will continue until I am sure you can defend yourself." She pressed her finger to Zelda's lips. "I know you can fight keta, we all know this. Yet you are still a woman. All beings, including the Goddesses and even the Sages, will hesitate if confronted with a…sexual attack. It's is nature. In an attempt to protect yourself, your body tenses and your mind becomes a place of silence. You cannot think, cannot fight for several moments. I am going to train you until I'm sure you can overcome this reaction. Do you understand?"

She hesitated before bowing her aching head. "I do." She leaned against Impa, accepting her comforting embrace. She cried no more tears, though she shook with tension and exhaustion.

The crackling fire was the only witness to Zelda's passage into adulthood, the only thing which filled the silent room as both woman let the waters of change wash over them without a word.

[−]

Weeks passed without further mention of Zelda's new training. When King Daphnes sought Impa's opinion for naming Link as one of Zelda's many suitors, she told him she would ask Zelda. Though
she never asked, for she knew Zelda's answer without having to relay the question, she told the King Link would not make a good suitor; he was a brother to the princess, not a husband.

That same night, the bond cracked enough to merge her dreams with Zelda's. What she saw would haunt her for days to come.

Chapter End Notes

"Keta" means precious one, or child/person of my heart. It's a fictional word. So is "Meka".
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three

Of the Darkness

Lightning tore through the sky as thunder rattled the stain glass windows. Zelda thrashed in her bed, whimpering as a nightmares encased her mind. She strained for breath as her sweat-soaked nightgown stuck to her skin and wrapped around her throat. As yet more lighting flashed outside, a similar scene played through her mind.

[-]

I cannot understand why there must be evil in the world. Wisdom tells me it is so we all shall appreciate the good, yet how do we appreciate what the Goddesses have given us when one of their own creations is taking it away? I know it is wrong to speak ill of the Goddesses, but Naryu's Love is not wrapped around my heart as it is Link's. Even as he fights with the dark warriors, he does not understand what he must do. Yet as I charge into the massacre before me with my sword in my hand, I know. Impa races beside me, the longshot wrapped around her arm clearing a path for us, our mares unhindered.

Unearthly lightning illuminates the horrifying scene, and even I must praise its dark beauty, We know whom we are fighting and we know what we must do. As I slide from my horse and swing my blade, I know the souls of those infected with the ReDead's poison are being saved. Even as the children scream in agony and beg for mercy while their veins slowly turn black with death, even as my blade slices through their necks, I know they will suffer no longer.

I fight for my family and my kingdom; this is what I tell myself as my breaches become soaked with blood and mud from the battlefield. I feel an icy hand wrap around my neck before two skeletal arms wind around my shoulders. I do not scream as I fall to the ground, nor do I freeze in shock. Deafened by the cannons and cries of agony, blinded by the bloody rain and silenced by my own concentration, I focus on the creature pinning me to the ground. I avoid its mouth, barely keeping beyond the reach of its teeth. Another joins the first, and now I fight two. I know it is useless to stand while the ReDead writhe on the ground in an attempt to grasp me.

I need no ocarina or harp to play the Sun Song. Like all creatures, the energies of life run through my veins. I breathe life and exhale death every moment while the subtle energies of change work their will. I whistle the song as I roll my body to avoid the ReDead's claws, feeling its power stir the life within me. Dark creatures all around Hyrule Field suffer the effects of the song, yet I feel no pity as my sword beheads to the monsters which had attacked me. I do not have time to look around before I am running again, guided by the pulsing Triforce.

I wonder where Impa is, but I have no time to worry for her. A Hylian soldier seems to be taking the same path as I. I run a hand over the front of my suit, pulling a throwing star from under the Sheikah Eye. My star misses the target; it matters not. Standing before me is the man I came to defeat, the man I have trained to kill. Many think Link is the one who will destroy him, yet they are wrong. The Sword of Evil's Bane is nothing but a tool to keep this monster at bay. It is not the Master Sword or Courage that shall defeat him; it is Wisdom. For with Wisdom there is Power, and you must have one to defeat the other; Courage has neither.
I do not hesitate as I level my silver arrow with his chest, my aim perfect. I know he will deflect the arrow; I am not foolish enough to believe he would not. As I pull another arrow from my quiver, I watch him. He is smirking, his eyes like molten lava. I do not ask why he is smirking, though the distraction may be what I need. Instead, I raise my bow once more.

I never have a chance to fire.

[-]

In the connecting room Impa sat up in bed, gasping for air. She pressed a hand to her heart in a vain attempt to slow it. Without a sound, her hand slid under her pillow and withdrew a knife which she hid in her sleeve. Her light footsteps were hurried as she made her way across her bedroom and entered Zelda's room. It took her but a moment to realize a nightmare is the reason for Zelda's distress.

A silent sigh escaped her lips as she walked between the shafts of moonlight. The bed dipped as she sat on the edge of the mattress and brushed Zelda's hair from her face. She placed a gentle kiss on the sleeping woman's brow and pulled the quilt to her chin once more. After smoothing the blanket, she rested her back against the headboard and closed her eyes, her breathing slowing as she dozed.

[-]

I was beside her the entire battle...or so I thought. I answer to no one save Zelda, yet I have lost her. I do not wonder what the King and Sages will think, I worry not for the Goddesses. As I fight my way through the battle, I have but one goal: find my Charge. Her rage, sorrow and fear swirls in my heart. I struggle to keep my mind clear of all emotion, relying on my instincts.

I spot several soldiers murdering their comrades, but I do not stop. Traitors are not my focus, though I do memorize their faces. From my position in the hill I can see Link fighting near the drawbridge, yet I cannot see Zelda. I sigh in frustration, realizing once more I am looking for Princess Zelda, not Sheik, as she has named herself. With a warrior's costume similar to my own, some bandages and a little magic to change her eyes, Sheik has become a mystery to all of Hyrule. She, though many refer to Sheik as a male, has been seen throughout the country doing many tasks. No one would guess Princess Zelda, holder of the Triforce of Wisdom, the Sage of Time and Princess of Destiny, was running around the country in breaches and boots.

I am rather proud of her costume.

It is this costume which finally helps me spot her. The Sheikah Eye is covered in muck, much like the rest of the body suit. It is the end of a bandage which alerts me to her. I see her fighting Ganondorf and know I cannot get to her in time. I do not know when I started running, only that I am racing faster than my horse through the battle. When my hand is grabbed, I swing around to kill the monster. Except it isn't a monster.

Momentarily distracted, I stare at the soldier who would dare stop me during a battle of war. I narrow my eyes as he chuckles and draws his sword. Another traitor; my decision is made. I cannot protect Zelda from a solider as I can from Ganondorf. Though everything in my screams to leave the man and go in search of her once more, something tells me leaving this man alive is something I will later regret.

I do not think as I throw the longshot. The chain wraps around his arm, only to be shook free. I am not surprised; I myself trained the army to free themselves from chains. I try to knock the black mask from his face, and find I am unable. This matters not. Though I trained most of them, the
The demi-mask does not hide his smirk of triumph.

He chuckles and I feel my blood run cold. The darkness which seeps from him heals the otherwise fatal wound as I withdraw my blade, enraged at his continued existence. His eyes sparkle with what I can only call mocking amusement. His voice causes my heart to stop and I resist the urge to tear his head from his neck at his words. "Run, little Sheikah." His smirk widens and I grind my teeth. "Your princess needs you," he murmurs before stepping into the fighting creatures. I do not go after him. Instead, I grasp the bond, berating myself for being lured into the trap. Again, I run at full speed. Even as golden light explodes from the center of the battle, I continue to head towards my Charge. My heart stops once more, and yet I keep going, knowing Zelda would never use the power of the Triforce unless necessary. I meld with the shadows and step out of them, in the center of the battle. The light pulses with righteous anger and continues to wash over the field, causing the dark creatures to die or run. Ganondorf is nowhere to be seen.

And neither is Zelda.

On the first floor, Link screamed in his sleep. With a gasp, he rolled from the bed and onto the floor. Though he couldn't see the shared memories, what he could see sickened and frightened him. He lifted the Master Sword from its place on the floor and left his chambers in search of someone to train with. Never again did he want to remember what haunted him.

When I was thirteen, Impa told me a story I will never forget. She told me how the Sheikah came to be, and how they slowly faded from the land. Even though it was three years after they found me, it was still a powerful story, one that I remember every time I think about when I met them.

I try not to remember much about my childhood. Kokiri Forest was not an easy place to live in, even with the occupants being eternal children. The day I left, I was supposed to bring back medicine for a sick young one; she was barely a hundred years old. On the way to town, I was attacked by foreigners and left with nothing in my pockets but space. I decided to continue to town, hoping the potion brewer would let me repay her.

I didn't expect for the foreigners to return. I don't know how long it lasted, but they beat me. I was hit on the head early on, and when I woke up, I was in the castle. Impa told me Zelda found me, and knowing Zelda as I do, I believe her. Since the day I woke up, I have followed Zelda. She often calls me a puppy, and I can't say she is wrong. Although it bothers Impa, I need to repay her. Zelda doesn't acknowledge my attempts at repayment anymore, she tells me to tell her father about it.

He laughed at me when I did. At least it didn't make him mad.

In her room, Zelda whimpered in her sleep and tossed her head from side to side. Impa stroked her hair, barely awake. "It's all right keta, go back to sleep." When the only the sounds of light breathing and the crackling fire filled the room, Impa closed her eyes once more.
I care not for anyone's opinion, even the Triforce of Wisdom which speaks loudly in my mind. It is not my Triforce, it belongs to my Charge. I could call it stupid, yet I know such a thing would be a waste of thought. This once however, I do not think it was stupid. I listened to what it said. After opening a Shadow portal, I barely had time to sheath my sword before Zelda falls to her knees before me.

I wish I could say I remember how it happened, but I know shock has erased those few hours from my memory. I remember walking through the portal and stepping foot on the castle floor. The healers have told me countless times that they feared more for me than for Zelda. They say Nabooru was pulled from battle to contain me, for I had lost control of my Shadows.

Nabooru has said compared to me, Ganondorf was not a threat. I laughed at her until I realized she was serious. She says that as Shadow and Spirit Sages, we are the ones who are most dangerous to all of Creation; we can destroy it without meaning to. This I have known since I awoke as a Sage and told her so. She responded by saying I returned to the battle and ended the existence of those who fought beside Ganondorf with a wave of my hand, my rage fueling my power over the Shadows. Nabooru claims I stole the darkness which gave his warriors life and used it to destroy them as they destroyed others. She told me I did not calm until Zelda whispered my name in her sleep. I remember none of this.

What I do remember is sleeping in a chair beside Zelda's bed for a week while the healers treated her broken bones, torn muscles and punctured organs. I remember draining the evil magic from her body, just as I remember holding her while she screamed in her sleep while it was removed. I remember nearly ending my own life when her heart stopped for several minutes.

I remember the day Zelda woke, and I remember how it took months of retraining before she was up to par. I remember how she asked her father if she could have lessons with several Generals so as not to raise suspicion about her quick healing and return to strength. I remember how she kept the training sessions from me, how I was barred from the area by her own power, along with the power of the Triforce.

[-]

In her sleep, Zelda curled in a ball around her pillow. Though her gown still choked her, she did not awaken. Thunder crashed through the sky with such force the glass figurines above the fireplace cracked.

[-]

When I was five, I met Ganondorf. I did not like him then, I hated him. I knew he was evil, you could see it in his eyes. His skin was darker than the ReDead's was light, and I would bet the Hylian treasury it was just as cold. When he kissed my knuckles, a disgusting ritual of greeting I have always despised, I was proven correct. His hands were colder than the ice which topped Snowpeak Mountain.

The King the Gerudo is one of the many titles he holds, yet none of them seem to inspire pride. I stared into his eyes, knowing he could sense my revulsion. When he merely chuckled, I took my hand from his and wiped it on my throne. Though I detested the chair nearly as much as the monster kneeling before me, I felt no despair in contaminating it with his filth; better it than me.

He told my father he wanted to create an alliance with Hyrule to help both races; every person in the room knew he was lying. I could feel Impa hovering behind me, barely restraining herself from
placing her hands around his throat. My father did not find my laughter amusing, although Ganondorf seemed more than annoyed at my lack of respect.

Does anyone truly expect a five year old to be in control of their emotions? I supposed I should have been, yet watching my destined nemesis pretend to grovel made me nauseous and amused at the same time; in some way, it may always be funny. Watching Ganondorf kneel at my feet did not give me pleasure. Knowing he felt the same revulsion all others felt when they were forced to kneel gave me satisfaction, especially when his face betrayed his displeasure.

When I met his eyes again, I knew one day he would try to have revenge. I wasn't afraid then, though I knew he could have killed me with a slap of his hand. The fire in his eyes seemed to grow as he worked harder to contain his anger. I touched my hand where the Triforce rested and swallowed a gasp of pain. As he smirked again, I felt my nerves begin to burn with agony which only comes from the magic of a Triforce.

Though we responded when spoken to, our eyes remained locked in an endless challenge. I felt Impa lay a hand on my shoulder, her Shadows slowly awakening my own Triforce to defend me. I heard a whisper of a whimper escape my throat and knew the monster also heard. He stood, his back straight and head held high. I looked away, disgusted with him and myself.

I don't know how long it was until the meeting had ended. When it did, he took my hand and kissed it once more. I raised my eyes instinctively; what I saw made me pull my hand away and press back into the throne. I know the ice in my voice would have frozen even the Yetis, yet I did nothing to melt it as I gave him the customary thanks.

His orange eyes haunted me long after he left the castle. But as I watched him laugh and tell me the pleasure of his visit was all his, I knew he was only beginning his plan...whatever it was. He bowed to my father and me before backing towards the door, his eyes finding mine once more.

Suddenly his eyes were no longer orange, although the fire remained. Red eyes stared back at me, pink lips pulled back in a snarl. "Fight me," I heard someone growl in my ear.

-I-

Impa woke seconds before Zelda. With the fluidity of the Shadows she controlled, she moved to the side of the bed, out of Zelda's reach.

A scream of terror tore from her throat as she sat up, the nightgown tightening even further around her throat. Though her eyes were open, Zelda saw nothing but the fire-lit red eyes. With another scream, she clawed at her gown in an attempt to free herself. Her heart pounded in her chest as her terror grew.

"Zelda, I'm going to take your hands," Impa told her mentally. Without a sound, her hands closed around the clammy wrists of her Charge. She held them tightly, saying nothing as she waited for the other woman to notice her. It took several minutes for the screams to end, and another few minutes for the sobs to quiet. She gently released her hold on Zelda's now ice-cold arms and loosely wrapped her arms around the teenager.

"I'm here keta, I'm here." As she heard those whispered words, Zelda's sobs renewed. She said nothing as her nightmares replayed in her mind, her conscious unable to deal with the truth of what she dreamed. With strength she'd forgotten, she returned the older woman's embrace. A mewl of pain broke through her sobs.

This is how the dawn found them, tear-stained and exhausted by their inner demons, their embrace
never weakening.

Neither spoke of what Zelda had dreamed, just as Link never questioned the screams which were heard from their quarters for several weeks. It became another part of their routine, acknowledge but never mentioned.

Chapter End Notes

To clear things up, the castle was originally the one in OOT, but when Ganon blew it up, it was rebuilt (and the Town) to match TP. More explanation on that later.

SONGS FOR THIS CHAPTER:
Run This Town by Jay-Z
Whispers by Evanescence
Arise by Flyleaf
AN: I had a review from a reader named "Li." Since there was no way to reply, I'd like to address their review now. This is long but important.

Child abuse, especially sexual abuse, and pedophilia are sensitive subjects for me, as well as many readers of fanfiction. I'm not going to rush the abused person's recovery. I'm not going to make it fiction. While the Zelda fandom is my medium, this story is based on truth. I am trying to portray Zelda, Link and Impa as truthfully as I can. Some parts of this story may not make sense right away, and there's a reason. We don't always know the "why" or "how" behind a situation, we find out over time. My main goal is to inform through entertaining, to educate through a story I hope is enjoyable enough for readers to keep reading.

I have read many stories in which a victim/survivor of any sort of sexual abuse (molestation, rape, incest, torture, etc al) often return to "normal" within a few weeks or months. I have read stories where victims/survivors engage in sexual activity within days of their abuse (often rape and/or torture) and continue with their lives as if nothing has happened. I'm not going to sugar-coat this story by doing such a thing. There will be talk of child abuse, of torture, of drug abuse, of death and self-harm. There will be scenes where such things are described, and I will post a warning before the scene. There will be sexual situations, but no sex. This isn't a PWP, it's a tale of two women and their family.

I put a lot of work in this story. I will be using foreign government policies, foreign cultures and many other things I have never learned before. I apologize if I'm not accurate in some information. I'm trying to merge reality with fiction…and as many of us know, that isn't always easy. My goal is not to offend. As I said before, it's to educate. My beta and I revise and comb through each chapter, but we may miss a few mistakes. I apologize in advance.

Sincerely,

HermioneSparta

[-]

Chapter Four

Life's Lessons (I)

"27 of May

3'noon

I can tell she doesn't want me to know, and though I respect her privacy, I am worried. Link is helping her hide whatever secrets she carries, and my worry grows more. The black box deep in her mind hides the causes of her nightmares. She won't talk to me anymore, and doesn't look at me some days.

There are days I regret intensifying her training last year. She thinks I don't know the way she looks at me when my back is turned, or how she won't always meet my eyes; how she shies from my touch. The bond is rarely open fully….that is the most telling of all.

Have I done something to lose her trust? Goddesses, have I lost my right to be her Guardian? Is this a test to see how well I can protect her when she resists my help, my care? All I can hope is
that she has not forsaken my Guardianship without breaking the bond. No matter how it happens, her death will always be on my hands. I know she is not immortal, but even if she dies of old age I will blame myself."

Zelda laid the book back in the drawer, wondering why Impa would blame herself for death of old age. She had long since stopped agonizing over the workings of her Guardian's mind, yet some things would always cause her to seek answers. Impa's guilt was one of them.

As she thought of Impa's guilt, she tried to push her own away. Curiosity had gotten the better of her, ill-adviced though it was.

She placed a hand over her heart, feeling regret welling deep in her chest. Though she had begun avoiding the older woman first, Impa retaliated by not speaking to her.

No, a little voice in the back of her mind told her. That is not true. You stopped listening, stopped responding to her attempts to talk. Why would she keep trying when you reject her?

She winced, hearing the truth with Wisdom's words. She swallowed hard and closed the drawer. As she stood, she looked around the room.

Over the years, her own room had changed considerable, often without her input. Yet in contrast, Impa's room had not. In the corner opposite the door rested a bed with a quilt with the central design of the Sheikah Eye. She knew from experience various weapons were hidden around the bed, including a knife between the mattress and wall.

Her eyes scanned the bare gray walls and she felt heaviness settle atop regret in her heart. On the nightstand by the bed rested a photograph of her as an infant with her father. Against the opposite wall was a dresser, which was bare of decoration save for a candelabrum. Next to it was a matching wardrobe which Zelda knew held dresses Impa wore only if under threat by her father. …or if begged.

She tried not to laugh as she remembered the last time she had begged Impa to wear a dress and gotten her wish.

The happy memory caused her eyes to burn with unshed tears as the heartfelt words ran through her mind. I trust her…I trust her more than anyone, she reminded herself. She wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the sudden chill which encased her.

She shook her head and glanced at the desk across from the bed. A filled bookshelf rested atop the sturdy wood, beams of weak sunlight brushing the tomes. Nearly hidden by heavy curtains, a window rested between the desk and wardrobe.

She moved without thought until she stood before the cloth. Careful not to touch, she squinted in vain attempt to see what lay beyond the castle wall.

So well defended, the parallels between the window and Impa's heart were not lost on her. Both were secreted from all but those she deemed worthy of viewing such a "weakness''.

The washroom directly behind her reminded her just how small the room was. As a child, she had asked Impa how she could live in a limited space while her own room was twice the size.

Impa had smiled and told her the room had once been a servant's quarters.

She hadn't felt any better.
Yet further explanation and years of maturity led Zelda to understand Impa's choice. Though the room was small, it was well hidden by a door which was nearly impossible to find. The window hidden by surrounding balconies and vines which scaled this part of castle, making it nearly impossible to find. Ganondorf's attacks against the castle several years back had destroyed the room which once connected the kitchen to Impa's washroom.

Even though her own chambers disgusted her by the wasted space, Zelda knew on some level Impa enjoyed the intimacy of her small space. With a swallow, she realized she had doubly invading her Guardian's privacy.

She had no permission to be in the room.

With hasty footsteps, she retreated from the private space, closing the door tightly behind her. Feeling dirtied by her actions, she looked around her room and curled her lip in disdain.

Though much of the castle had been destroyed or damanged by Ganondorf's bombs, the area beneath her chambers contained the rooms in which he had stayed.

*No coincidence I'm sure,* she thought to herself.

Impa had taken her from the castle when the sky was as black as Ganondorf's heart. She knew their three month absence had infuriated the beast.

Neither of them cared overmuch.

The Sages had forced Ganondorf back into the Desert by the time they returned. It had taken over a year to rebuild the castle and surrounding area, even with the Sages working alongside the masons.

Many of her nights were spent sleeping beside Impa, a fact which had never bothered her. Guilt and shame wrapped around her throat as she thought of her actions over the past year, how she had begun closing herself off from the world.

Her fingers brushed the curtains surrounding her four-poster bed, and she couldn't help but smile in memory. They had argued for weeks before Impa had relented in that particular matter. Extra privacy curtains had been hung at Zelda's request, with the stipulated they be removed if deemed unsafe.

Zelda had rolled her eyes then, barely suppressing laughter. They'd both known Impa would not change her mind. It was she who mentioned them to begin with.

With a sigh, she ran her fingers over the heavy fabric and looked around once more. Bookshelves stood on one side of the main door, as desk on the other. The wall opposite Impa's door held nothing but more doors and a fireplace. Two balcony windows stood on either side of her bed, giving the room an illusion of lightness; to her, it felt all the more stifling.

Guilt filled her mind once more.

She fled the room without sparing a thought, racing through the sitting room before she could see it and into the hall.

The knights posted by her door blinked in shock and looked at each other, wondered what had caused her hasty flight. They decided not to ask.

*With Princess Zelda, it could be anything.*
She ran, ignoring the soldiers and workers. The faster she ran, the louder her thoughts became, the more she saw and the further her guilty burrowed.

Impa worried she was going to reject her; how could she tell her Guardian what was hidden deep in her heart? Even as she ran through the corridors, barely avoiding the occupants of the castle, she knew she simply…couldn't.

The walls and its decorations became a blur as she sprinted, unhindered by her heeled boots. Nary a sound passed her lips, not even when emotion threatened to choke her.

She only ran faster.

Link wasn't sure how he knew something was wrong. As he looked around the empty meeting room, he shook his head and decided not to wait any longer for the Lieutenant. With a muttered curse, he stepped into the hall and closed the heavy door behind him. With a sigh, he looked around for someone to speak to.

It was only by chance he saw the end of Zelda's dress as she rounded a corner. Without a thought he ran after her. His heavy footsteps did nothing to alert her to his presence, and he knew then it was she who had caused him to be on alert. Though she had closed their bond, he knew she could not shut it completely as the Triforce would not allow it.

"Zelda!" he called as she rushed through the circular courtyard and towards the soldiers' quarters. He knew she was running blindly, just as he knew Impa would find them soon.

He wrapped a hand around her wrist while calling her name. It was only his quick reflexes which saved him from her blade. As her dagger sliced through the air, he spun behind her, pinning her hand behind her back. "Zelda, it's me, Link. Calm down Zel…talk to me."

She said nothing as she twisted to free herself. When he released his hold, she sheathed the dagger and drew her sword with nary a word. She knew he would understand her silent request. She didn't smile in thanks as he pulled the Master Sword from his back, nor did she hesitate as he swung at her neck. She blocked his attack with ease, letting her rage and self-loathing fuel her motions. She didn't comment at he swore in shock, obviously unused to her full strength.

Impa watched them as she stood atop a pillar several stories up and several hundred feet away. Even as she analyzed their attacks and defenses, even as she cataloged every move Link made, she worried. Her heart felt as if it were in her throat as she watched tears run from Zelda's eyes. She touched her chest, wondering why her Charge would no longer seek her presence. Her eyes remained on them as they battled for nearly an hour. Link's offensive strategy told her he was more than tired, just as Zelda's continued silence told her she was in mental agony. She crouched atop the pillar and fell to the ground, her bent knees absorbing the impact. With silent steps, she walked behind the future monarch. Her worried frown only deepened when Zelda failed to notice her presence. Her hand cut through the air as quickly as the swords and wrapped around the other woman's bicep, her free hand grabbing her blade arm.

"You didn't sense me, at all," she murmured. Warmth escaped the clothed flesh under her hands in ripples, timed by the beat of a quick heart. Worry became anxiety which wrapped around her heart. When Zelda continued to say nothing, she released her and moved so they were facing one another.
She placed a hand under the other woman's chin and lifted her head, seeking the green eyes of her Charge.

"What is wrong?" she heard Impa whisper. The walls around her heart cracked and she lowered her eyes. She heard Link sheath his sword and back away. As the blade softly scrapped against the scabbard, a gentle breeze rustled the early spring leaves scattered around the terrace and spreading the perfume of new blossoms through the air. The scent of dew and flower buds mixed with the earthy tone which was Impa's natural perfume, the combination sending Zelda's mind into chaos. She kept her head low as she forced herself to swallow the words she truly wanted to speak.

"Nothing...nothing's wrong," she said quietly. Once more she felt a bent finger lift her head. She closed her eyes so as not to look in the red orbs which could read her so well. She felt her lips moving as she spoke silently to herself.

"Nothing," Impa repeated just as quietly. She heard Link close the gate to the castle and brushed her fingers down Zelda's cheek, ghosting over the dark bags under the young woman's eyes. The soft skin under her fingers warmed with blush, a reaction she knew was caused by Zelda's near-inability to lie to her. "If nothing is wrong," she said slowly, "then why do you hide from me?"

The private words which were never meant for any others' eyes flashed through Zelda's mind. Like a noose around her neck, guilt choked her and kept her from breathing. The sound of her heart pounded in her ears and masked the words she spoke. "I-I'm not hiding," she stuttered. Unable to hear beyond the sound of her pounding heart, she opened her eyes and looked at the warrior before her. "I just...I don't know. I'm sorry." "You've been so distant. It worries me," the Sheikah admitted in a breathless whisper. Agonizing worry filled her chest and clouded her mind, making it hard to think. She knew the sharp pain in her heart was not her own and wrapped her arms around the Hylian before her. "Oh Zelda, please calm down," she begged as her Charge began to cry. "Tell me what is bothering you, please. Is it something I said?" she questioned, the last word a bare whisper through their bond.

Her face pressed against Impa's neck, Zelda struggled to contain a sob. Deep in her mind, she could feel the truth begging to be let free...and she sealed it away once more.

Impa would never know must never know, she told herself.

"Nothing you did," she whispered as her tears fell. She bit her tongue, shaking with the force of her mental and emotional control.

Impa ran a hand down her shaking back, unsure if she believed what she was told. "You haven't been the same since I intensified your training last year."

A silence settled between them, broken only by the birds, trees and Zelda's sniffles. When she spoke, her voice was cold with bitterness. "Did you expect me to be?"

"No," Impa said with a shake of her head. "I didn't. But I did not expect you to avoid me like you have." She sighed softly, pausing to collect her thoughts. "I didn't expect you to hate me enough th-
"

Zelda pulled back and started Impa in the eyes, her shock evident. "I don't hate you! Why..." She trailed off, finally allowing herself to see how much pain she had caused her mentor and protector.

"Oh Impa, I'm sorry," she whispered as she hugged the other woman tightly. Armor dug into her
arms and chest as she continued her tight hold, which was returned with equal strength. "I didn't mean to…. Well, I did mean to avoid you. But I didn't mean to make you think I hated you. Goddesses, I'm so sorry." Her voice cracked with the weight of her actions. "I'm so, so very sorry."

With her eyes closed, Impa exhaled softly as the steel barriers around their bond slowly lowered. Relief filled her as the silence in her heart was replaced with emotions and words unable to be spoken. "I forgive you," she assured Zelda. She never loosened her hold on the princess, every part of her screaming to never let go. She rocked on her heels as she felt tears burn her neck once more. "I forgive you keta, I always will."

"I'm sorry," Zelda mumbled against Impa's neck as she shook with the pressure of her silence.

"Please tell me what's wrong," Impa begged softly. She wanted nothing more than to leave Zelda in peace. And yet the need to protect her would not allow harmful secrets.

"I can't. I… I can't. Please don't make me," she begged, breathless from the fresh wave of fear which engulfed her. She pulled away, wiping her eyes as she did.

"I-I'm going to…go..." Without another word she spun on her heel and ran towards the door she'd previously fled from.

Still with shock, Impa stared at Zelda's retreating form. She slowly shook her head and tried to grasp her thoughts. She knew something wasn't right and hadn't been for a long while. As worry pooled in her stomach, she ran after the princess. She wasn't sure where she was going, only following the bond as its strength fluxed.

It took her several minutes to find the room Zelda had taken refuge in. After calming her breathing, she laid a hand on the door knob, shivering from the cold of the metal. She turned it slowly and pressed a hand against the door, using her weight to keep the heavy wood steady as it opened. With little sound she moved from the empty corridor to the private study, closing the door just as silently behind her, looking ahead the entire time.

What she saw stiffened her limbs once more.

Partially concealed by a stack of books, Link sat in a plush wing-backed chair; in his lap was Zelda. Under normal circumstances, Impa would wait until Zelda no longer needed his comfort to make herself known. Yet she knew from Zelda's position it was not comfort the teenager was seeking.

Fury burned in her heart as she clenched her fist, unable to tear her eyes away. Straddling the Hero, Zelda's arms were wrapped around his neck and her torso pressed to his. His hands rested dangerously low on her hips, his fingers worming their way under her belt. Impa felt bile rise in her throat as her Charge, the same woman who had assured her Link was her brother in all but blood, pressed her lips to his.

Her moans cut deeper than any wound Impa had every taken on her behalf.

She felt blood trickle down her curled fingers and fall to the ornate Gerudo rug under her feet. Their breathless pants sliced through the blood rushing in her ears. As she watched Link slide his hands over Zelda's back and his fingers wind in the laces of her bodice, she wondered if she had fallen into a nightmare.

Until Zelda's husky voice confirmed that she was awake.

"Please Link, again."
As he ran a hand through her long golden-brown hair, Impa felt guilt begin to consume her fury. She was the one given the task of protecting Zelda, the one who was to keep her from situations such as these…and she had failed.

"Not here Zel, someone might see us," he whispered in a hoarse voice as she kissed his neck.

"Who? The door's locked," she murmured with a laugh.

"Are you sure?" he questioned softly as he lifted her head from his neck. He brushed her lips with his, avoiding her teeth as she tried to grab his lip. "Ah-ah, none of that," he chastised as he kissed her nose.

With a sigh, she snuggled against his chest, their armor doing nothing to hinder their loving embrace.

Impa felt her heart break. Not only had she been lied to, something she had thought Zelda was quite literally unable to do, but she had not seen anything. They had been sneaking around for how long only the Goddesses knew, and she had not only failed to see the changes in Zelda, she had failed to notice anything.

So preoccupied with her own worries, she had failed in her duty.

Only her guilt gave her the strength to turn from the scene and slip from the room. She paid no mind to the empty corridor as she leaned against the wall and slid to the floor, disgust and shame causing tears to spill down her ashen cheeks.

Her retreat left her no chance to see Zelda's green eyes meet Link's blue as their tears fell. She never saw Link hug Zelda tighter as she whispered "I'm sorry" and "thank you". She never heard her beg Link to keep quiet as he's always done, nor for Link to assure her that he would carry her secret as long as she needed him too.

She never heard Link whisper "I wish you would tell Impa", nor Zelda's frantically voice fears at telling her. She never heard the sobs of misery which escaped her Charge as she admitted reading her diary and the truth to what had happened over the past year.

As they continued to speak, Impa buried her head in her hands and wept. She felt something within her crack as what she assumed were Zelda's game with the bond become more intense. Silent sobs tore from her throat as Zelda's pain mixed with hers, something she was sure was created for her benefit.

Her trust in truth and wisdom shattered when Zelda whispered I'm sorry through her mind. Never again would she believe those words with such honesty.

[-]

[-]

AN: End Part One of Life's Lessons.

Zelda's chambers:

floorplanner[.]com[/]profile[/]18504656
Songs for this chapter:

What Hurts the Most by Cascada

Dance With the Devil by Breaking Benjamin

This is How a Heart Breaks by Rob Thomas
Days passed. Then weeks. Over a month of more secrets, seven weeks of plans, lapsed before anything was said.

"I WILL NOT MARRY HIM!"

Zelda's shriek echoed through the castle. In his study, her father winced and shared a glance with several advisors. All of them shook their heads and silently left the room, leaving the King and his Guards to their thoughts.

In her room, Zelda hurled a hand mirror at the wall, the shattered glass falling to the floor like glitter as the silver plate clattered to the ground. She stared at Impa, her chest heaving as rage coursed through her veins. Her skin flushed with the strain of control.

Impa calmly watched the wrathful teenager, her arms crossed. With a tone of boredom, she leaned against the wall and looked at her nails. "You can share a bed with him, but not marriage? Why Zelda, I'm shocked." She raised her eyes as Zelda choked on her breath.

Disbelief and heartbreak sliced through her rage and cleared the haze from her mind. With a second gasp, Zelda pressed a hand to her mouth. She heard nothing but the echoing of Impa's words. Her mind was void of everything save the undisturbed nonchalance on Impa's face. "You-" she began, only to break off with a cry of disgust. "I have never—"

"Do not lie to me!" Impa roared as she pushed off the wall. She watched rage fill Zelda's eyes once more and held her gaze. She closed the distance between them, standing close enough to catch the scent of lightning. Anger and pain, like copper against her tongue, invaded her nose and filled her lungs. Her nostrils flared as she tried to ignore the scent of building emotions and raw power.

"Do not play me for a fool," she hissed as her nose nearly brushed Zelda. "I saw you. Oh yes," she continued as Zelda's eyes widened. "I saw you on his lap, wanton. Have you no shame?!"

Zelda's disbelief grew as she felt Impa's fingers dig into her bare shoulders. She kept her eyes on Impa's, shocked in silence. Numbness consumed her as she understood what her Guardian thought, as she realized just how her actions had looked. "You don't...we weren't...it wasn't..." she trailed off, unable to form the words to tell the truth. She gasped and whimpered as pain ran from her shoulders down her arms. "Y-you're hurting me," she stammered in a whisper.

"I'm not—" Impa broke off as tears pooled in Zelda's eyes. Her anger forgotten, she lifted her hands as if scalded and took several steps backwards.

This was not her, this was not how she normally acted.

What had happened to her? To her control?

Never had she harmed Zelda. Though she had been wounded in training, the she'd never intentionally hurt her. She looked between her hands and the crimson marks which rested on the young woman's shoulders. She stared at the rapidly darkening bruises, seeing them as the accusations which surely shone from the other woman's eyes.

Zelda wrapped her arms around her chest and dropped her father's letter. Blindly, she stared at Impa
without seeing her. "I'm sorry," she whispered with a broken voice. "I-I'm so-sorry, so s-sor-sorry." She shivered even as a noon sun flooded her window and shone on her. "What you saw…it wasn't….it was something…." Her shivering grew more intense as Impa's self-disgust melted with her own inner turmoil.

"Zelda," Impa whispered softly as she extended a hand. Shame and confusion fended her anger as she waited. When Zelda didn't pull away, she laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

She was sure the other female wanted nothing to do with her at the moment, she was just as sure that her Charge needed someone to hold her. Ignoring the chill seeping from the young woman's skin, she drew her into a hug. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It-it's ok," Zelda murmured in shock. The sound of paper being compressed reminded her of the letter currently resting under Impa's boot. "Just…don't do it again…please."

"It's not ok." With a deep breath, she tightened her arms. "I won't keta, I promise."

The term of endearment caused something within her to crack. Tears ran down her cheeks as she laid her head on Impa's shoulder. Understanding her anger, though not forgiving her actions, she held tight to the Sheikah's words.

Ignorance was not something Impa could allow herself, not even regarding the irony of that…fateful day…and current events.

"I can't marry him. I won't," she heard the Hylian whisper (no, whimper, damn it all) into her shoulder. "What you saw, it wa-wasn't what…I didn't…"

She felt Zelda shiver again as fear snaked through the bond and wrapped around her heart.

"All right," she said softly. "I believe you," she murmured even as doubt continued to plague her. "If it wasn't…what it looked like, what was it?"

Though her words were quiet, implications filled the room.

"You don't believe me," Zelda stated as she pulled away. She hugged herself once more, her head hung as misery dripped from her voice.

"Why should I?" Trying to keep the bitterness from her voice, Impa lifted her chin. "One day you tell me he is your brother, the next I find you in his lap and all but undressing. What was it Zelda? A misguided attempt at comfort?"

"No."

"Then what?"

You have a choice, Princess, she heard a little voice in the back of her mind snidely whisper. Make it.

"I can't tell you," she said whispered through the bond. "I'm sorry Impa. I can't tell you. Not now."

"One day?" Impa asked with a bare hint of hope.

"One day," Zelda promised.

"I still don't believe you."
"I know."

"I'm still very angry."

"So am I," Zelda pointed out. She smiled sadly. When Impa did not return her smile, she lowered her eyes. The anger which had been her defense for over a year drained from her like the crumbled paper on the ground. Something within her raged at Impa's choice to go to her father, yet she felt little emotion besides grief.

At the moment however, all she could feel was the weight of her silence, the agony of their shared pain and mistrust. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

"I know. So am I."

"Will you ever trust me again?"

"One day."

"But not today?"

"Do I have a reason to?"

"No…I suppose you don't."

They both jumped, their conversation forgotten as the sound of fist meeting wood rent the air. The bedroom door behind them rattled from the impact, a harsh voice only slightly muffled. "Your Majesty, His Highness King Daphnes requires your immediate audience."

Zelda grief echoed the glittering mirror under the force of her anger. Her eyes fell on the door as she felt hatred boil in her blood, curdling her rage and turning it into something new, something she had no name for.

Impa watched her for several minutes as she stared at the door. Lost in her rage, Zelda failed to realize Impa's scrutiny, failed to erect her battered shields and hide in her cloak of formal regality.

It was on then, when she forgot herself so entirely, that Impa could see the truth. The haunting shadows deep within her eyes made themselves as her tan skin paled. Strong shoulders trembled as her lithe body tensed, defending against an unseen blow.

She nearly wrote it off, believing it to be results of the war and her…teenage angst. Yet words spoken with the barest of breathes reached her ears, convincing her otherwise.

"As if there isn't enough injustice in the world, now I have another tyrant to deal with."

As she continued to stare, assessing this new revelation, she couldn't help but wonder: what exactly was this secret Zelda was keeping.

Some part of her didn't want to know.

[-]

Breaking from her enraged trance took Zelda nearly ten minutes and another summoning bang on her door.

A red haze gripped her mind, fuelled by the anger and pain boiling in her veins. Some part of her, some tiny bit of calm amongst the storm, knew she was being irrational. They were doing what
they thought best.

And yet, she could not bring herself to care.

Impa…her father…how often had they "done best" with disregard to her?

The double doors, hung perfectly despite their weight, swung open beneath her hands. She never paused, her quick steps making short distance of the stately office.

"I will not marry him," she announced without permeable. Her words were hard, containing finality beyond her station. "I do not care what you think you know, your information is false. Impa observations were not what she believed them to be."

There was no hurry in her father's ascent. Only when he stood fully, his heavy gaze resting on her, did he speak. "I do not care what you claim such actions were. The fact of the matter is they happened. You will marry him."

Indignation flared anew within her, spurred by the simple knowledge that he would not listen.

"On what grounds?" she hissed through clenched teeth. "Acting as a teenager? Letting my emotions, hormones, whatever say you, get a better of me? Have you not acted as such, father?" she spat, her eyes narrowing.

Impa quietly closed the heavy doors, pausing for the briefest moments once the latch clicked. She turned, her gaze landed upon the eldest Guard. His narrowed eyes were a challenge she met without hesitation, refusing to bow. The marks upon her Charge's shoulder were an accusation echoed within his eyes, the weight of words unspoken between two Sheikah.

There was no satisfaction when he turned to the King. Merely sorrow.

"What I did in the past," Daphnes said after a pause, "Is not what is important. Your actions—"

"Correct, my actions. My mistakes. Though I am your daughter, your heir, I am not perfect. None of us are! We may be the ruling family of Hyrule, but even we are not immune to the imperfects of our minds…our bodies."

"I never said we were," he told her. "Yet there is a difference between a mistake and…this! This horrid, filthy display of impropriety and disregard. Have you no shame? Clearly there's little decency—"

His words fell silent, replaced by the sharpest of inhales. His gaze, burning with the fires of an infuriated father and weighted by the crown, moved from Zelda to Impa. Face reddened, he sought breath, choking on this latest betrayal.

"You! What makes you think to stand there after you've laid hands upon her? How dare you presume—"

"Be silent, father!" Zelda cried, stepping forward once more. She watched his eyes snap towards her, his body trembling as fingers curled into fists.

"What makes any of us immune to anger? Did the Goddesses themselves no destroy lands in their wrath? You cannot accuse Impa of mistreating me without hypocrisy. Is my future no less important than my present? Do I not receive a say in how I will live my life?

"We've all made mistakes. You, I, Link, Impa…even mother, Nayru rest her soul. We are human,
prone to faulty decisions and the painful lessons they bring. You may be Hyrule's ruler, but what gives you the right to dictate how we learn from those mistakes?

"Or has our monarchy become a dictatorship without my notice?" Sarcasm coated her rhetoric, lingering even after she ceased to speak.

Captive, Daphnes' could only stare. The fire in her eyes, the wisdom in her words…when did his little girl had become an adult?

Rounding the desk, he felt something within him just…give. It was simply…too much anymore.

By the Mothers, he missed his wife. What would she say, if she were here? How would she advise him, what would be her response to the last few days?

His hand shook as he reached for her shoulder. Every so gently, as if she were a babe once more, he ran his fingers down her bruised skin. Her flinch, the recoil she could not entirely suppress, brought a muttered curse to his lips. His hand fell on its own accord.

Her rigid posture, the defiant lift of her chin, told him what he needed to know.

How interesting, this reversal.

She would not allow him to punish Impa.

As if perceiving his thoughts, she calmly looked at Impa before returning her eyes to him. Her lips twisted into a smile worthy of a thief, her voice soft.

"She has not violated Cosmic Law. She made a mistake, experienced a lapse in judgment. Will you condemn her for an action she clearly regrets?"

Inspecting the impassive Guardian, the widowed man saw no regret. And yet, he knew the Sheikah woman well. Self-directed disgust and hatred no doubt ate at her heart, regret being the least of her inner torment. Only when she nodded did he look at his daughter once more.

It took several moments to find the proper words, his reluctance making it all the more difficult. "I will not speak of her…" He took a breath and closed his eyes in acceptance. "I will not speak of her mistake again. You are correct, it is not my right nor my place. As your father, seeing you harmed in any way concerns me."

The sound of disbelief which escaped his heir was not fit for a lady, though it expressed her sentiments clear enough. Resting a hand over his heavy heart, he opened his eyes to meet hers.

"But I will not change view that you should marry Link." He raised his other hand to silence her protests before they could begin. "I will not and cannot force you to marry; our family has not done such practices for many centuries. My letter informed you he was to be your first suitor, not that you would be marrying him."

"I will not marry him," she whispered.

Her clenched fists betrayed her. She turned to the nearest bookshelf, desperate to escape the gazes which bored into her. The pristine books mocked her as ran her fingers down their spines.

"I will not," she repeated. Softer now, her voice carried with the weight of her regret and defeat. "I made a mistake, will you punish me for it? If so, choose a punishment which is not marriage."
"This was not to punish you," Impa said softly.

When Zelda said nothing for several minutes, she turned inward. Only turmoil and confusion met her through the bond. She closed her eyes and exhaled softly. "What are you feeling?" she asked quietly.

Their ritual of questions gave her comfort, securing her knowledge that while Impa was more than angry with her, she was still cared for…still loved. "I don't know," Zelda murmured, her own eyes closing.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Hold me?" she requested. Her mental voice was like a gentle breeze, felt yet barely heard.

Impa wrapped her arms around Zelda's shoulders. Her cheek rested on the other woman's head. "I'm still mad at you," she whispered when Zelda turned in her arms, facing her. "Furious. But I'm worried even more."

"I know. I can't tell you," came the quiet response. "I'm sorry Impa. I…I need more time."

"You will tell me one day?"

"I will."

With haunting thoughts, King Daphnes watched their display. Never had he known them to stay angry at one another for long. It was simply…not their way.

His lips twitched in sad amusement as he recalled one instance a few years back. According to Link, who had been frantic with worry when seeking his advice, Guardian and Charge hadn't spoken to one another in three days.

Not weeks, mind you. But days. He'd calmed the poor boy with tea and discussion, recognizing the burden of a shunned peacemaker. How often had the same fate been his? Dignitaries were no less quarrelsome than two headstrong females.

They stood in silence for what felt like an eternity before Zelda pulled away. She bowed her head for a moment in respect. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"You were right to."

"Not right enough to hurt you. Never can I be justified in hurting you, nor would I want to be."

"Where now?"

Impa shook her head, understanding the question for what it was. "I don't know. To bed I supposed. I'm exhausted."

Zelda took a step back, unable to swallow her quiet snickers as her eyes rolled heavenward. "Aren't we all,"

Another soft sound escaped her, this one of wariness rather than amusement. Making her way to the ornate desk, she stood beside it, silent…waiting for her father to acknowledge her. Only when he looked at her, seated once more, did she speak.
"We all make mistakes, and we should all learn from them. I will not apologize, for my actions had nothing to do with you. I do not know what to say to make you believe I meant no harm."

"And I thank you, sire, for giving me some choice over my future."

He winced, the neutrality of her tone barely hiding the sarcasm lacing her words.

The truth that his rash decision, however justified it may have seemed, caused her pain… It brought him more anguish than her anger ever had.

"I'm sorry child." He wasn't surprised when her reply was a nod. He watched her join Impa by the doors, leaving him to his duties without another word.

He stared at the double doors long after they were closed, feeling the weight of his station – of the distance it put between them.

Resting his head in his hands, he wondered once more if allowing the country to come before his daughter had been the right decision.

And yet again, he realized there was no reverse such a choice.

[-]

Their walk to their shared chambers was one of contemplative silence.

The posted soldiers nodded to them, as silent as the walls. Neither reacted as the two women neared the door, one behind the other. It was commonplace for Impa to stand behind her Charge, reaching around her as she did now.

Scarred fingers wrapped around the smooth brass handle. Only when the younger woman slipped between the cracked doors, the faint sound of the inner doors opening and closing reaching her ears moments later, did she address the men.

"No one is to be allowed entrance to these rooms if I am not in attendance, not even Link." She watched them nod, meeting her eyes for the barest moment before turning forward once more. "If there is another summon, the inner chamber is not to be entered under any circumstances. Is this understood?"

"But the King—"

She turned with deliberate slowness towards the protesting solider. "King Daphne's authority does not extend over my own in regards to Princess Zelda's safety, as he and you well know. The inner chambers are not to be entered for a summons under any circumstance. Is. That. Clear?"

"We understand, Guardian Impa," came the quick reply, echoed though it was. Their voices were firm as they continued to stare forward, their eyes never leaving the Hylian banner hanging on the wall.

She followed Zelda's example and slipped through the cracked door, locking it behind her.

"Impa." The other woman's soft voice drifted from the passage between the sitting room and their chambers.

"I'll be there shortly," she replied as she stepped away from the door. "I want to bank the fire."

Only when she heard the retreating footsteps did she make her way towards the fireplace. Soothed
by the crackling logs and waving flames, there was finally time to just...breathe.

And yet, with each stroke of the iron against the fragile wood, she felt her emotional control begin to slip.

Her fingers met warm stone as she laid the poker beside her, eyes sliding closed. The heat of the embers washed over her in waves, invoking a calm state with each soothing caress. Without thought, she stood, breath escaping in a soft rush.

She reached forward and ran her fingers over the ragged stone surrounding the hearth, the world a sea of pulsing blood red. The grooves of her fingers caught of the sharp peaks of the warm stone, causing a slight rasp to reach her ears. Her thoughts faded to silence as she traced the mortar, feeling the imperfections with sensitive nerves.

A gentle breeze flowed through the room. It swept around the chairs and tables, hugging the floor like a lover. The cool air wrapped around her, carrying a sense of peace which caused her eyes to burn with unshed tears. Taking comfort in the forces which were her own, the Sage of Shadows stood before the dying embers with a coil of dark purple energy wrapped around her.

Her peace faded as quickly as it had come. She dug her fingertips into the stone, head bowed. Without a sound she allowed her pain to overtake her. Glowing like the embers before her, she felt Zelda's love radiate from her heart to push away the emptiness left by her pain. A husky chuckle tore from her throat when she opened her eyes.

That she was not allowed to feel her own pain hurt worse than any lie Zelda had told her.

"I do not want your pity," she told the room.

Knowing she had been caught, Zelda moved from the passageway towards the fireplace. She watched as the tension grew within her Guardian, her steps the cause.

The lengthening shadows seemed to reach for her, their purpose unknown.

She couldn't help by shiver. Pulling her dressing gown tighter around herself, she continued to move closer to the other woman, only stopping when she felt the heat of her body.

"I have no pity for you," she said softly so as not to break the spell which had fallen over them. "Respect, admiration and love I hold in my heart, but never pity. You do not deserve it."

"No, I don't," Impa agreed just as softly. "Nor do I deserve to be kept from feeling my emotions."

"I wouldn't dare presume to have such a right." Zelda laid a hand on Impa's shoulder. The cool metal of her armor under her hand emulated the wall she had placed between them, giving it a physical presence. "I was watching you, and I felt your pain...but I didn't try to stop it."

"I don't believe you."

"You have no reason to believe me, to trust me. I know that."

The only source of light in the room dimmed noticeably. Without a word, Impa turned from the fireplace and quickly crossed the room and enter the passage connecting the sitting area to the inner sanctuary.

The sound of hurried steps, of desperation to keep her within sight, made her heart ache once more.
"This isn't working," she said without turning around. As she entered Zelda's chambers, she turned to the left and walked towards the door leading to her own bedroom.

"What isn't...oh." The reference to the state of their relationship gave Zelda mental pause. She closed the double doors connecting her rooms to the passage, lingering before them for several moments.

The near silent scrape of Impa's door reached her ears, breaking her rather incoherent thoughts. She turned and strode to the half-open door. She watched from the threshold as Impa lit the tinder in her own hearth.

"I'm sorry?" she questioned.

Impa closed her eyes as she sat on her weapon chest. She sighed softly, rubbing her temples as she sought words.

"This isn't about being sorry keta, it's about everything. You are hiding something which is obviously harmful. How do I know?" She opened her eyes and looked at Zelda, smiling humorlessly at her shocked expression.

"Because if it wasn't harmful, you wouldn't go through such lengths to hide whatever it is. Though it goes against every instinct I have, I won't press you to tell me. I can't protect you if you don't speak to me, if you continue to ignore and defy me.

"Know something Zelda. No matter how angry I may be, how hurt I am by your silence, everything I do and ever will do is for you, to keep you safe." With a deep breath, she rose and made her way to the door. She pulled the barrier farther back and closed the space between them. Without hesitation, she pressed her hand to Zelda's cheek, molding her fingers to the curve of her face.

"I exist for you," she stated without hesitation. "I breathe for you, my heart beats for you. You are my life, my Charge. I can never know any different, you know this. One day you will tell me the truth, and I await that day. Until then, allow me to help you...please. It hurts me to know I can't protect you from yourself, to know you don't trust me enough to tell me the truth."

She pressed a finger to Zelda's lips, stalling her protests. "You may trust me, or you may not. Yet something has caused you to lose your trust in my ability to listen to you. Something has made you believe you can't confide in me, possibly made you think I won't believe you. And I accept this. As you said, none of us are perfect. You're only seventeen, and yet you carry the weight of Hyrule on your shoulders."

She gently touched the bruises hidden beneath the younger woman's dressing gown, grimacing at her own actions. "I understand what it means to never be a child. Despite my attempts, you never had a real childhood. It is impossible for any child born of royalty to have the freedom and innocence of youth that other children had. I gave you what I could, and I hope it was enough."

"It was," Zelda stated quickly as Impa took a moment to breath. She met rub eyes, unflinching under the weight of the emotion within them. "It was more than I would have had without you." Crashing thunder warned of a coming storm, hiding the sound of her shuddering inhale. "It's not that I don't trust you, or think you can't handle what I...what I can't tell you. It's that I can't tell you. I've tried Impa, I really have. But I can't."

Lightning flashed through the hidden window, reflecting in grey-green eyes.
Impa murmured "Ok," and touched her forehead to Zelda's. "I won't press you. When you can tell me, I'll be here." She paused before allowing a grin to break free. "Now calm down or else you won't be able to sleep."

Zelda tried not to laugh at the absurd statement. She giggled softly and pulled her head away to cover her mouth. The next flash of lightning only caused her to laugh even more. Not knowing why she found everything suddenly hilarious, she staggered passed Impa and sat on her bed. Tears of relief rolled down her cheeks as the tension between them – finally – began to fade.

Impa watched her, chuckling quietly as Zelda hiccuped between peals of laughter. She rested against the wall and crossed her arms over her chest. Her chuckles became quiet laughter as Zelda attempted to explain her amusement. "I understand," she said between her own laughs.

As tears of amusement replaced tears of sadness, Zelda felt her relief fill her chest and spread through her body. Warm joy chased the chill of rage and grief, leaving behind a sense of lightness which flowed through her veins. When her laughter began to calm she sat up and wrapped a hand around her stomach. "We needed that," she stated. Her lips twitched with mirth as she met Impa's sparkling eyes.

"We did," Impa agreed with hesitation. The same warmth spread through her limbs and surrounded her mind, leaving her lightheaded. She met Zelda's smile with her own and felt her heart skip at the amount of trust, of love which shone in Zelda's eyes.

Zelda stood and padded over to Impa, her bare feet scapping against the rough carpet. She retied the sash on her dressing gown before hugging the Sheikah. When strong arms wrapped around her, she felt another wave of warmth wash through her.

For the first time in a year, she felt...happy.

They held each other for several minutes, the heat from the fire driving the cold just as surely as they drove away the darkness which had plagued them. When Impa pulled away and shooed Zelda into her own room, they shared a smile and forwent their nightly words of parting; tonight, there was no need to wish a useless "good night".

Only the need to assure one another they would see each other in the morning.

Just as the walls around their bond had fallen, the door between their rooms remained open. If only for the moment, there was no need to be distant when they were already apart. For the night, they would take comfort in the presence of the other.

Until dawn, they would rest in the peace of truth and love.

As silence fell in their rooms, both women smiled as dreams of happiness filled their minds.

Their problems could wait until morning.

**Songs:**

Songs for this chapter:
Stand in the Rain by Superchic[k]
Away From Me by Evanescence
Dawn's fractured sunlight painted the cool glass with a rainbow of warmth. The early spring rays fell against the carpet, interweaving with the shadows cast by the fire. A dance of dark and light crept across the floor and walls, driving the night from the room.

As the gentle light peeked through the curtains surrounding her bed, Zelda murmured in her sleep and pulled the heavy comforter over her eyes. Just as the night slowly faded around her, her dreams slipped from her mind, allowing reality to invade her thoughts. The cocoon of blankets did little to shield her from the truth of the waking world, yet she continued to rest in the calm warmth which had kept the cold of the night from waking her.

The sound of bare feet gently padding around the room brushed the rest of the night's fog from her mind. With a soft smile, she pulled the covers back down to her chest and watched Impa through the parted curtains. "Morning," she greeted.

"Morning," Impa said just as quietly. She felt a smile turn her lips upward and made no move to stop it. She leant against the wall and grinned as Zelda flinched when her bare skin made contact with the cool stone. Amusement bubbled in her stomach as Zelda threw the covers back only to shriek and burrow under them once more. "While it is warm," she heard herself say, "it is still rather chilly for spring."

"Chilly!" Zelda uttered the word as if it were a curse. "Freezing more like!" She cast her eyes in the direction of the fireplace in accusation. "I fed it well."

A soft snort met her words as Impa continued to lean against the wall. Her amusement grew as Zelda attempted to pull her heavy dressing gown on without leaving the covers.

"It's not funny," Zelda whined as she turned her eyes to Impa.

"It is. It's truly not that cold Zelda."

"It is so."

"Not."

"Is."

"Not."

They stared at one another for several moments before their composure cracked and giggles fell from their lips. Three days had passed since their "talk". While an awkward silence would fall between them at times, it was not as heavy as it had been. The angry tension which had constantly hung between them had dissolved like the morning fog, only an imprint of its previous existence lingering in the air.

It was this imprint which caused their laughter to fade into a pensive silence. Zelda rose from the bed and tied the sash of her dressing gown in an attempt to ward off the chill. She stood behind the open curtains and watched Impa for a moment. She allowed her eyes to follow the sunlight as it made a path down her body.
Without her armor, Impa looks approachable; soft even, she thought to herself. A well-worn nightshirt and winter leggings displayed the feminine shape of her body. A thin robe hung on her shoulders, covering her arms without hindering her movement as it parted enough to reveal the swell of her breasts. Her gray, shoulder-length hair seemed white in the rising sun as it framed her face in gentle waves, softening the sharp angles of her cheeks and strong chin.

Zelda bit her lip and guiltily met Impa's eyes as a blush burned her cheeks.

Staring at someone while they were unaware was one thing. To continue to stare when it was clear the person was aware was another.

'Mortification' was not a strong enough word.

Impa smirked and allowed Zelda to speculate on her thoughts. She watched her fidget in nervous embarrassment.

"Is there a reason you were inspecting me?" she questioned softly. She kept her laughter inside as Zelda's eyes became wide with shock.

'Did she just purr?!' Zelda felt her mouth open and close as she tried to speak. Eventually, she squeaked "No," and ducked her head to those piercing eyes. "I-I mean, I didn't...wasn't..." She bit her lip and swallowed hard as her hands became clammy.

"Why are you so nervous?" Pushing herself from the wall, Impa kept her eyes on Zelda as she moved closed the space between them. As she left her place in the sunlight to enter the half-lit area behind the curtains, she watched Zelda's clumsy attempts to brush her hair from her face.

"I-I'm not nervous!" Zelda protested as darted her eyes around the room. She licked her lips and glanced at the smirking woman before looking at the floor once more. With her eyes on the ornate red and gold carpet, she shook her head. She watched her hands turn red as her embarrassment spread through her entire body. Her hair fell forward, hiding her from the room as she sought whatever solace she could find.

"You're flushed, heat is rising from your skin," Impa observed. She spoke softly as she brushed Zelda's cheek with her fingers, the heat of her skin doing nothing to hide its softness.

"You're twisting your hands, possibly to hide the fact that you want and need to move around." She knelt so her face was below Zelda's and grasped the Hylian's hands in her own.

"You're stuttering, something you only do when you're afraid or nervous. Your hands are cold despite your flush." She raised her eyes and tried to hold Zelda's gaze. "You're avoiding my eyes. You haven't pulled away, which means you aren't afraid...therefore you are nervous."

"Your logic is flawed," Zelda murmured.

"How?" She placed the tips of her fingers under Zelda's chin and gently lifted her head. As her hair fell to the side, Impa stared in her eyes. "You feel vulnerable."

"Yes," came the whispered affirmation from chapped pink lips. Her breath caught in her throat as Impa raised one knee, giving herself at least a head's height. "I feel..."

When she trailed off, Impa leaned forward so her breath mixed with Zelda's. "You feel...?" she prompted quietly.

The flickering shadows of hidden pain caused her heart to skip a beat and a chill to run down her
spine. Realizing in that instant just how her position could seem, she shook her head.

"Pardon me," she requested as she moved backwards.

"No need to forgive anything," Zelda murmured as she averted her eyes once more. Her hands shook as she clenched them again.

"Are you cold?" Impa asked as she hesitantly sat beside the trembling teenager.

"Yes. No. I don't know," Zelda admitted after a moment. "I don't know much of anything." Without pause she stood and moved around the bed towards her wardrobe. "I need to dress," she told herself as she quickened her pace. Her heart pounded in her chest as chaos filled her mind, the long shadows cast by the furniture in the room wrapping around her darkening thoughts.

A chill ran down her spine as she heard Impa follow her and she left the door open in hopes heat from her room would enter the wardrobe. Ignoring the mirrored wall as if it didn't exist, she stood in the center of the room and gazed at all the different styles of clothing. "What is the purpose of all this?"

Shocked by the question, Impa took time to collect her thoughts before answering. "To denote your royal station…among other things," she admitted grudgingly, wincing as the words fell from her lips. How disgusting a truth it was.

"Such as to attract a suitor?" Zelda questioned softly, knowing the answer before she had spoken.

Once more a silence fell between them, carrying the weight of unacknowledged truth. Someday, Zelda would marry, and it was possible her husband would be someone she knew very little of.

"I suppose, in a way," Impa regretfully confirmed. She watched as Zelda ran her fingers over her daily gowns and then her formal attire. Worry made her stomach churn as Zelda pulled several unworn gowns from their hangers and threw them over the chair centered in the room.

Without thought, Zelda shed her dressing gown and untied her flannel nightgown enough to let it hang off one shoulder. She pulled the first cumbersome dress over her body and yanked the laces until they were tight enough for the dress to stay in place. With a little wiggling, and a few muttered curses, the nightgown pooled at her feet.

She met her own gaze in the mirror. Her lips twisted into a sneer of disgust, destroying whatever curiosity she may have had. She ran a hand down the sensuous combination of velvet and silk, her fingers tracing the extensive embroidery. "I am to turn eighteen next year, and the King has ordered gowns which display my womanly charms," she spat.

She turned and watched the dress flare at her feet, showing her legs. "Despite the full shirt, my legs are displayed. And this is only the first dress. The 'decorative' lengths of layered cloth often called short sleeves are nothing more than a way to hide my muscles, which I'm more than sure the gloves will finish."

Impa watched her repeat the process, hands shaking with fury. She said nothing, letting the younger woman vent.

She was correct, however.

The dresses specifically bought to be worn after her birthday did not hint at her feminine figure; they displayed it with little regard to modesty. It was distasteful at best, cruel at worst.
Gall burned her throat.

The King was a fine one to discuss respect and shame.

"I am not an object, a doll he can dress and sell to the highest bidder!" Zelda snarled as she tore the hated slip of a dress from her body and threw it to the floor in two pieces. Tears of rage and hurt stung her eyes as she stared at the third dress.

She had assumed, in a moment of hopeful self-delusion, the new dresses had been given to her as a way to show his support. And now…she knew otherwise. Her father – nay, the King – had no intention of supporting her decision.

She had interrupted his plans for her marriage to Link.

"He is no father of mine," she muttered as she wrenched the third garment over her head. So fueled by her rage, notice any difference between it and the others before facing the mirror.

It wasn't a dress.

Breathe shuddering in her lungs, Impa felt bile rise in her throat. She had never believed the King, even in his worst mood, would stoop to such depths.

They both stared, if for different reasons. Impa watched Zelda's already flushed skin become almost maroon, emotion burning her from within. She swallowed hard as her stomach continued to churn, protesting each new revelation.

Opaque white silk brushed the floor, the nightgown hugging her body like a lover. Five tiny pearls held lace and silk closed between her breasts, the straps atop her shoulders nothing more than delicate wisps of silk. Like flower petals, twin strips of silk hugged Zelda's breasts,

"It was your mother's," Impa heard herself whisper. "She placed it in storage to be kept until you were engaged. I was to retrieve it and give it to you, her gift for you."

"There should have been a note in the box for you."

"No doubt His Majesty has burned such a note," Zelda snarled. Her tears fell as her shoulders shook with suppressed sobs. She stood before the mirror, betrayal wiping away all thought.

How could he?

"I knew have the King of Hyrule as my father would mean he had little time to care for me as other fathers did with their children. He showed his love through gifts, not actions. I've long since learned to accept his gifts without fuss, just as I know emotions are not something he wishes to discuss. But…I never knew he would stoop to such a level," she whispered.

"I look at this gown and I don't see something a woman would wear for her husband. I see a pretty wrapping for a pretty prize, a jewel which outshines all others."

Her bitter words tore through Impa's rage and struck her heart. The dry room caused her eyes to water all the more as she continued to stare at the woman clothed in white. The implications of such a simple nightgown were drowning her. If it had been presented in the box by either herself or the King, it would have been a present from her dead mother.

Yet it had not been. Placed so carelessly near her new attire was a message neither of they could ignore. Zelda's marriage would never be for her. It was a matter of State, a matter for the King to
control and manipulate much like he manipulated his chess pieces.

Never had she been so ashamed to be considered a friend of the King.

Yet as both women continued to silently rage of the injustice, King Daphnes was searching through the very room his late wife had placed the same gown in.

He'd been foolish in many ways regarding his daughter. He would not apologize for the past – if he did, he would never stop. But…he could do this. He could give her the gown, tell her the stories she had always begged to hear. He could support her decision – her freedom to choose – in this way.

How similar the present could echo the past. His mother had gifted this to her daughter-in-law, though he hadn't known that until their wedding night. She had stood before him in their chambers, a vision in flowing white. Blond hair plaited behind her, her lowered eyes and tense shoulders had betrayed the truth.

She was wearing it because she thought she had to. After a few moments, she had looked at him with defiance and worry marring her beautiful face. He had met her eyes and told her in no uncertain terms that he'd prefer her comfortable. Whether she wore the gown or changed into something else, it was up to her.

She'd stared at him for a bit, blinking in shock. When she had asked him why he was being so kind to her, he had taken her cold hands in his.

"Because," he had stated, "Marriage is a partnership. Not a country to be governed or an army to be commanded. We must work together. I can't begin to wonder what my mother has told you, and I don't wish to; I'm sure her words are what has put such fear in your eyes."

He kissed her knuckles, allowing his lips to linger in an attempt to calm her. "I am sorry if I gave you the impression I am cold and unfeeling. I'm not. Nor am I a monster. A man, yes, but never a monster. My mother's first marriage was a disaster, and I'm sure my father was not as nice to her as he could have been. I haven't the faintest clue what women tell each other, but I do know this.

"We entered this marriage for peace between our countries. But I don't want that to be the reason we continue it. We may or may not love. Regardless of why this marriage happened, it is still a partnership of respect and equality. And I refuse to treat you as anything less than an equal. As such, if you are uncomfortable, then I will try to make you comfortable. That includes this," he added with a grin as he pinched the thin gown between his fingers. "I may be the future king of this country, but I don't rule this marriage. We make decisions together."

She had said nothing for several minutes as she thought, shivering from the cold. When he took her in his arms, he was unsurprised to feel tears wet his neck where she had hidden her face. "A partnership," she had whispered, "Is more than I could have dreamt for. Thank you."

A sad smile graced his lips as Daphnes recalled the night.

No…he might not agree with Zelda's decision, but he would not allow his opinions to rule his decisions. He and her mother had made their choices, and she would make hers. He would not stand in the way of them.

With a sigh, he looked around the small room once more before shaking his head and turning to the door. It took him mere moments to leave the room and lock it once more, sealing the past away as surely as he had destroyed any chance of regaining his daughter's trust.
Another sigh escaped him as he slowly made his way to the dining room he, Link, Zelda and Impa often supped in.

He nor the Guards following him noticed the figure concealed by the dark shadows of the corner. A smirk of triumph graced full lips. "It is done."

"Begin phase two," came the malice-filled response with the receptive mind. "And waste no time."

Zelda and Impa made their way to the dining room. So deep in their soundless discussion, neither heard Link call their names.

It wasn't until he darted in front of them, nearly colliding with them, that they focused on the corridor properly. Zelda flushed and glanced at Impa, noting her grin.

"Did you need something?" she asked her pseudo-brother.

Link avoided her gaze with practiced ease, running hand through his hair and nervously straightening his tunic as he spoke. "Just…erm…are you going to breakfast?"

"We are. Is there a reason we should not?"

"No!" he said quickly.

"Link!" Impa snapped after several moments, patience wearing thin. "If you are not going to tell us the reason for this obstructive delay, would you please move so we can eat?"

He swallowed hard, seeing the ire within her crimson eyes. "I know you're still angry with the King, and—"

Zelda raised a hand to cut him off, her voice firm and cool like the spring breeze winding through the windows. "Whether I—no. If we are angry or not with the His Majesty is irrelevant. We have always taken breakfast in the dining room, even when the castle was under threat of attack."

She stared in those azure discs, watching the emotion play within them. "Unless there is a reason the room is unavailable, I request you move aside so we may continue forward."

"It's not unavailable," he mumbled, following them without thought. "Zelda, you don't want to go in there!"

Impa spun in her heel, her voice slicing through the air as she stared at him. "You will cease to dictate her actions with your assumptions, or you will give a reason for such a presumptive statement. Which shall it be?"

"Impa, if you intimidate him too long your food will be cold," Zelda called without missing a step. Eyes firmly kept forward, she never saw Link shrink away Impa, nor the moment when Impa tapped the Master Sword in warning.

Link blanched as Impa withdrew her hand from the Sword and walked beside Zelda once more. The knowledge that she could—and would—decapitate him with his own sword was terrifying.

Tugging her pristine sleeves in nervous habit, Zelda entered the dining room without a word. Only when Impa held out her chair did she focus on those around her. With the barest of glances at her father, she nodded to the Sheikah around them as Impa took her own seat.
Something told her it was going to be a long day.

Link sat in the remaining open seat, the intimate table feeling crowded. He sat beside the King and glanced at the Sages across from him. Their rage was a tangible force.

He glanced to the door, wondering if it would be best just to...leave. He saw it then, the reason he had originally stopped them.

Damn it all.

He slid his eyes from the door and struggled to contain his disgust. Without taking his eyes from the table, Link placed a hand over his glass. "I don't need a refill," he told the maid. When she turned to the King, he sighed softly to himself. His stomach churned as he looked at his untouched food.

"Aren't you hungry?" Zelda asked, her quiet voiced laced with worry. She waited until he lifted his eyes before she smiled softly. "Or are you thinking?"

Impa saw the anger festered in Link's blue eyes. She watched as hidden disgust streak through his irises, turning them dark as hatred curled his lips into a sneer. Her fingers tightened around her knife as his gaze slid from Zelda to the reflective surface behind her.

She caught the object of his scrutiny from the corner of her eye. "Are you hiding for a reason?" she called as she laid her utensils on the table.

"None at all," said a rumbling voice. His eyes never left hers as he stepped forward, the door swinging shut with the gentlest of touches.

A chuckle bubbled within him, only to be swallowed. Her red eyes narrowed, showing she did recognize his voice. Yet…while her suspicion was clear, she was not entirely certain of his identity.

A pity. It had been an interesting battle those few years back.

"I did not mean to intrude," Zelda heard him whisper. She stared at Link, unwilling to gaze upon their unwelcome addition. The white rage of injustice burned within her veins as her knuckles tightened around her knife.

Would there be any peace today?

The question rang through his mind, the events of past weeks weighing heavy on his heart. Looking between each of his companions, and feeling far older than his years, King Daphnes spoke to the armored man in attempt to break the tense silence.

"Knight Creso. Would you join us for a meal?"

Laughing brown eyes never left flaming red as the knight bowed from his waist. His armor reflected the morning sun, its silver shine creating an aura of light around him.

"I must decline, Your Majesty." As he rose from the bow, the faint sound of metal place sliding against one another filled the air. "Are you not well, Your Royal Highness?" he questioned as he moved his eyes from Impa's to Zelda's.

She felt Impa rest a hand on her leg and tore her eyes from his infuriating expression. "I am well, good sir," she assured his as she turned her focus to her plate once more. Without hesitation she
lifted her utensils and pulled the sharp knife through her meat and eggs as if they were water.

"This is good to hear," Daphnes said between bites of food. "I heard you had been injured yesterday."

"I gave her a blue potion," Link interjected before Impa could speak. "I wasn't aware you were training the army hard enough to break their bones." He watched Impa's body tense as rage filled her. A smile turned the corners of his lips upward. "Her Highness was limping when I escorted her to her chambers."

Impa narrowed her eyes, turning her gaze to Zelda as she searched the bond for admission or deceit. "What time was she returned to her chambers, Link?"

Realizing the situation was no longer in his favor, Creso licked his lips nervously. "Late, Guardian Impa. I saw our Princess standing on her balcony and requested her assistance with a trainee." He felt a stirring deep in his mind and saw the shadows writhe with her power. When she turned her piercing eyes to him, he bowed once more.

The Sage of Shadows was not a person to reckon with.

Not right now, anyway.

"I apologize. Princess Zelda is the greatest fighter Hyrule has, aside from Hero Link and yourself. Her assistance was appreciated greatly."

Sensing Impa's control was wearing thin, Daphnes held up a hand. He looked around the small table once more and sighed softly. "Why don't we change the subject, hm?"

"Yes," Zelda muttered as she stabbed her form through a slice of strawberry. "Let's. Have you a subject?"

"Actually," he began, a smile lighting his face. "I do. I was searching for something earlier, but since I cannot find it, I shall tell you. Your mother left you a—"

"A gown. Yes, I know. It was hers. I have it," she told him through clenched teeth. Fury and fear mixed in her heart and turned to acid in her veins as she stared at the men before her.

Link, her brother and confident, kept his eyes on his plate in an attempt to remain unnoticed. The King, her father and the one who wanted to use her body for the country's benefit, watched her with sparking eyes. And through it all, Knight Creso was watching her eyes sickening amusement and a twisted smile.

She returned her eyes to her father; No, the King. He is no father of mine, she reminded herself. She heard Impa hiss through her teeth in annoyance and knew she also felt insulted by his happiness at the situation.

"This is good. I must have asked someone to retrieve it for me," he murmured to himself, blinded to his daughter's warth by memories of years past.

"You must have. It is a beautiful gown," Impa commented as she wrapped her hands around a cup of tea. The bitter aroma of fresh tea, untouched by sugar or milk, reached her nose as she lifted the cup to her lips. The black liquid slid down her throat and through her chest, cutting through the heavy heat of rage and left a cool trail of calm behind it. She took another sip and leveled her eyes with the overweight monarch. Any hint of calm in her mind vanished when she saw him nodding in agreement.
"It is. I'm glad you received it. Does it fit?"

"Yes," Zelda forced herself to say. Copying Impa's actions, she gripped a glass of milk as if holding a sword in battle. Her free fingers drummed the table as she felt the urge to use her blades imbed itself in her nerves.

"Excellent!" Daphnes smiled at Zelda, a father's love shining from his eyes. His smile fell as he watched her tense further, like a feline preparing to lunge. "Is something wrong?"

"No," she said as she hid her rage behind her mask of diplomatic nonchalance. Without warning, she set her glass on the table and rose. "I'm going for a ride. Good day, Your Majesty, Link." She kept her eyes forward and away from all others as she quickly strode from the room.

"I believe I'll join her," Impa muttered as she also stood. She spared each man the smallest of nods, barely glancing at them. Nary another word left her lips as she left the room with quick strides.

The echo of their heavy steps filled their ears and blocked the sounds of activity in the castle from their minds. Without missing a step, Zelda walked toward a broken statue as if it weren't in her path. With the confidence born from much training, she leapt over the body of the statue and landed quietly beside Impa. She smiled to herself as she ran a hand through her long hair to smooth it from her face.

Having become used to such displays of grace and skill, the soliders and servants said nothing. Impa watched Zelda as she glided through the air. Over the last few years, the Hylian's body had become fluid, her lithe frame working to achieve whatever position she desired. Whether she was leaping over hurdles or scaling a wall, sinew and muscles rippled under her soft skin with subtle strength.

Dancing in the morning sun, the spring light painted a golden aura as she lost herself within the Earth's rhythms. For just a moment, she could see the younger woman's soul fly free.

The busy people around them become a quiet buzz of noise, barely penetrating the wall of silence they had erected around themselves against the world. They leisurely walked from corridor to corridor without a destination. Behind their wall, their anger at the men they'd left in the dining room slowly faded as the nearness of the other wrapped around them. Much like the breeze gently rolling through the open windows, peace settled around them despite the chaos of rushing workers. They shared another amused smile and descended the stairs towards the main doors.

"It's Saturday." Zelda commented without warning. "I have no lessons, and today is our day off of training. There are no parties scheduled or diplomats to arrive." She looked around the large entrance hall and shook her head in confusion, her words echoing through their spirits. "So why is everyone acting as if there is?"

"I have no idea," Impa replied honestly. She brushed a curl behind Zelda's ear, smiling when the younger woman blushed. "Link has been following us for several minutes, and it's grating on my nerves."

"Oh, you mean the ones I frayed?" the Princess asked innocently.

The Sheikah's quick response was filled with mock annoyance and laced with humor. "No, the ones you pulled out by their roots."

"That was Link, not me!" Zelda protested as they came to a stop before the main doors. She watched Impa look over her shoulder and giggled at the exasperated annoyance which covered her
"Idiot boy. What does he want now?" Impa asked with exasperation. She shook her head and sighed as the Hylian warrior all but ran towards them. Another sigh escaped her lips as he widened his eyes and gestured frantically between Zelda and the door. "When will he learn signals are meant to be hidden?" she hissed under her breath as he stumbled to a halt a foot from them.

"About the time he trusts me to leave the castle on my own," Zelda stated under her breath as Link struggled to catch his own. "Wolf got your tongue?" she questioned as worry filled his eyes troubled blue eyes.

"No," he muttered as he glanced between her, Impa and the open door. Concern gnawed at his heart as he saw his best friend wasn't upset about what had happened at breakfast. "I just…are you ok?" he asked as he laid a hand on her shoulder.

Zelda pulled away from his scalding hand and touched her shoulder, the thin cotton of her shirt doing nothing to repel the heat of his flesh. She saw his eyes narrow as emotions flashed in their darkening depths, the wolf within him raising its hackles in suspicion. "Is there something you needed?" she all but snarled.

"I'm worried about you Zel," he told her without permeable. "I don't think you should leave the castle."

"And why shouldn't she?" Impa wondered aloud as she took a step closer to the Hero. She waited until he averted his eyes to smirk. "As I thought. Until you decide to tell me why she must be cautious, she will be able to come and go as she pleases."

Zelda clenched her fist and dug her nails into her palms as anger flooded her once more. "I am a big girl," she whispered, venom lacing her words. "If I can handle fighting Ganondorf at age thirteen, I can certainly leave my own home."

Link watched fire burn in her emerald eyes and took a step back. "I know you can," he assured her just as quietly. "It's just—"

"Just nothing," Impa snapped as she wound an arm through Zelda's. "We're leaving. Unless you have some reason to seek us, leave us be for the day. I won't tell you again," she added.

Both women turned on their heels and strode through the open doors. Link flinched as Zelda's hair smacked his face, knowing it was deserved. Yet as he watched them quickly emerge from the castle's shadow and into the spring sunlight, he felt his worry grow.

Knight Creso was planning something. While he would keep Zelda's secrets, he wouldn't allow her need to hide endanger them all.

Without a thought, Link turned and raced up the stairs. Desperate and hope lent spurred his search for both the King and errant knight.

[-]

Never could it be said that Impa didn't remember the smallest details of any event. She was still muttering about them when they entered Eldin Province, much to Zelda's amusement.

"—as if we hadn't had enough problems dealing with finding a tutor willing to teach him something other than—"
"Impa…"

"—history or sword work. If I'd wanted him to learn only fighting and why we fight—"

"Impa."

"— I would have taught him myself. It was as if—no, it was because the little brat of a boy—"

"Impa!"

Blinking several times in startled confusion, Impa stopped walking. "Yes Zelda?" she asked as if nothing had happened.

Zelda's lips twitched in as laughter bubbled in her chest at the picture Impa made. With her head tilted to the side, eyes wide with questioning confusion and lips pursed lightly to keep from ranting further, Zelda could see the inquisitive child she had once been.

"Are you done?"

A grin turned her lips upward to match Zelda's smile, and Impa laughed softly. "For the moment."

"Good!" Zelda said as they continued walking through the high grass. She ran her fingers over the wild flowers and watched pollen fill the air, sweeting the breeze. "I never thought you'd shut up," she baited as she glanced at her Guardian.

"You're one to talk," Impa snarked good naturedly as her hand brushed Zelda's. Her grin widened as Zelda blushed under her teasing glare. "You never know when to stop talking, even if it's five in the morning!"

"Me?! You're the one who doesn't stop talking until dawn, Miss 'What Do You Want to Do Today'."

"Sure, blame it all on me." Impa turned her head to the side and lifted her nose in the air. "Begone with you if you must be so cruel!"

Clutching her stomach in laughter, Zelda staggered beside Impa as they continued to walk. As her free hand became tangled in the grass, she curled her fingers and pulled a fistful of the plants free. With a quiet giggle, she laid her hand on Impa's shoulder and shoved the ball of wild flowers down the front of her leather under-armor. The moment her fingers dropped the grass, she ran further into the field.

Shrieking with shock, Impa chased the brunette while trying to remove the scratching weeds from between her breasts. Caught between amusement and annoyance, she ran faster. "Zelda!"

"That's my name!" she called over her shoulder as she continued to run, unhindered by the weight of her riding boots. The sound of her pounding feet against the dry field mingled with her laughter as she darted around a cluster of trees.

Impa followed her through the trees, the sound of Zelda's laughter coaxing her own into the air. She grasped at her Princess' shirt and growled good-naturedly when her fingers missed the cloth my scant inches. "I WILL get you back for this!" she promised as she continued to run after the other woman.

"Sure you will. Promises, promises." She twisted to face the Sheikah and blew her a kiss before turning forward, laughing all the while. "And after you do, why don't you take the flowers from
your hair?"

Impa ran a hand over her hair before harrumphing, realizing she had fallen for the younger woman's tricks once more. Another peal of laughter escaped her chapped lips as Zelda tripped over herself, cursing all the while. "You're too confident," she said as she stood over the fallen Hylian.

"Can you blame me?" Zelda asked as she huffed. Accepting the offered hand, she wrapped her fingers around Impa's armored wrist and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. After brushing grass and dirt from her pants, she raised her eyes to Impa's. "Well?"

"No," Impa said after a moment. As Zelda had done earlier, Impa twined her fingers in the tall grass and clutched the plants in her fist.

Sensing her intent, Zelda smirked and began running once more. Once more, Impa's hand grazed air as she reached for Zelda's shirt. A groan of annoyance rumbled in her chest as she followed the fleeing woman.

"You're too slow!" Zelda taunted, scaling a tree as quickly as possible. As she moved from limb to limb, she saw Impa begin to climb after her. So focused on her retreat, she didn't notice the branch she grabbed was broken.

The crack of wood and screech of fear caused an instant change within the alert Guardian. She pushed off the limb she'd been crouched on and grasped the falling woman from the air.

It didn't matter to her that Zelda could have found purchase on another branch, nor that they weren't far from the ground. Her only goal, as it had always bee, was to keep her safe.

It was the only thought in her racing mind as the ground rushed to meet them. She twisted her body so her back faced the packed earth. "I've got you," she said softly as they collided with the ground.

Seconds felt like minutes as gravity pulled her body against Impa's, the jarring force rattling her teeth. It took her several moments to put enough space between them to check the Sheikah female for injury.

"Impa...you're hurt," she whispered as she saw pain flood Impa's hooded eyes.

With a grunt, Impa lifted herself onto her elbows. Pain seized her back and chest, unrelenting as she struggled for breath. "Not...hurt," she responded after a moment. "Just a bit...dazed."

"Maybe not injured, but hurt none the less," Zelda murmured as she wrapped an arm around Impa's shoulders to hold her up. "You might have a concussion."

Exhaling sharply, Impa forced herself to sit upright. She pressed a hand to her head as gravity once more redirected her blood flow. "We fell ten feet Zelda. I'm fine." She smiled softly in reassurance and cupped the ashen woman's cheek. "I promise. I'm more shocked than anything. The ground isn't completely thawed from the winter."

"I'm sorry. Goddesses, don't ever do that again." Ignoring her chuckle of amusement, Zelda wrapped her arms around Impa. Relief flooded her as her embrace was returned.

Impa was safe, bruised but unbroken.

"Why don't you wear something less...restrictive?"

Taken aback by the rather odd inquiry, Impa could only blink in confusion. "What do you mean?"
"You wear a metal vest that ends two inches under your throat, under which is a shirt of chain-mail. As if that wasn't bad enough, you wear metal pants and boots made for Gorons."

Red eyes rolled heavenward in exasperation. She spoke slowly and with exaggerated care, enjoying the annoyance it would cause. "Zelda, armor is for protection. My vital organs are contained in my torso, which is covered by my armor. My most vulnerable arteries, which are in my legs and neck, are also protected."

"But it's so…heavy! You fell out of a tree. Why not wear your suit?"

"And advertise to the world that you are Sheik? I think not." Unable to stop herself, Impa scoffed at the disbelief on Zelda's face. "I can move perfectly fine in what I'm wearing. Unlike those things you call dresses," she added with a smile.

Zelda placed a hand to her heart as laughter flooded the bond. Warmth filled their bellies with butterflies, noticed but uncommented. "I thought you liked my dresses."

Impa snorted softly as she continued to lean against Zelda, lulled by the sound of her heart. "I like them when they aren't ridiculously padded and held in place by boned corsets. I like them when you wear one petticoat, not twenty. I like them when you can wear something under them." She lifted Zelda's shirt enough to show the leather armor underneath. "I like them when they're practical. Otherwise, I hate them."

Zelda slapped the calloused hand from her shirt with a grin and smoothed the tan material so it rested flat once more. "Well, if you hate them so much, take it up with the dress makers."

"I have," Impa muttered with a groan. "None of them care." She closed her eyes and sighed in exasperation. "Annoying fashion vultures, all of them."

In an attempt not to laugh at Impa's pained expression, Zelda slowly unwound the string which kept the Sheikah's gray hair in a tight bun. The gray waves spilled over the other woman's shoulders as she combed her fingers through the tresses.

Impa slowly opened her eyes and tilted her head back once more. She watched Zelda's eyes unfocused as she became lost in thought. Smiling to herself at the trust Zelda presented her, she gently wrapped her fingers around Zelda's wrist and pulled the hand from her hair.

Her fingers traced the hidden Triforce, golden energy entwining with purple.

Zelda remained silent as she watched their magics dance. As a cool blew from the north-western Lake Hylia, surrounding them with the scents of spring. The feel of Impa's rough fingers caressing the back of her hand warmed her shared love and trust caused her filled her heart with a lightness she hadn't thought possible.

Keeping her eyes on Zelda's face, Impa spoke softly so as not to startle the other Sage. "What are you thinking about?"

Meeting Impa's eyes without hesitation, Zelda's smile grew. With a quiet giggle, she began running her fingers through Impa's hair once more. "Nothing much," she stated truthfully. "Just…thinking."

"Hmm," was the only response Impa gave for several minutes. "We should continue with our walk. As much as I enjoy laying in the grass and doing nothing—"

Zelda giggled again and pulled from hand from Impa's hair. "I understand. It's too beautiful of a day to lay around." Standing with ease, she extended a hand to her companion.
Shaking her head, Impa took the offered hand. "You move far too quickly for a Hylian."

"You trained me, if I remember correctly."

Smirking proudly, Impa patted Zelda's head in pacification. "That I did."

Zelda held a hand to her mouth, stifling her laughter as best as she could. The smug expression Impa wore only grew more satisfied as they continued walking.

"You were always my best student," Zelda heard her say.

"I was your only student!" Allowing herself to laugh, Zelda shook her head. "You've become senile Imps."

"What have I told you about calling me that ridiculous name?!"

"That you hate it, and it makes you feel like something akin to a Poe."

"Exactly. So why do you insist on using it?"

Smiling innocently, Zelda batted her lashes. "Because it annoys you."

"Goddess save me…"

Their laughter faded into a comfortable silence as they walked through the grass. They shared a smile, enjoying the privacy while it lasted.

Basking in the rarity of their solitude, Zelda lifted her face towards the sun and smiled as it caressed her face. "Do we have to return soon?"

"Not necessarily," Impa murmured as she also raised her face towards the bright orb. "It's a beautiful day."

"Your eyes are closed," Zelda told her as she turned her gaze to her companion.

"Very observant," Impa replied with a grin, her face still turned towards the sky. "Thank you for telling me."

Watching the rest of Impa's emotional defenses crumble as the spring breeze blew around them caused Zelda's heart to skip. Entranced by the emotions displayed on her Guardian's face, she stared without shame, unable to look away.

"Impa," she whispered. "I—" She shook her head as her voice failed her. Strength fleeing, she sighed softly and stared at the peak of Death Mountain.

The cool air around them became frigid, the weight of hidden words turning their blood to ash. Impa turned towards Zelda, a worried frown twisting her lips as she felt the desolation which wrapped around her Charge's mind and heart. "Tell me, please," she heard herself beg as she cupped Zelda's cheek.

"We're having a good time. I don't want to ruin anything."

"You could never ruin anything keta, it's impossible. If you are upset, I want you to talk to me, regardless of what we are doing."

Giving herself no time to question her actions, Zelda closed the space between them and hugged
the older woman. Pulling the earthy scent deep into her lungs with each breath, she felt the truth struggling to break free. Her need for secrecy fought against her desire to keep from hurting Impa.

And yet, Fate snatched the decision from her hands. Just as she prepared herself to say the words she'd only spoken to Link, Impa narrowed her eyes.

"Someone's coming," Impa hissed. Furious at the interruption, she stared in the direction of the castle. She hugged the younger woman tighter, regretting the silence between them.

The stomping hooves of nearing horses send vibrations through the compacted ground, bringing a curse to her lips. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Zelda murmured as she pulled away. Her heart pounded with each nearing thud of the horses, the weight of their bodies causing the earth under her feet to stir. The sound of their heavy breathing and the shouts of their riders caused her to close her eyes.

Her mask of diplomatic indifference slid into place as if it had never left. Her control became iron-clad as she opened her eyes and stared at the soldiers nearing them.

Now was not the time to allow her emotions to control her. She held her head high as Knight Creso arrived with several of the Royal Guard and two advisors. Her hands rested at her side, the fingers of her right hand brushing her sword as each man slid from his horse.

"Is something amiss?" she asked, her voice as calm as her expression.

"My Lady," one of the advisers said quietly. "There has been an…incident."

Zelda felt her breath catch in her throat. Her words remained calm even as her heart clenched in her chest. "What sort of incident, Sir Evat?" She watched his blue eyes lower as he knelt before her.

The Knights and remaining advisors slowly lowered themselves to one knee as Advisor Evat lifted his head.

Impa shook her head as horror crept through her mind. Though she was angry, she had never wished…not this way. Not when Zelda never had a chance to speak with him.

"His Majesty King Daphnes of Hyrule suffered a fatal heart attack twenty minutes earlier. It is the Goddesses' will that our Sovereign be laid to rest."

Mikal Evat brushed a lock of brown hair from his face and met the green eyes, unwavering in his dedication. He watched as confusion and shocked filled her eyes and covered her face, leaving her bare of all emotional defense. Without hesitation he lowered his eyes to his hands as he extended them.

"His Majesty's ring, Your Highness. Long live Queen Zelda Nohansen of Hyrule!"

"Long live the Queen!" chorused the kneeling men. Zelda wrapped her numb fingers around the golden wedding ring which rested in his hand. Grief choked her as the reality of the situation began to settle in her heart.

She hadn't gotten to say goodbye, hadn't told him how angry she was.

Her last words to him had been filled with rage, not love.

She hadn't even hugged him.
And now, she never would.

Gooseflesh rose on her arms as she slid the ring into her pocket. She dimly heard Impa echo their words. "Rise, good sirs. Now is not the time to fall to your knees. The King, Din rest his soul, has joined his Queen in eternal rest." Her eyes remained blind to the field and people surrounding her as she stared at the Castle. "We are in the middle of a war gentleman. Mount your steeds and return to the castle. Summon the Lords, Parliament and Council."

"My Lady," Knight Creso said quietly as he stood. "How are you to return? I see no horse."

Unflinching as her mask of indifference slid into place once more, Zelda met his eyes with a calm she did not feel. "The same way I left it. I shall walk. Queen though I may be, arrogance is not a trait I find pleasing. My people will see me walk among them as I return to my home, just as I walked among them when I left it."

"But Gan—"

"Ganondorf is not foolish enough to threaten me on this day," she hissed. She watched as one by one, they sat astride their horses once more. She swallowed a growl as she saw the grief, disbelief and shock in their eyes.

"Gentlemen, let me make myself very clear. The time for your petty rivalries, your foolish anger, is over. The King is dead and no longer will I turn a blind eye to your treatment of my station. I am now leader of Hyrule's army as well as leader to the allied militia. You may hate me for having higher rank, you may despise me for being a warrior…I do not care. I am not my father, I will not allow you to continue your personal agendas.

"Let it be known, from this day forward, all military decrees shall be signed by myself. I will not lift the curfew, for General Wadel's decision was a wise one. Any further restrictions placed on the people of Hyrule will not be tolerated unless I approve them. All of you," she emphasized as she stared at each man in turn, "shall be placed on political probation. Any hint of disregard to my orders shall result in loss of military rank and possible charge of treason. This is a new day, gentlemen, and I will not have those I consult divided."

Silence fell over the posse. Nary a whisper met the wind as the young Queen kept her cold eyes on them. Unfaltering, she waited until they all looked away before she softened her expression. As Impa touched her shoulder she felt her stomach roll. Her eyes burned with suppressed tears and grief threatened to overwhelm her. "He's dead. He's dead dead dead…and I didn't…I never said goodbye. Never told him I love him. That I was angry about the stupid gown."

"I know keta. Dismiss them. We shall talk then," Impa assured her. She lifted her head and watched the men bow over their horses as Zelda raised a hand.

"You are dismissed for now. Remember my words."

"Your orders shall be known throughout the land, Your Majesty," Evat said. His voice was as strong as his determined gaze. He watched the ice in her eyes begin to melt and bowed his head once more. "Your eternal servant, my Queen." Without another word he backed his horse through the group. His back was presented to her only once he reached the end of the assembly, unwilling to insinuate an insult moments after announcing Queen Zelda's ascension to the throne.

"We should have waited," Knight Creso muttered to himself as he and the others followed Evat. "The Queen is obviously—"
"Obviously nothing," snapped a fellow soldier. "She is our Lady, the mother of our country. Her Majesty is not to be questioned, Creso. Do not forget yourself."

"Of course not," the other man said quickly. "I am merely worried she was unsettled from the breakfast she shared with his late Majesty."

"It is not for us to decide if she is unsettled or not," a third rider said. He turned in his saddle. "The Queen—"

"We must ride, not gossip!" Evat snapped as he gripped his reins. He spurred his horse and raced towards the Castle, annoyance warring with sorrow as he heard the others follow behind him. He pressed his body against the steed as he saw the distance between himself and the Town entrance become shorter by the second. "C'mon boy," he whispered to the horse as the crowds of mourning Hylians parted to allow him and the others passage. "Just a bit farther."

His mount whined and continued to gallop across the bridge and into town. Cries of grief filled his ears as the sound of the horse's hooves became muted by the chaos.

Any comfort he found, any constant he gained from being in a place of vantage, became nothing but a reminder of failure as he moved deeper into the marketplace. Without looking back, he knew the other men were being detained by the masses.

A reflection in a nearby window confirmed his suspicions.

The people of Hyrule wanted to know why their King was dead, and no words of truth would soothe their anger.

"Enough!" Zelda heard one of the assembly yell as she and Impa ran towards the bridge. Uncaring if her people saw her racing behind the horses, Zelda continued to follow the men. She watched as the swarms of bodies descended to the horses like flies. Anger and horror shook her confidence as the horses began to rear, agitated by the crowds. "Be gone!" she heard him scream as the horses bucked.

"Long live Queen Zelda!" Impa shouted as they neared market gates. She stood beside Zelda as their footsteps ceased. Neither moved as they waited for the crowd to fall silent.

The angry voices which echoed through the fields from the market slowly became a hum of questioning whispers. "Long live Queen Zelda, Her Majesty of Hyrule," came the immediate response. Kneeling men and curtseying women repeated the words several times as a path crept through the crowd, leading the new matriarch to the castle.

Without hesitation, Zelda began walking towards the masses. Her head held high and eyes forward, she did nothing to hide the tears of grief and confusion which pooled in her eyes. When spoken to, she responded without hearing the words, unable to hear anything save her own pounding heart. Nervous beyond measure and lost to her next course of actions, the young Queen presented a confidence she didn't feel.

Impa also kept her head high as she walked beside Zelda. Her eyes moved over the crowd, forever searching for those who meant harm to her Charge. She blinked several times as Zelda's anger at the soldiers and her new Advisors faded into pain. "Never forget you are loved," she told the younger woman beside her as they passed through the center of town.

Unable to take her hand, Zelda nodded in response and wrapped her emotions around their bond in a mental hug. "I couldn't even if I wanted to."
"What are you thinking?"

"I can't do this. I can't run a country Impa…I can't."

"You can, because you love them. You understand they are people, not numbers. Do not let the Council and advisors dictate your thoughts as well as your actions. You expressed your mind as Princess, and as Queen, you can begin making changes to help Hyrule."

"And if they do not accept my proposals?" Zelda mumbled as they made their way towards the arched doors leading to the courtyard around the castle.

"They have no choice," Impa told her. Certainty laced her voice as she ignored the guards and pushed the doors open. "You are not your father; you won't let them ignore you."

As Guardian and Charge allowed the weight of change to settle on their shoulders, Link watched them from the shelter of a darkened corner. His eyes, usually filled with the warmth of laughter, were as cold as the breeze. There was no amusement on his face as he followed Creso from the gates to the west entrance of the castle.

Choruses of "Long live Queen Zelda" muted all sounds of their presence. Link rubbed his ears as the echo rang through his head. Like a bell tolled at noon, the sounds of praise and grief carried through the castle and outwards across the land, the weight of recent events pressing heavily on each person as the news spread. Link shook his head and pushed the raised voices from his mind with little effort.

Single-minded in his task, the Hero stalked the Knight much like with the knowledge of a hunter, never noticing the passage of time. So determined to catch the Knight, Link gave Zelda's meeting with the High Council and other political bodies nary a thought.

It was this meeting which currently held Zelda's attention. She perched on the edge of her seat, her back ramrod straight. Nerves frayed by the monotone voices of her Council members, she clenched her teeth to disguise the annoyance bubbling within her.

The knowing smirks of the Lords and Ladies of Chambers didn't help.

When the Chairman of Parliament's voice eclipsed the Councilwoman's, she felt her neck tighten with stress.

Rubbing her head to ward off the impending migraine, she kept her eyes on the Council. Knowing they were observing her, she tilted her head and narrowed her eyes in challenge. As several Parliament members looked away, the young Queen allowed herself a mental smirk.

Impa cleared her throat softly and bit back as smile as she observed Zelda's triumph. As several hours passed, the Sheikah Guardian felt numbness fill her limbs as surely as it clouded her mind. Exhausted trickled through their bond as Zelda's mind touched her own.

"How boring this is," Zelda sighed as she watched the shadows lengthen with the fading sunlight. "I am the Heir Apparent, why must I have this explained to me?"

"By 'this' I assume you mean being the Heir Apparent. It is explained because that is procedure."

"Yes, well…tradition is boring in this case."

Unable to keep her stoic mask in place, Impa glanced down at the scroll in front of her. Pretending to be engrossed in the material she had memorized after Zelda's birth, she let her lips twitch in
amusement. "You aren't wrong," murmured as hunger began to churn her stomach.

"-this is not to—milady Queen, is your attention focused on the subject at conversation?"

"Do you mean the explanation, which is much too long good sir, of how I am to spend several hours a day receiving Hyrule citizens when I could be walking among them and hearing their concerns? Yes, I am focused. However, I fail to see how sitting in a chair will accomplish anything when, as I said, I could be walking through the land and talking with my people. There are many races in many areas of Hyrule whom do not feel comfortable entering the castle; why must they be left out?" she questioned. She held the gaze of Sir Majoren, PM and Head Scholar of the Hyrule National Library. When the man's wide eyes twitched in response to her unspoken challenge, she smiled softly. "Have you no answer, Sir Majoren?"

"My Queen, I am your faithful and most humble servant," he began, "yet—"

Zelda raised a hand to stall his words. "I am tired, sir, and frankly…I am already sick of excuses. This dictation which states I, the Queen, must sit on a throne all afternoon, every day of the week, is ridiculous. I will not follow such an archaic tradition, for that is what this is; a tradition. I have studied Hyrule's laws and the requirements of its monarchs extensively, and have found no such article which supports your statement.

"Do you know what I was doing when I heard the King had passed away? I was walking in the fields, admiring the nature of our lovely country. I was not wearing a dress made of foreign silks and waving the Hyrule banner. The only Triforce I carried on my person is Wisdom; I had no adornment. I had no guard following me, for I was in the company of my Guardian, Maderone Impa. Please, no not interrupt me.

"I was walking, ladies and gentlemen, just as you do. I was not riding a horse or sitting in a carriage. I was not walking on carpet over mud, but sinking my boots into it. I was not distanced from my people as you want me to be. I may be Queen, but we are all Hyrulian, no matter our race.

"I will not laze around for six hours a day to listen to my people when I could go to them. Why must they come to me? I am their leader, yet I serve them. This is their country, I am merely their advocate. If any person wishes to speak to me while I am in the castle, they may do so. But I will not," she said as she pounded her fist on the glossy wooden table, "presume I am better than anyone else. I will not treat the people of this country like cattle, nor 'commoners' as I have heard them called. We are all equal in the eyes of the Goddesses.

"Now, I believe it is well past sunset, and this means it is time to eat. I am hungry, as I'm sure this Council is, and I will now take my supper." She watched several members of the Council sweat and clench their teeth. Paying them no mind, she pressed against the table and curled her fingers for support. Zelda pushed the ornate wooden chair backwards as she stood.

Unflinching as the heavy chair feet ground against the flagstone, Impa also stood. She scanned the room and met the eyes of the remaining Royal Guards. The last of the Sheikah continued to stand silently as she gave them a knowing look. She pressed her lips together and laid her fingers over them. A silent question of loyalty passed between the dwindling tribe, striking an old cord buried deep within the Sheikah history.

The Sheikah men nodded once in agreement; no matter what, they would remain loyal to Queen Zelda as they had King Daphnes.

Despite the Royal Family's betrayal towards the Sheikah race in the past, the remaining Shadow people knew they could trust the new Queen as they had not the King. She had proven herself to
them, not through Impa, but through her own actions. It was Sheik who endeared them to the Hylian woman they now protected, not her personification of a just and fair heir of the previous monarch.

Her motivation to protect her people as they fought to protect her, even when she was a child, told the stoic Guards their elegant Queen was worthy of the Sheikah tribe. They knew, even when she was too young to legally train with the armies, she rode into battle with her head high and back straight.

Though the Triforce rested within her, the power she held came from her heart. Neither the Goddess' magics nor diplomatic illusion was needed to show how much she cared for her country and its occupants.

Seeing the acceptance shining in the eyes of the otherwise unmoving men, Impa allowed herself a rare smile. Proud of her Charge and even prouder of her tribe, she felt relief drive the worry from her previously heavy heart. A she laid a hand on the small of Zelda's back, she glanced over her shoulder. "If you are ready..." she said with a raised eyebrow. Her words trailed into silence as she watched the Guards stand straighter than ever, their spears held tightly. When they fell into position behind she and Zelda, she returned her attention to the woman that was her world. "And you?"

"Starving," Zelda replied without hesitation, her eyes shining with laughter. "Let's eat before it's too late."

"Yes, let's," Impa mumbled quietly as she pressed her hand harder against Zelda's back to urge her forward. "How about now?"

Zelda's infectious laughter floated through the castle, a soothing balm to the gashes deep in their souls made by their grief.

[-]

[-]

**Songs:**

What Lies Beneath by Breaking Benjamin

Fade Away by Breaking Benjamin

Her Diamonds by Rob Thomas

Hear Me by Kelly Clarkson

Fake It by Seether
Dawn's fractured sunlight painted the cool glass with a rainbow of warmth. The early spring rays fell against the carpet, interweaving with the shadows cast by the fire. A dance of dark and light crept across the floor and walls, driving the night from the room.

As the gentle light peeked through the curtains surrounding her bed, Zelda murmured in her sleep and pulled the heavy comforter over her eyes. Just as the night slowly faded around her, her dreams slipped from her mind, allowing reality to invade her thoughts. The cocoon of blankets did little to shield her from the truth of the waking world, yet she continued to rest in the calm warmth which had kept the cold of the night from waking her.

The sound of bare feet gently padding around the room brushed the rest of the night's fog from her mind. With a soft smile, she pulled the covers back down to her chest and watched Impa through the parted curtains. "Morning," she greeted.

"Morning," Impa said just as quietly. She felt a smile turn her lips upward and made no move to stop it. She leant against the wall and grinned as Zelda flinched when her bare skin made contact with the cool stone. Amusement bubbled in her stomach as Zelda threw the covers back only to shriek and burrow under them once more. "While it is warm," she heard herself say, "it is still rather chilly for spring."

"Chilly!" Zelda uttered the word as if it were a curse. "Freezing more like!" She cast her eyes in the direction of the fireplace in accusation. "I fed it well."

A soft snort met her words as Impa continued to lean against the wall. Her amusement grew as Zelda attempted to pull her heavy dressing gown on without leaving the covers.

"It's not funny," Zelda whined as she turned her eyes to Impa.

"It is. It's truly not that cold Zelda."

"It is so."

"Not."

"Is."

"Not."

They stared at one another for several moments before their composure cracked and giggles fell from their lips. Three days had passed since their "talk". While an awkward silence would fall between them at times, it was not as heavy as it had been. The angry tension which had constantly hung between them had dissolved like the morning fog, only an imprint of its previous existence lingering in the air.

It was this imprint which caused their laughter to fade into a pensive silence. Zelda rose from the bed and tied the sash of her dressing gown in an attempt to ward off the chill. She stood behind the
open curtains and watched Impa for a moment. She allowed her eyes to follow the sunlight as it made a path down her body.

*Without her armor, Impa looks approachable; soft even,* she thought to herself. A well-worn nightshirt and winter leggings displayed the feminine shape of her body. A thin robe hung on her shoulders, covering her arms without hindering her movement as it parted enough to reveal the swell of her breasts. Her gray, shoulder-length hair seemed white in the rising sun as it framed her face in gentle waves, softening the sharp angles of her cheeks and strong chin.

Zelda bit her lip and guiltily met Impa's eyes as a blush burned her cheeks.

Staring at someone while they were unaware was one thing. To continue to stare when it was clear the person was aware was another.

'Mortification' was not a strong enough word.

Impa smirked and allowed Zelda to speculate on her thoughts. She watched her fidget in nervous embarrassment.

"Is there a reason you were inspecting me?" she questioned softly. She kept her laughter inside as Zelda's eyes became wide with shock.

*Did she just purr?*! Zelda felt her mouth open and close as she tried to speak. Eventually, she squeaked "No," and ducked her head to those piercing eyes. "I-I mean, I didn't...wasn't..." She bit her lip and swallowed hard as her hands became clammy.

"Why are you so nervous?" Pushing herself from the wall, Impa kept her eyes on Zelda as she moved closed the space between them. As she left her place in the sunlight to enter the half-lit area behind the curtains, she watched Zelda's clumsy attempts to brush her hair from her face.

"I-I'm not nervous!" Zelda protested as she darted her eyes around the room. She licked her lips and glanced at the smirking woman before looking at the floor once more. With her eyes on the ornate red and gold carpet, she shook her head. She watched her hands turn red as her embarrassment spread through her entire body. Her hair fell forward, hiding her from the room as she sought whatever solace she could find.

"You're flushed, heat is rising from your skin," Impa observed. She spoke softly as she brushed Zelda's cheek with her fingers, the heat of her skin doing nothing to hide its softness.

"You're twisting your hands, possibly to hide the fact that you want and need to move around." She knelt so her face was below Zelda's and grasped the Hylian's hands in her own.

"You're stuttering, something you only do when you're afraid or nervous. Your hands are cold despite your flush." She raised her eyes and tried to hold Zelda's gaze. "You're avoiding my eyes. You haven't pulled away, which means you aren't afraid...therefore you are nervous."

"Your logic is flawed," Zelda murmured.

"How?" She placed the tips of her fingers under Zelda's chin and gently lifted her head. As her hair fell to the side, Impa stared in her eyes. "You feel vulnerable."

"Yes," came the whispered affirmation from chapped pink lips. Her breath caught in her throat as Impa raised one knee, giving herself at least a head's height. "I feel…"

When she trailed off, Impa leaned forward so her breath mixed with Zelda's. "You feel…?" she
prompted quietly.

The flickering shadows of hidden pain caused her heart to skip a beat and a chill to run down her spine. Realizing in that instant just how her position could seem, she shook her head.

"Pardon me," she requested as she moved backwards.

"No need to forgive anything," Zelda murmured as she averted her eyes once more. Her hands shook as she clenched them again.

"Are you cold?" Impa asked as she hesitantly sat beside the trembling teenager.

"Yes. No. I don't know," Zelda admitted after a moment. "I don't know much of anything." Without pause she stood and moved around the bed towards her wardrobe. "I need to dress," she told herself as she quickened her pace. Her heart pounded in her chest as chaos filled her mind, the long shadows cast by the furniture in the room wrapping around her darkening thoughts.

A chill ran down her spine as she heard Impa follow her and she left the door open in hopes heat from her room would enter the wardrobe. Ignoring the mirrored wall as if it didn't exist, she stood in the center of the room and gazed at all the different styles of clothing. "What is the purpose of all this?"

Shocked by the question, Impa took time to collect her thoughts before answering. "To denote your royal station…among other things," she admitted grudgingly, wincing as the words fell from her lips. How disgusting a truth it was.

"Such as to attract a suitor?" Zelda questioned softly, knowing the answer before she had spoken.

Once more a silence fell between them, carrying the weight of unacknowledged truth. Someday, Zelda would marry, and it was possible her husband would be someone she knew very little of.

"I suppose, in a way," Impa regretfully confirmed. She watched as Zelda ran her fingers over her daily gowns and then her formal attire. Worry made her stomach churn as Zelda pulled several unworn gowns from their hangers and threw them over the chair centered in the room.

Without thought, Zelda shed her dressing gown and untied her flannel nightgown enough to let it hang off one shoulder. She pulled the first cumbersome dress over her body and yanked the laces until they were tight enough for the dress to stay in place. With a little wiggling, and a few muttered curses, the nightgown pooled at her feet.

She met her own gaze in the mirror. Her lips twisted into a sneer of disgust, destroying whatever curiosity she may have had. She ran a hand down the sensuous combination of velvet and silk, her fingers tracing the extensive embroidery. "I am to turn eighteen next year, and the King has ordered gowns which display my womanly charms," she spat.

She turned and watched the dress flare at her feet, showing her legs. "Despite the full shirt, my legs are displayed. And this is only the first dress. The 'decorative' lengths of layered cloth often called short sleeves are nothing more than a way to hide my muscles, which I'm more than sure the gloves will finish."

Impa watched her repeat the process, hands shaking with fury. She said nothing, letting the younger woman vent.

She was correct, however.
The dresses specifically bought to be worn after her birthday did not hint at her feminine figure; they displayed it with little regard to modesty. It was distasteful at best, cruel at worst.

Gall burned her throat.

The King was a fine one to discuss respect and shame.

"I am not an object, a doll he can dress and sell to the highest bidder!" Zelda snarled as she tore the hated slip of a dress from her body and threw it to the floor in two pieces. Tears of rage and hurt stung her eyes as she stared at the third dress.

She had assumed, in a moment of hopeful self-delusion, the new dresses had been given to her as a way to show his support. And now…she knew otherwise. Her father – nay, the King – had no intention of supporting her decision.

She had interrupted his plans for her marriage to Link.

"He is no father of mine," she muttered as she wrenched the third garment over her head. So fueled by her rage, notice any difference between it and the others before facing the mirror.

It wasn't a dress.

Breathe shuddering in her lungs, Impa felt bile rise in her throat. She had never believed the King, even in his worst mood, would stoop to such depths.

They both stared, if for different reasons. Impa watched Zelda's already flushed skin become almost maroon, emotion burning her from within. She swallowed hard as her stomach continued to churn, protesting each new revelation.

Opaque white silk brushed the floor, the nightgown hugging her body like a lover. Five tiny pearls held lace and silk closed between her breasts, the straps atop her shoulders nothing more than delicate wisps of silk. Like flower petals, twin strips of silk hugged Zelda's breasts,

"It was your mother's," Impa heard herself whisper. "She placed it in storage to be kept until you were engaged. I was to retrieve it and give it to you, her gift for you.

"There should have been a note in the box for you."

"No doubt His Majesty has burned such a note," Zelda snarled. Her tears fell as her shoulders shook with suppressed sobs. She stood before the mirror, betrayal wiping away all thought.

How could he?

"I knew have the King of Hyrule as my father would mean he had little time to care for me as other fathers did with their children. He showed his love through gifts, not actions. I've long since learned to accept his gifts without fuss, just as I know emotions are not something he wishes to discuss. But…I never knew he would stoop to such a level," she whispered.

"I look at this gown and I don't see something a woman would wear for her husband. I see a pretty wrapping for a pretty prize, a jewel which outshines all others."

Her bitter words tore through Impa's rage and struck her heart. The dry room caused her eyes to water all the more as she continued to stare at the woman clothed in white. The implications of such a simple nightgown were drowning her. If it had been presented in the box by either herself or the King, it would have been a present from her dead mother.
Yet it had not been. Placed so carelessly near her new attire was a message neither of they could ignore. Zelda's marriage would never be for her. It was a matter of State, a matter for the King to control and manipulate much like he manipulated his chess pieces.

Never had she been so ashamed to be considered a friend of the King.

Yet as both women continued to silently rage of the injustice, King Daphnes was searching through the very room his late wife had placed the same gown in.

He'd been foolish in many ways regarding his daughter. He would not apologize for the past – if he did, he would never stop. But...he could do this. He could give her the gown, tell her the stories she had always begged to hear. He could support her decision – her freedom to choose – in this way.

How similar the present could echo the past. His mother had gifted this to her daughter-in-law, though he hadn't known that until their wedding night. She had stood before him in their chambers, a vision in flowing white. Blond hair plaited behind her, her lowered eyes and tense shoulders had betrayed the truth.

She was wearing it because she thought she had to. After a few moments, she had looked at him with defiance and worry marring her beautiful face. He had met her eyes and told her in no uncertain terms that he'd prefer her comfortable. Whether she wore the gown or changed into something else, it was up to her.

She'd stared at him for a bit, blinking in shock. When she had asked him why he was being so kind to her, he had taken her cold hands in his.

"Because," he had stated, "Marriage is a partnership. Not a country to be governed or an army to be commanded. We must work together. I can't begin to wonder what my mother has told you, and I don't wish to; I'm sure her words are what has put such fear in your eyes."

He kissed her knuckles, allowing his lips to linger in an attempt to calm her. "I am sorry if I gave you the impression I am cold and unfeeling. I'm not. Nor am I a monster. A man, yes, but never a monster. My mother's first marriage was a disaster, and I'm sure my father was not as nice to her as he could have been. I haven't the faintest clue what women tell each other, but I do know this."

"We entered this marriage for peace between our countries. But I don't want that to be the reason we continue it. We may or may not love. Regardless of why this marriage happened, it is still a partnership of respect and equality. And I refuse to treat you as anything less than an equal. As such, if you are uncomfortable, then I will try to make you comfortable. That includes this," he added with a grin as he pinched the thin gown between his fingers. "I may be the future king of this country, but I don't rule this marriage. We make decisions together."

She had said nothing for several minutes as she thought, shivering from the cold. When he took her in his arms, he was unsurprised to feel tears wet his neck where she had hidden her face. "A partnership," she had whispered, "Is more than I could have dreamt for. Thank you."

A sad smile graced his lips as Daphnes recalled the night.

No...he might not agree with Zelda's decision, but he would not allow his opinions to rule his decisions. He and her mother had made their choices, and she would make hers. He would not stand in the way of them.

With a sigh, he looked around the small room once more before shaking his head and turning to
the door. It took him mere moments to leave the room and lock it once more, sealing the past away as surely as he had destroyed any chance of regaining his daughter's trust.

Another sigh escaped him as he slowly made his way to the dining room he, Link, Zelda and Impa often supped in.

He nor the Guards following him noticed the figure concealed by the dark shadows of the corner. A smirk of triumph graced full lips. "It is done."

"Begin phase two," came the malice-filled response with the receptive mind. "And waste no time."

Zelda and Impa made their way to the dining room. So deep in their soundless discussion, neither heard Link call their names.

It wasn't until he darted in front of them, nearly colliding with them, that they focused on the corridor properly. Zelda flushed and glanced at Impa, noting her grin.

"Did you need something?" she asked her pseudo-brother.

Link avoided her gaze with practiced ease, running hand through his hair and nervously straightening his tunic as he spoke. "Just...erm...are you going to breakfast?"

"We are. Is there a reason we should not?"

"No!" he said quickly.

"Link!" Impa snapped after several moments, patience wearing thin. "If you are not going to tell us the reason for this obstructive delay, would you please move so we can eat?"

He swallowed hard, seeing the ire within her crimson eyes. "I know you're still angry with the King, and—"

Zelda raised a hand to cut him off, her voice firm and cool like the spring breeze winding through the windows. "Whether I—no. If we are angry or not with the His Majesty is irrelevant. We have always taken breakfast in the dining room, even when the castle was under threat of attack."

She stared in those azure discs, watching the emotion play within them. "Unless there is a reason the room is unavailable, I request you move aside so we may continue forward."

"It's not unavailable," he mumbled, following them without thought. "Zelda, you don't want to go in there!"

Impa spun in her heel, her voice slicing through the air as she stared at him. "You will cease to dictate her actions with your assumptions, or you will give a reason for such a presumptive statement. Which shall it be?"

"Impa, if you intimidate him too long your food will be cold," Zelda called without missing a step. Eyes firmly kept forward, she never saw Link shrink away Impa, nor the moment when Impa tapped the Master Sword in warning.

Link blanched as Impa withdrew her hand from the Sword and walked beside Zelda once more. The knowledge that she could—and would—decapitate him with his own sword was terrifying.

Tugging her pristine sleeves in nervous habit, Zelda entered the dining room without a word. Only
when Impa held out her chair did she focus on those around her. With the barest of glances at her father, she nodded to the Sheikah around them as Impa took her own seat.

Something told her it was going to be a long day.

Link sat in the remaining open seat, the intimate table feeling crowded. He sat beside the King and glanced at the Sages across from him. Their rage was a tangible force.

He glanced to the door, wondering if it would be best just to...leave. He saw it then, the reason he had originally stopped them.

Damn it all.

He slid his eyes from the door and struggled to contain his disgust. Without taking his eyes from the table, Link placed a hand over his glass. "I don't need a refill," he told the maid. When she turned to the King, he sighed softly to himself. His stomach churned as he looked at his untouched food.

"Aren't you hungry?" Zelda asked, her quiet voiced laced with worry. She waited until he lifted his eyes before she smiled softly. "Or are you thinking?"

Impa saw the anger festered in Link's blue eyes. She watched as hidden disgust streak through his irises, turning them dark as hatred curled his lips into a sneer. Her fingers tightened around her knife as his gaze slid from Zelda to the reflective surface behind her.

She caught the object of his scrutiny from the corner of her eye. "Are you hiding for a reason?" she called as she laid her utensils on the table.

"None at all," said a rumbling voice. His eyes never left hers as he stepped forward, the door swinging shut with the gentlest of touches.

A chuckle bubbled within him, only to be swallowed. Her red eyes narrowed, showing she did recognize his voice. Yet...while her suspicion was clear, she was not entirely certain of his identity.

A pity. It had been an interesting battle those few years back.

"I did not mean to intrude," Zelda heard him whisper. She stared at Link, unwilling to gaze upon their unwelcome addition. The white rage of injustice burned within her veins as her knuckles tightened around her knife.

Would there be any peace today?

The question rang through his mind, the events of past weeks weighing heavy on his heart. Looking between each of his companions, and feeling far older than his years, King Daphnes spoke to the armored man in attempt to break the tense silence.

"Knight Creso. Would you join us for a meal?"

Laughing brown eyes never left flaming red as the knight bowed from his waist. His armor reflected the morning sun, its silver shine creating an aura of light around him.

"I must decline, Your Majesty." As he rose from the bow, the faint sound of metal place sliding against one another filled the air. "Are you not well, Your Royal Highness?" he questioned as he moved his eyes from Impa's to Zelda's.
She felt Impa rest a hand on her leg and tore her eyes from his infuriating expression. "I am well, good sir," she assured his as she turned her focus to her plate once more. Without hesitation she lifted her utensils and pulled the sharp knife through her meat and eggs as if they were water.

"This is good to hear," Daphnes said between bites of food. "I heard you had been injured yesterday."

"I gave her a blue potion," Link interjected before Impa could speak. "I wasn't aware you were training the army hard enough to break their bones." He watched Impa's body tense as rage filled her. A smile turned the corners of his lips upward. "Her Highness was limping when I escorted her to her chambers."

Impa narrowed her eyes, turning her gaze to Zelda as she searched the bond for admission or deceit. "What time was she returned to her chambers, Link?"

Realizing the situation was no longer in his favor, Creso licked his lips nervously. "Late, Guardian Impa. I saw our Princess standing on her balcony and requested her assistance with a trainee." He felt a stirring deep in his mind and saw the shadows writhe with her power. When she turned her piercing eyes to him, he bowed once more.

The Sage of Shadows was not a person to reckon with.

Not right now, anyway.

"I apologize. Princess Zelda is the greatest fighter Hyrule has, aside from Hero Link and yourself. Her assistance was appreciated greatly."

Sensing Impa's control was wearing thin, Daphnes held up a hand. He looked around the small table once more and sighed softly. "Why don't we change the subject, hm?"

"Yes," Zelda muttered as she stabbed her form through a slice of strawberry. "Let's. Have you a subject?"

"Actually," he began, a smile lighting his face. "I do. I was searching for something earlier, but since I cannot find it, I shall tell you. Your mother left you a—"

"A gown. Yes, I know. It was hers. I have it," she told him through clenched teeth. Fury and fear mixed in her heart and turned to acid in her veins as she stared at the men before her.

Link, her brother and confident, kept his eyes on his plate in an attempt to remain unnoticed. The King, her father and the one who wanted to use her body for the country's benefit, watched her with sparking eyes. And through it all, Knight Creso was watching her eyes sickening amusement and a twisted smile.

She returned her eyes to her father; No, the King. He is no father of mine, she reminded herself. She heard Impa hiss through her teeth in annoyance and knew she also felt insulted by his happiness at the situation.

"This is good. I must have asked someone to retrieve it for me," he murmured to himself, blinded to his daughter's warth by memories of years past.

"You must have. It is a beautiful gown," Impa commented as she wrapped her hands around a cup of tea. The bitter aroma of fresh tea, untouched by sugar or milk, reached her nose as she lifted the cup to her lips. The black liquid slid down her throat and through her chest, cutting through the heavy heat of rage and left a cool trail of calm behind it. She took another sip and leveled her eyes...
with the overweight monarch. Any hint of calm in her mind vanished when she saw him nodding in agreement.

"It is. I'm glad you received it. Does it fit?"

"Yes," Zelda forced herself to say. Copying Impa's actions, she gripped a glass of milk as if holding a sword in battle. Her free fingers drummed the table as she felt the urge to use her blades imbed itself in her nerves.

"Excellent!" Daphnes smiled at Zelda, a father's love shining from his eyes. His smile fell as he watched her tense further, like a feline preparing to lunge. "Is something wrong?"

"No," she said as she hid her rage behind her mask of diplomatic nonchalance. Without warning, she set her glass on the table and rose. "I'm going for a ride. Good day, Your Majesty, Link." She kept her eyes forward and away from all others as she quickly strode from the room.

"I believe I'll join her," Impa muttered as she also stood. She spared each man the smallest of nods, barely glancing at them. Nary another word left her lips as she left the room with quick strides.

The echo of their heavy steps filled their ears and blocked the sounds of activity in the castle from their minds. Without missing a step, Zelda walked toward a broken statue as if it weren't in her path. With the confidence born from much training, she leapt over the body of the statue and landed quietly beside Impa. She smiled to herself as she ran a hand through her long hair to smooth it from her face.

Having become used to such displays of grace and skill, the soliders and servants said nothing. Impa watched Zelda as she glided through the air. Over the last few years, the Hylian's body had become fluid, her lithe frame working to achieve whatever position she desired. Whether she was leaping over hurdles or scaling a wall, sinew and muscles rippled under her soft skin with subtle strength.

Dancing in the morning sun, the spring light painted a golden aura as she lost herself within the Earth's rhythms. For just a moment, she could see the younger woman's soul fly free.

The busy people around them become a quiet buzz of noise, barely penetrating the wall of silence they had erected around themselves against the world. They leisurely walked from corridor to corridor without a destination. Behind their wall, their anger at the men they'd left in the dining room slowly faded as the nearness of the other wrapped around them. Much like the breeze gently rolling through the open windows, peace settled around them despite the chaos of rushing workers. They shared another amused smile and descended the stairs towards the main doors.

"It's Saturday." Zelda commented without warning. "I have no lessons, and today is our day off of training. There are no parties scheduled or diplomats to arrive." She looked around the large entrance hall and shook her head in confusion, her words echoing through their spirits. "So why is everyone acting as if there is?"

"I have no idea," Impa replied honestly. She brushed a curl behind Zelda's ear, smiling when the younger woman blushed. "Link has been following us for several minutes, and it's grating on my nerves."

"Oh, you mean the ones I frayed?" the Princess asked innocently.

The Sheikah's quick response was filled with mock annoyance and laced with humor. "No, the ones you pulled out by their roots."
"That was Link, not me!" Zelda protested as they came to a stop before the main doors. She watched Impa look over her shoulder and giggle at the exasperated annoyance which covered her face.

"Idiot boy. What does he want now?" Impa asked with exasperation. She shook her head and sighed as the Hylian warrior all but ran towards them. Another sigh escaped her lips as he widened his eyes and gestured frantically between Zelda and the door. "When will he learn signals are meant to be hidden?" she hissed under her breath as he stumbled to a halt a foot from them.

"About the time he trusts me to leave the castle on my own," Zelda stated under her breath as Link struggled to catch his own. "Wolf got your tongue?" she questioned as worry filled his eyes troubled blue eyes.

"No," he muttered as he glanced between her, Impa and the open door. Concern gnawed at his heart as he saw his best friend wasn't upset about what had happened at breakfast. "I just…are you ok?" he asked as he laid a hand on her shoulder.

Zelda pulled away from his scalding hand and touched her shoulder, the thin cotton of her shirt doing nothing to repel the heat of his flesh. She saw his eyes narrow as emotions flashed in their darkening depths, the wolf within him raising its hackles in suspicion. "Is there something you needed?" she all but snarled.

"I'm worried about you Zel," he told her without permeable. "I don't think you should leave the castle."

"And why shouldn't she?" Impa wondered aloud as she took a step closer to the Hero. She waited until he averted his eyes to smirk. "As I thought. Until you decide to tell me why she must be cautious, she will be able to come and go as she pleases."

Zelda clenched her fist and dug her nails into her palms as anger flooded her once more. "I am a big girl," she whispered, venom lacing her words. "If I can handle fighting Ganondorf at age thirteen, I can certainly leave my own home."

Link watched fire burn in her emerald eyes and took a step back. "I know you can," he assured her just as quietly. "It's just—"

"Just nothing," Impa snapped as she wound an arm through Zelda's. "We're leaving. Unless you have some reason to seek us, leave us be for the day. I won't tell you again," she added.

Both women turned on their heels and strode through the open doors. Link flinched as Zelda's hair smacked his face, knowing it was deserved. Yet as he watched them quickly emerge from the castle's shadow and into the spring sunlight, he felt his worry grow.

Knight Creso was planning something. While he would keep Zelda's secrets, he wouldn't allow her need to hide endanger them all.

Without a thought, Link turned and raced up the stairs. Desperate and hope lent spurred his search for both the King and errant knight.

[-]

Never could it be said that Impa didn't remember the smallest details of any event. She was still muttering about them when they entered Eldin Province, much to Zelda's amusement.

"—as if we hadn't had enough problems dealing with finding a tutor willing to teach him
something other than—"

"Impa…"

"—history or sword work. If I'd wanted him to learn only fighting and why we fight—"

"Impa."

"— I would have taught him myself. It was as if—no, it was because the little brat of a boy—"

"Impa!"

Blinking several times in startled confusion, Impa stopped walking. "Yes Zelda?" she asked as if nothing had happened.

Zelda's lips twitched in as laughter bubbled in her chest at the picture Impa made. With her head tilted to the side, eyes wide with questioning confusion and lips pursed lightly to keep from ranting further, Zelda could see the inquisitive child she had once been.

"Are you done?"

A grin turned her lips upward to match Zelda's smile, and Impa laughed softly. "For the moment."

"Good!" Zelda said as they continued walking through the high grass. She ran her fingers over the wild flowers and watched pollen fill the air, sweeting the breeze. "I never thought you'd shut up," she baited as she glanced at her Guardian.

"You're one to talk," Impa snarked good naturedly as her hand brushed Zelda's. Her grin widened as Zelda blushed under her teasing glare. "You never know when to stop talking, even if it's five in the morning!"

"Me?! You're the one who doesn't stop talking until dawn, Miss 'What Do You Want to Do Today'."

"Sure, blame it all on me." Impa turned her head to the side and lifted her nose in the air. "Begone with you if you must be so cruel!"

Clutching her stomach in laughter, Zelda staggered beside Impa as they continued to walk. As her free hand became tangled in the grass, she curled her fingers and pulled a fistful of the plants free. With a quiet giggle, she laid her hand on Impa's shoulder and shoved the ball of wild flowers down the front of her leather under-armor. The moment her fingers dropped the grass, she ran further into the field.

Shrieking with shock, Impa chased the brunette while trying to remove the scratching weeds from between her breasts. Caught between amusement and annoyance, she ran faster. "Zelda!"

"That's my name!" she called over her shoulder as she continued to run, unhindered by the weight of her riding boots. The sound of her pounding feet against the dry field mingled with her laughter as she darted around a cluster of trees.

Impa followed her through the trees, the sound of Zelda's laughter coaxing her own into the air. She grasped at her Princess' shirt and growled good-naturedly when her fingers missed the cloth my scant inches. "I WILL get you back for this!" she promised as she continued to run after the other woman.
"Sure you will. Promises, promises." She twisted to face the Sheikah and blew her a kiss before turning forward, laughing all the while. "And after you do, why don't you take the flowers from your hair?"

Impa ran a hand over her hair before harrumphing, realizing she had fallen for the younger woman's tricks once more. Another peal of laughter escaped her chapped lips as Zelda tripped over herself, cursing all the while. "You're too confident," she said as she stood over the fallen Hylian.

"Can you blame me?" Zelda asked as she huffed. Accepting the offered hand, she wrapped her fingers around Impa's armored wrist and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. After brushing grass and dirt from her pants, she raised her eyes to Impa's. "Well?"

"No," Impa said after a moment. As Zelda had done earlier, Impa twined her fingers in the tall grass and clutched the plants in her fist.

Sensing her intent, Zelda smirked and began running once more. Once more, Impa's hand grazed air as she reached for Zelda's shirt. A groan of annoyance rumbled in her chest as she followed the fleeing woman.

"You're too slow!" Zelda taunted, scaling a tree as quickly as possible. As she moved from limb to limb, she saw Impa begin to climb after her. So focused on her retreat, she didn't notice the branch she grabbed was broken.

The crack of wood and screech of fear caused an instant change within the alert Guardian. She pushed off the limb she'd been crouched on and grasped the falling woman from the air.

It didn't matter to her that Zelda could have found purchase on another branch, nor that they weren't far from the ground. Her only goal, as it had always bee, was to keep her safe.

Seconds felt like minutes as gravity pulled her body against Impa's, the jarring force rattling her teeth. It took her several moments to put enough space between them to check the Sheikah female for injury.

"Impa…you're hurt," she whispered as she saw pain flood Impa's hooded eyes.

With a grunt, Impa lifted herself onto her elbows. Pain seized her back and chest, unrelenting as she struggled for breath. "Not…hurt," she responded after a moment. "Just a bit…dazed."

"Maybe not injured, but hurt none the less," Zelda murmured as she wrapped an arm around Impa's shoulders to hold her up. "You might have a concussion."

Exhaling sharply, Impa forced herself to sit upright. She pressed a hand to her head as gravity once more redirected her blood flow. "We fell ten feet Zelda. I'm fine." She smiled softly in reassurance and cupped the ashen woman's cheek. "I promise. I'm more shocked than anything. The ground isn't completely thawed from the winter."

"I'm sorry. Goddesses, don't ever do that again." Ignoring her chuckle of amusement, Zelda wrapped her arms around Impa. Relief flooded her as her embrace was returned.

Impa was safe, bruised but unbroken.

"Why don't you wear something less…restrictive?"
Taken aback by the rather odd inquiry, Impa could only blink in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You wear a metal vest that ends two inches under your throat, under which is a shirt of chain-mail. As if that wasn't bad enough, you wear metal pants and boots made for Gorons."

Red eyes rolled heavenward in exasperation. She spoke slowly and with exaggerated care, enjoying the annoyance it would cause. "Zelda, armor is for protection. My vital organs are contained in my torso, which is covered by my armor. My most vulnerable arteries, which are in my legs and neck, are also protected."

"But it's so…heavy! You fell out of a tree. Why not wear your suit?"

"And advertise to the world that you are Sheik? I think not." Unable to stop herself, Impa scoffed at the disbelief on Zelda's face. "I can move perfectly fine in what I'm wearing. Unlike those things you call dresses," she added with a smile.

Zelda placed a hand to her heart as laughter flooded the bond. Warmth filled their bellies with butterflies, noticed but uncommented. "I thought you liked my dresses."

Impa snorted softly as she continued to lean against Zelda, lulled by the sound of her heart. "I like them when they aren't ridiculously padded and held in place by boned corsets. I like them when you wear one petticoat, not twenty. I like them when you can wear something under them." She lifted Zelda's shirt enough to show the leather armor underneath. "I like them when they're practical. Otherwise, I hate them."

Zelda slapped the calloused hand from her shirt with a grin and smoothed the tan material so it rested flat once more. "Well, if you hate them so much, take it up with the dress makers."

"I have," Impa muttered with a groan. "None of them care." She closed her eyes and sighed in exasperation. "Annoying fashion vultures, all of them."

In an attempt not to laugh at Impa's pained expression, Zelda slowly unwound the string which kept the Sheikah's gray hair in a tight bun. The gray waves spilled over the other woman's shoulders as she combed her fingers through the tresses.

Impa slowly opened her eyes and tilted her head back once more. She watched Zelda's eyes unfocused as she became lost in thought. Smiling to herself at the trust Zelda presented her, she gently wrapped her fingers around Zelda's wrist and pulled the hand from her hair.

Her fingers traced the hidden Triforce, golden energy entwining with purple.

Zelda remained silent as she watched their magics dance. As a cool blew from the north-western Lake Hylia, surrounding them with the scents of spring. The feel of Impa's rough fingers caressing the back of her hand warmed her shared love and trust caused her filled her heart with a lightness she hadn't thought possible.

Keeping her eyes on Zelda's face, Impa spoke softly so as not to startle the other Sage. "What are you thinking about?"

Meeting Impa's eyes without hesitation, Zelda's smile grew. With a quiet giggle, she began running her fingers through Impa's hair once more. "Nothing much," she stated truthfully. "Just…thinking."

"Hmm," was the only response Impa gave for several minutes. "We should continue with our walk. As much as I enjoy laying in the grass and doing nothing—"
Zelda giggled again and pulled from hand from Impa's hair. "I understand. It's too beautiful of a
day to lay around." Standing with ease, she extended a hand to her companion.

Shaking her head, Impa took the offered hand. "You move far too quickly for a Hylian."

"You trained me, if I remember correctly."

Smirking proudly, Impa patted Zelda's head in pacification. "That I did."

Zelda held a hand to her mouth, stifling her laughter as best as she could. The smug expression
Impa wore only grew more satisfied as they continued walking.

"You were always my best student," Zelda heard her say.

"I was your only student!" Allowing herself to laugh, Zelda shook her head. "You've become senile
Imps."

"What have I told you about calling me that ridiculous name?!"

"That you hate it, and it makes you feel like something akin to a Poe."

"Exactly. So why do you insist on using it?"

Smiling innocently, Zelda batted her lashes. "Because it annoys you."

"Goddess save me…"

Their laughter faded into a comfortable silence as they walked through the grass. They shared a
smile, enjoying the privacy while it lasted.

Basking in the rarity of their solitude, Zelda lifted her face towards the sun and smiled as it
caressed her face. "Do we have to return soon?"

"Not necessarily," Impa murmured as she also raised her face towards the bright orb. "It's a
beautiful day."

"Your eyes are closed," Zelda told her as she turned her gaze to her companion.

"Very observant," Impa replied with a grin, her face still turned towards the sky. "Thank you for
telling me."

Watching the rest of Impa's emotional defenses crumble as the spring breeze blew around them
caused Zelda's heart to skip. Entranced by the emotions displayed on her Guardian's face, she
stared without shame, unable to look away.

"Impa," she whispered. "I—" She shook her head as her voice failed her. Strength fleeing, she
sighed softly and stared at the peak of Death Mountain.

The cool air around them became frigid, the weight of hidden words turning their blood to ash.
Impa turned towards Zelda, a worried frown twisting her lips as she felt the desolation which
wrapped around her Charge's mind and heart. "Tell me, please," she heard herself beg as she
cupped Zelda's cheek.

"We're having a good time. I don't want to ruin anything."

"You could never ruin anything keta, it's impossible. If you are upset, I want you to talk to me,
regardless of what we are doing."

Giving herself no time to question her actions, Zelda closed the space between them and hugged the older woman. Pulling the earthy scent deep into her lungs with each breath, she felt the truth struggling to break free. Her need for secrecy fought against her desire to keep from hurting Impa.

And yet, Fate snatched the decision from her hands. Just as she prepared herself to say the words she'd only spoken to Link, Impa narrowed her eyes.

"Someone's coming," Impa hissed. Furious at the interruption, she stared in the direction of the castle. She hugged the younger woman tighter, regretting the silence between them.

The stomping hooves of nearing horses send vibrations through the compacted ground, bringing a curse to her lips. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Zelda murmured as she pulled away. Her heart pounded with each nearing thud of the horses, the weight of their bodies causing the earth under her feet to stir. The sound of their heavy breathing and the shouts of their riders caused her to close her eyes.

Her mask of diplomatic indifference slid into place as if it had never left. Her control became iron-clad as she opened her eyes and stared at the soldiers nearing them.

Now was not the time to allow her emotions to control her. She held her head high as Knight Creso arrived with several of the Royal Guard and two advisors. Her hands rested at her side, the fingers of her right hand brushing her sword as each man slid from his horse.

"Is something amiss?" she asked, her voice as calm as her expression.

"My Lady," one of the advisors said quietly. "There has been an…incident."

Zelda felt her breath catch in her throat. Her words remained calm even as her heart clenched in her chest. "What sort of incident, Sir Evat?" She watched his blue eyes lower as he knelt before her.

The Knights and remaining advisors slowly lowered themselves to one knee as Advisor Evat lifted his head.

Impa shook her head as horror crept through her mind. Though she was angry, she had never wished…not this way. Not when Zelda never had a chance to speak with him.

"His Majesty King Daphnes of Hyrule suffered a fatal heart attack twenty minutes earlier. It is the Goddesses' will that our Sovereign be laid to rest."

Mikal Evat brushed a lock of brown hair from his face and met the green eyes, unwavering in his dedication. He watched as confusion and shocked filled her eyes and covered her face, leaving her bare of all emotional defense. Without hesitation he lowered his eyes to his hands as he extended them.

"His Majesty's ring, Your Highness. Long live Queen Zelda Nohansen of Hyrule!"

"Long live the Queen!" chorused the kneeling men. Zelda wrapped her numb fingers around the golden wedding ring which rested in his hand. Grief choked her as the reality of the situation began to settle in her heart.

She hadn't gotten to say goodbye, hadn't told him how angry she was.
Her last words to him had been filled with rage, not love.

She hadn't even hugged him.

And now, she never would.

Gooseflesh rose on her arms as she slid the ring into her pocket. She dimly heard Impa echo their words. "Rise, good sirs. Now is not the time to fall to your knees. The King, Din rest his soul, has joined his Queen in eternal rest." Her eyes remained blind to the field and people surrounding her as she stared at the Castle. "We are in the middle of a war gentleman. Mount your steeds and return to the castle. Summon the Lords, Parliament and Council."

"My Lady," Knight Creso said quietly as he stood. "How are you to return? I see no horse."

Unflinching as her mask of indifference slid into place once more, Zelda met his eyes with a calm she did not feel. "The same way I left it. I shall walk. Queen though I may be, arrogance is not a trait I find pleasing. My people will see me walk among them as I return to my home, just as I walked among them when I left it."

"But Gan—"

"Ganondorf is not foolish enough to threaten me on this day," she hissed. She watched as one by one, they sat astride their horses once more. She swallowed a growl as she saw the grief, disbelief and shock in their eyes.

"Gentlemen, let me make myself very clear. The time for your petty rivalries, your foolish anger, is over. The King is dead and no longer will I turn a blind eye to your treatment of my station. I am now leader of Hyrule's army as well as leader to the allied militia. You may hate me for having higher rank, you may despise me for being a warrior…I do not care. I am not my father, I will not allow you to continue your personal agendas.

"Let it be known, from this day forward, all military decrees shall be signed by myself. I will not lift the curfew, for General Wadel's decision was a wise one. Any further restrictions placed on the people of Hyrule will not be tolerated unless I approve them. All of you," she emphasized as she stared at each man in turn, "shall be placed on political probation. Any hint of disregard to my orders shall result in loss of military rank and possible charge of treason. This is a new day, gentlemen, and I will not have those I consult divided."

Silence fell over the posse. Nary a whisper met the wind as the young Queen kept her cold eyes on them. Unfaltering, she waited until they all looked away before she softened her expression. As Impa touched her shoulder she felt her stomach roll. Her eyes burned with suppressed tears and grief threatened to overwhelm her. "He's dead. He's dead dead dead...and I didn't...I never said goodbye. Never told him I love him. That I was angry about the stupid gown."

"I know keta. Dismiss them. We shall talk then," Impa assured her. She lifted her head and watched the men bow over their horses as Zelda raised a hand.

"You are dismissed for now. Remember my words."

"Your orders shall be known throughout the land, Your Majesty," Evat said. His voice was as strong as his determined gaze. He watched the ice in her eyes begin to melt and bowed his head once more. "Your eternal servant, my Queen." Without another word he backed his horse through the group. His back was presented to her only once he reached the end of the assembly, unwilling to insinuate an insult moments after announcing Queen Zelda's ascension to the throne.
"We should have waited," Knight Creso muttered to himself as he and the others followed Evat. "The Queen is obviously—"

"Obviously nothing," snapped a fellow soldier. "She is our Lady, the mother of our country. Her Majesty is not to be questioned, Creso. Do not forget yourself."

"Of course not," the other man said quickly. "I am merely worried she was unsettled from the breakfast she shared with his late Majesty."

"It is not for us to decide if she is unsettled or not," a third rider said. He turned in his saddle. "The Queen—"

"We must ride, not gossip!" Evat snapped as he gripped his reins. He spurred his horse and raced towards the Castle, annoyance warring with sorrow as he heard the others follow behind him. He pressed his body against the steed as he saw the distance between himself and the Town entrance become shorter by the second. "C'mon boy," he whispered to the horse as the crowds of mourning Hylians parted to allow him and the others passage. "Just a bit farther."

His mount whined and continued to gallop across the bridge and into town. Cries of grief filled his ears as the sound of the horse's hooves became muted by the chaos.

Any comfort he found, any constant he gained from being in a place of vantage, became nothing but a reminder of failure as he moved deeper into the marketplace. Without looking back, he knew the other men were being detained by the masses.

A reflection in a nearby window confirmed his suspicions.

The people of Hyrule wanted to know why their King was dead, and no words of truth would soothe their anger.

"Enough!" Zelda heard one of the assembly yell as she and Impa ran towards the bridge. Uncaring if her people saw her racing behind the horses, Zelda continued to follow the men. She watched as the swarms of bodies descended to the horses like flies. Anger and horror shook her confidence as the horses began to rear, agitated by the crowds. "Be gone!" she heard him scream as the horses bucked.

"Long live Queen Zelda!" Impa shouted as they neared market gates. She stood beside Zelda as their footsteps ceased. Neither moved as they waited for the crowd to fall silent.

The angry voices which echoed through the fields from the market slowly became a hum of questioning whispers. "Long live Queen Zelda, Her Majesty of Hyrule," came the immediate response. Kneeling men and curtseying women repeated the words several times as a path crept through the crowd, leading the new matriarch to the castle.

Without hesitation, Zelda began walking towards the masses. Her head held high and eyes forward, she did nothing to hide the tears of grief and confusion which pooled in her eyes. When spoken to, she responded without hearing the words, unable to hear anything save her own pounding heart. Nervous beyond measure and lost to her next course of actions, the young Queen presented a confidence she didn't feel.

Impa also kept her head high as she walked beside Zelda. Her eyes moved over the crowd, forever searching for those who meant harm to her Charge. She blinked several times as Zelda's anger at the soldiers and her new Advisors faded into pain. "Never forget you are loved," she told the younger woman beside her as they passed through the center of town.
Unable to take her hand, Zelda nodded in response and wrapped her emotions around their bond in a mental hug. "I couldn't even if I wanted to."

"What are you thinking?"

"I can't do this. I can't run a country Impa...I can't."

"You can, because you love them. You understand they are people, not numbers. Do not let the Council and advisors dictate your thoughts as well as your actions. You expressed your mind as Princess, and as Queen, you can begin making changes to help Hyrule."

"And if they do not accept my proposals?" Zelda mumbled as they made their way towards the arched doors leading to the courtyard around the castle.

"They have no choice," Impa told her. Certainty laced her voice as she ignored the guards and pushed the doors open. "You are not your father; you won't let them ignore you."

As Guardian and Charge allowed the weight of change to settle on their shoulders, Link watched them from the shelter of a darkened corner. His eyes, usually filled with the warmth of laughter, were as cold as the breeze. There was no amusement on his face as he followed Creso from the gates to the west entrance of the castle.

Choruses of "Long live Queen Zelda" muted all sounds of their presence. Link rubbed his ears as the echo rang through his head. Like a bell tolled at noon, the sounds of praise and grief carried through the castle and outwards across the land, the weight of recent events pressing heavily on each person as the news spread. Link shook his head and pushed the raised voices from his mind with little effort.

Single-minded in his task, the Hero stalked the Knight much like with the knowledge of a hunter, never noticing the passage of time. So determined to catch the Knight, Link gave Zelda's meeting with the High Council and other political bodies nary a thought.

It was this meeting which currently held Zelda's attention. She perched on the edge of her seat, her back ramrod straight. Nerves frayed by the monotone voices of her Council members, she clenched her teeth to disguise the annoyance bubbling within her.

The knowing smirks of the Lords and Ladies of Chambers didn't help.

When the Chairman of Parliament's voice eclipsed the Councilwoman's, she felt her neck tighten with stress.

Rubbing her head to ward off the impending migraine, she kept her eyes on the Council. Knowing they were observing her, she tilted her head and narrowed her eyes in challenge. As several Parliament members looked away, the young Queen allowed herself a mental smirk.

Impa cleared her throat softly and bit back as smile as she observed Zelda's triumph. As several hours passed, the Sheikah Guardian felt numbness fill her limbs as surely as it clouded her mind. Exhausted trickled through their bond as Zelda's mind touched her own.

"How boring this is," Zelda sighed as she watched the shadows lengthen with the fading sunlight. "I am the Heir Apparent, why must I have this explained to me?"

"By 'this' I assume you mean being the Heir Apparent. It is explained because that is procedure."

"Yes, well...tradition is boring in this case."
Unable to keep her stoic mask in place, Impa glanced down at the scroll in front of her. Pretending to be engrossed in the material she had memorized after Zelda's birth, she let her lips twitch in amusement. "You aren't wrong," murmured as hunger began to churn her stomach.

"-this is not to—milady Queen, is your attention focused on the subject at conversation?"

"Do you mean the explanation, which is much too long good sir, of how I am to spend several hours a day receiving Hyrule citizens when I could be walking among them and hearing their concerns? Yes, I am focused. However, I fail to see how sitting in a chair will accomplish anything when, as I said, I could be walking through the land and talking with my people. There are many races in many areas of Hyrule whom do not feel comfortable entering the castle; why must they be left out?" she questioned. She held the gaze of Sir Majoren, PM and Head Scholar of the Hyrule National Library. When the man's wide eyes twitched in response to her unspoken challenge, she smiled softly. "Have you no answer, Sir Majoren?"

"My Queen, I am your faithful and most humble servant," he began, "yet—"

Zelda raised a hand to stall his words. "I am tired, sir, and frankly…I am already sick of excuses. This dictation which states I, the Queen, must sit on a throne all afternoon, every day of the week, is ridiculous. I will not follow such an archaic tradition, for that is what this is; a tradition. I have studied Hyrule's laws and the requirements of its monarchs extensively, and have found no such article which supports your statement.

"Do you know what I was doing when I heard the King had passed away? I was walking in the fields, admiring the nature of our lovely country. I was not wearing a dress made of foreign silks and waving the Hyrule banner. The only Triforce I carried on my person is Wisdom; I had no adornment. I had no guard following me, for I was in the company of my Guardian, Maderone Impa. Please, no not interrupt me.

"I was walking, ladies and gentlemen, just as you do. I was not riding a horse or sitting in a carriage. I was not walking on carpet over mud, but sinking my boots into it. I was not distanced from my people as you want me to be. I may be Queen, but we are all Hyrulian, no matter our race.

"I will not laze around for six hours a day to listen to my people when I could go to them. Why must they come to me? I am their leader, yet I serve them. This is their country, I am merely their advocate. If any person wishes to speak to me while I am in the castle, they may do so. But I will not," she said as she pounded her fist on the glossy wooden table, "presume I am better than anyone else. I will not treat the people of this country like cattle, nor 'commoners' as I have heard them called. We are all equal in the eyes of the Goddesses.

"Now, I believe it is well past sunset, and this means it is time to eat. I am hungry, as I'm sure this Council is, and I will now take my supper." She watched several members of the Council sweat and clench their teeth. Paying them no mind, she pressed against the table and curled her fingers for support. Zelda pushed the ornate wooden chair backwards as she stood.

Unflinching as the heavy chair feet ground against the flagstone, Impa also stood. She scanned the room and met the eyes of the remaining Royal Guards. The last of the Sheikah continued to stand silently as she gave them a knowing look. She pressed her lips together and laid her fingers over them. A silent question of loyalty passed between the dwindling tribe, striking an old cord buried deep within the Sheikah history.

The Sheikah men nodded once in agreement; no matter what, they would remain loyal to Queen Zelda as they had King Daphnes.
Despite the Royal Family's betrayal towards the Sheikah race in the past, the remaining Shadow people knew they could trust the new Queen as they had not the King. She had proven herself to them, not through Impa, but through her own actions. It was Sheik who endeared them to the Hylian woman they now protected, not her personification of a just and fair heir of the previous monarch.

Her motivation to protect her people as they fought to protect her, even when she was a child, told the stoic Guards their elegant Queen was worthy of the Sheikah tribe. They knew, even when she was too young to legally train with the armies, she rode into battle with her head high and back straight.

Though the Triforce rested within her, the power she held came from her heart. Neither the Goddess' magics nor diplomatic illusion was needed to show how much she cared for her country and its occupants.

Seeing the acceptance shining in the eyes of the otherwise unmoving men, Impa allowed herself a rare smile. Proud of her Charge and even prouder of her tribe, she felt relief drive the worry from her previously heavy heart. A she laid a hand on the small of Zelda's back, she glanced over her shoulder. "If you are ready..." she said with a raised eyebrow. Her words trailed into silence as she watched the Guards stand straighter than ever, their spears held tightly. When they fell into position behind she and Zelda, she returned her attention to the woman that was her world. "And you?"

"Starving," Zelda replied without hesitation, her eyes shining with laughter. "Let's eat before it's too late."

"Yes, let's," Impa mumbled quietly as she pressed her hand harder against Zelda's back to urge her forward. "How about now?"

Zelda's infectious laughter floated through the castle, a soothing balm to the gashes deep in their souls made by their grief.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
What Lies Beneath by Breaking Benjamin
Fade Away by Breaking Benjamin
Her Diamonds by Rob Thomas
Hear Me by Kelly Clarkson
Fake It by Seether
Moonlight fell through the windows, casting darker shadows than the sunlight had nearly eighteen hours before. As if to make a mockery of the peaceful start of her day, Zelda's dreams were plagued with screams and bloodshed. Angry orange eyes followed her through the darkness of her mind as she tore at her bed in a frantic attempt to free herself from the horrid scenes which held her tightly in their claws.

After a leisurely dinner, Guardian and Charge had retired to their chambers for the night. Silenced with shock and numbed from grief, they spoke little until well wishes were exchanged for the night.

Whispers of Impa's words filled her ears as Zelda's nails dug into the thick quilt wrapped around her. Cold sweat drenched her writhing frame as she tore through the haunting memories. With a warrior's strength, Zelda wrenched herself upright and threw the covers across the room.

"Come to me," whispered the voice which haunted her darkest memories. Without hesitation, she scrambled from the bed and ran across the empty room. Her thought became heavy as her mind was entrapped in the need to follow the call. Agony choked her as her bare feet pounded soundlessly against the carpeted floor. Misery tore at her heart as she fumbled to open the hidden door with little light. A quiet click echoed through her silent room as she slipped behind the door and pulled it shut.

Ignoring the whispers in her ear, the frightened Queen practically leapt from the threshold to the side of Impa's bed. Barely able to grasp the covers in her shaking hand, the young woman slid beside her Guardian. Trembling from fear and the cold night, she pressed herself against the Sheikah, seeking warmth in whatever form she could. The beat of her pounding heart deafened her to the crackling fire and various sounds echoing through the castle.

The whispered words became spiteful, their sensual command slowly losing their soft edge.

"Come to me Zelda...or you will regret it."

Angry dictations sliced through her mind and heart, sending new chills down her spine. She closed her eyes, trying to ignore what only she could see. A silent whimper tore from her throat as hands wrapped around her soul and beckoned her. Visions of violence and pain ran through her wounded mind like blood down a sword, trickling deeper towards her heart with every frantic breath she drew. Her voice was barely a sound on the silent air when she spoke her plea with a single word. "Impa..."

Partially awakened by Zelda's terror, Impa blinked several times and pressed a hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn. Eyes blurred and mind clouded by her deep sleep, the Sheikah rolled away from the wall. Fatigue weighed her movements as she clumsily wrapped her arms around the woman curled at her side. "Zelda, what is it? Did something happen?" she mumbled sleepily. Barely registering the black streaks of hidden knowledge running through their bond, she tightened her arms and ran a
hand through Zelda's hair. "Talk to me keta," she murmured.

Though waking quickly, confusion and exhaustion clouded her mind further as Zelda's terror urged her body into action. Attempting to calm the trembling woman, Impa reached behind her to grab a knife. When a whimper met her words, she laid beside the brunette once more, worry lacing around her heart. "Zelda, please speak to me." Her eyes, used to the darkness and shadows of the night, met the grey-green orbs of her Charge. A shiver ran down her spine as tears sparkled in Zelda's wide eyes.

"I had a nightmare," the Hylian whispered as regret chocked her. Unable to meet Impa's knowing gaze any longer, she pressed her face into Impa's neck and wrapped her arms around the other woman's shoulders. "A really bad nightmare. Hold me…please," she begged. The need to flee the castle ran through her veins like her rushing blood as the voice became louder, more demanding. Eyes closed tightly against the truth, she whimpered once more. "Don't let me go." With a swallow, she sobbed and let her tears fall freely.

"Never keta, never," Impa promised as she held the crying woman to her. Pulling the covers over them once more, she waited for her Charge to sleep before sliding the knife under the pillow. She closed her eyes and fell into a fitful sleep, caught between the need to protect and her heart's need to love and trust the one who was her reason for living.

Through the night and early morning, Guardian and Charge kept their embrace tight as their demons haunted their dreams. When dawn finally woke the Sheikah, Impa found herself wrapped protectively around the chilled Hylian. Despite the heavy covers and dying fire, Zelda's skin remained as cold as the midnight air.

With a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes to rest until the Queen rose.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Stricken by Disturbed
Wash Away Those Years by Creed
Whisper by Within Temptation
Her Diamonds by Rob Thomas
Chapter Six

Breaking the Mold (I)

Similar nights happened frequently through the following year. Impa had long since stop asking Zelda of her icy skin, knowing she would never receive the truth.

As Hyrule slowly began to emerge from its grief and continued to war against Ganondorf, the Queen and her Guardian began their changes. Subtle though they were, the impacts were profound.

Alliances were made and renewed with various races in and around Hyrule, allowing the Hylian army to merge their legions with those of the other races.

Refugees took sanctuary in Sage temples, led along a path laid by the Triforce of Wisdom.

When food banks began to empty and charities bled dry, large sums of rupees were often donated anonymously.

While Zelda and Impa worked, Link kept to his own path. He was often absent from the Queen's presence, something which did not go unnoticed by the masses.

Yet none of this mattered as the triad walked with their friends into the market.

Enjoying the relative freedom of such a simple task as shopping, Zelda couldn't help but acknowledge how different her life was from other women her age. Some days, she felt far older than her eighteen years.

And yet...as she strolled down the busy streets with Impa, Link, Navi and Malon, this was not one of those days.

"-thing you want?" Malon asked Link as she watched Navi stare longingly at a pouch of shimmering blue pearls.

"Not yet," Link mumbled as he peeked over Navi's shoulder. "Um...what would you do with them? I mean...you're a ball of light most of the time."

He whined when Navi's elbow made contact with his ribs. "That's for me to know, Mr. Nosey," she grumbled as she turned from the stand and walked away.

A smile pulled at her lips as she watched her friends enjoy themselves. She ran a hand through her unbound hair and allowed her thoughts to drift.

While a Princess making weekly rides to the Gorons had been seen as amusing, a Queen making such runs was unheard of. It hadn't stopped her from making the frequent trips, however.

She had laughed when the Council attempted to reprimand her a second time. "I am and always will be Zelda, my Ladies and Lords, no matter the title which comes before my name," she had told them as she left the room.
The only "compromise" she had made was the accompaniment of two Guards, be they Sheikah or Hylian. Impa had been rather offended by the suggestion, much to the Council's dismay.

Zelda had pat her hand and told her they need some delusion of control.

Link had reported country and castle inhabitants were singing her praises all the louder.

His laughter lasted long after Zelda's blush faded, something she reminded him daily. It wasn't fair to laugh at your best friend, right?

An addition to their group drew her thoughts ot the present. She searched for the name of the brown-haired man talking with Link.

Shad, the archeologist and a member of the Resistance. One of the many who had helped Link during his earlier quest.

Curiosity satisfied, she nodded to herself and allowed her thoughts to wander once more.

Shad watched the Time Sage's eyes glaze and began pondering the young monarch, wondering who she truly was. Though a just and fair ruler, he knew little of the woman Link called his sister.

As sunlight filtered through the drifting clouds, the young archeologist slid his gaze from Zelda to Impa. He shivered as her red eyes met his. The small smile forming on her lips, coupled with the air of authority and strength, told him all he needed to know.

The faintest hint of purple Shadow magic glow around her, made him turn his attention to the red head inspecting a booth.

Malon was her name, according to Link. The woman, just past twenty years, was a bit shorter than himself and filled with a child's delight. His lips twitched in amusement as she clapped her hands and grabbed the sleeve of the woman next to her. What was the second woman's name? Navi?

Feeling Shad's gaze, Navi turned to face him. She watched him blush and turn to Link. Smiling as she shook her head, the humanoid fea returned her attention to the farmer beside her. Her red hair and short frame was a contrast to the brunette and blond warriors around them.

Navi's smile grew as Malon began haggling with a stocky vendor. She knew the young woman enjoyed arguing with the towns people. Some would say she enjoyed arguing more than she like riding.

Malon winked at the gold-eyed, white-haired fea as the vendor wrapped her purchase with a scowl. She blew a curl from her face and glanced around before looking at Navi again.

The fea seemed happy, though it was clear to the farmer that she missed her mate. While the young Hylian had never met the Twilight Queen, she heard Link and Zelda speak highly of her many times over.

Would Midna be visiting soon? Surely that would raise their spirits. Meaning Navi, Link, Zelda and Impa of course.

Maybe she could even meet the Twilight Queen. It would be nice to have a face to go along with all the stories!

Link shook his head as Shad returned his focus to their conversation yet again. He smiled to himself, amused by Shad's muttering. "Are the ladies an annoyance, friend?" he questioned softly.
Shad shook his head and sighed softly, turning his face towards the cloudy sky. "No. I just..." he lowered his head to catch Link's eyes. "I am rarely around this many people," he mumbled before lowering his gaze. Without a though, the brunette removed his glasses and cleaned them with the hem of his shirt.

Link's eyes filled with understanding as he laid a hand on the other man's shoulder. "We can leave if you want. Maybe stop by the hospital?"

The archeologist felt his lips twitch as he fought a smile. Golden Sages Hospital of Hyrule had been their meeting place. Link had been injured and spent several months in rehab, much to the Hero's annoyance.

"Maybe," he said after several moments. With a teasing grin, he looked over his glasses at the blond warrior. "I think the nurses are still talking about you."

Link felt his skin warm and mock-glared at the scholar. "Don't remind me," he muttered. His eyes narrowed as Shad grinned. "You're the one who—"

"Me?! I did nothing. You were injured enough to be in the hospital."

Link shook his head and sighed softly as he did so. He sighed again as the clouds part enough to let shafts of warm sunlight fall upon the market, aware of his friend's scrutiny. Letting a smile grace his lips, he lowered his head to look Shad in the eyes. "Is there a reason you're staring at me?"

The corner of Link's mouth twitched and curled upwards in a slow half-smile of delightful amusement. "I haven't changed much."

"No," the scholar observed as his eyes slowly took in Link's form. "No, you haven't, had you?"

"Is that a good thing?" asked a hesitant voice.

"Maybe," came the quiet reply.

"Hey...if you two are done whispering, we want to eat. As in now," Malon added as an afterthought. She tapped her foot and glanced at the other women, all of whom had voiced their desire for food and drink.

As if choreographed, both men rolled their eyes and shared a sigh of exasperation before looking at each other once more. Women, their silent, weary smile seemed to say. Can't live with them, can't live without them. Their smiles turned to grins as they focused their eyes on the females before them.

The very hunger and strong females.

All armed with weapons of some sort.

Rethinking their plan of harassment, both Link and Shad glanced at the surrounding restaurants and spoke as one. "Where do you want to eat?"

[-]
Basking in the victory which came naturally to the four females, each woman looked at one another and smirked in triumph.

Yet again their male friends had chosen self-preservation over their ego.

Queen, Guardian, fairy and farmer allowed their smirks to grow as silent laughter bubbled in their chests. Each warrior placed a hand to her mouth and giggled as their eyes fell to the disgruntled men one table over.

Sulking over their decision to cede defeat in the matter of food and drink, Link and Shad ignored the laughing women merely feet away. Both men stared at their empty plates and contemplated how men stupidly were called the stronger sex when the women beside them clearly outranked them, regardless of social status. Though they considered themselves members of the equality party, both also knew when to admit they were outsmarted and outnumbered...

Much like now.

Various Hylians watched as Shad and Link rolled their eyes before bowing to their companions. Men and women alike sighed as the shy sunlight case a gold aura upon them.

Realizing their victory had been spoiled by the crowd's appreciation of the retreating men, the four friends share a glance and nodded. They paused long enough to pay for their meal before following the duo.

The winding paths of the market brought smiles to the combined faces as the group eventually reformed. After several minutes of argument, it was decided Shad and Malon would be the first to shop for formal wear. Upon their whined requests to know why, Navi smiled and simply stated "Because the Queen loves any reason to make Hyrule happy, even during war."

Zelda's tan cheeks became tinged with pink as she narrowed her eyes at the smiling fea. "War is no excuse to not celebrate being alive. Those we have lost gave their lives to keep us safe...why not thank them by enjoying what they've given us?" she asked.

"Too true," Malon murmured as she cast a hateful glare at the regally dressed mannequins decorating the store. "Why Shad and I have to go first doesn't make sense," she added.

As the clothing maker hovered around the group, Shad removed his glasses and cleaned them with a handkerchief. Before he could speak, however, the seamster replied.

His voice was friendly and full of knowledge, yet unmistakably restrained. "Because, my dear," he said as he circled both Malon and Shad, his eyes darting between them and the others. "Our Queen, Guardian, Hero and the Twilight Queen's..." he trailed off, clearly unwilling to challenge the threatening glares of the aforementioned beings. "The Twilight Queen's dear friend would—"

"Oh Dujen, do leave them be," called a woman. Each person, seamster and shoppers alike, looked around. When the mysterious woman emerged from behind the heavy wooden door leading to the back of the shop, Dujen sighed.

"Lywel," be began, "I am doing nothing save—"

"Harassing these young ones," Lywel mocked. She drew her four-foot-nine frame to full height and marched through the ensemble.

Her black eyes shone with compassion as she looked between the blushing Shad and Malon to the grinning Zelda, Navi, Link and Impa. "Your Majesty," she whispered, hastily lifting her skirt in
"I apologize for my employee's lack of respect for you and your companions."

"We must respect ourselves before any other," Zelda told her with a smile. "Mr..."

"Opela, m'lady," the balding man supplied while bowing.

"Mr. Opela," she said as her smile began to wane, "is not your responsibility. I am not vain enough to be offended by his lack of formality, though I am observant enough to notice he held his tongue mostly due to my presence." She watched as the man's cheeks became fiery with embarrassment and felt no remorse. "Though it was none of his business, my friend had questioned our business in your shop."

Lywel rose from her curtsey and shooed with clothing maker away with scowl. She turned her gaze to Malon and Shad once more. "I believe I heard this young one ask why she and her companion are to be dressed first." She waited for Malon to nod before smiling. "Though I don't presume to know the inner workings of our Queen's mind," she cast a glance at Impa before winking as Malon, who blushed and giggled, "I do understand the reasoning.

"You and your friend here are people I have yet to meet. I need extra time for your measurements and fittings. Have you a specific occasion in mind you would like to dress for?"

Malon and Shad looked between one another than the others. "Her Majesty did not say," Shad answered quietly.

Zelda felt her neck burn with embarrassment at the growing formality around her.

After a day of her friends speaking with familiarity, with the exception of the young archeologist, being surrounded by those she considered family displaying rigid etiquette caused her head to spin. In the past year, she had become used to the people of Hyrule treating her with the utmost respect. At the same time, she had also watched them slowly loosen their manners...just as she wanted.

The sudden change only served to remind her she would never be equal to her friends in the eye of Hyrule.

"'Her Majesty' has a name, Shad," she said after a hesitation. "My name is Zelda."

Quiet fell in the shop as all eyes turned to the young Queen. Several seconds passed before Shad cleared his throat. He spoke softly as the noise from the streets slowly invaded the silent space. "I apologize, Queen Zelda. I am...not as close to you as the others. I daren't presume to be," he added. The whispered words rolled from his lips like water from an over-filled glass. He kept his eyes on the ground, feeling very much like a chastised child.

Link shifted his feet and laid a hand on Shad's shoulder, smiling when the other man gave him a questioning glance. "You're one of us. If Zel wants you to use her name, then I'd do it." He lowered his voice and looked around in mock-fright. "She's scary enough. Plus she can beat me in a fight."

Laughter filled the shop, dawing questioning gazes from those passing by.

Arguments were something all of them expected. It went beyond who would "go" first. In fact, several of their arguments were little more than battle of wills...mostly battle of the sexes.

None of them, however, expected the current topic to be a matter of discussion. Some would later swear Link and Zelda had been close to drawing blades, so fierce were their words and angry were

[-]
their eyes.

"He shouldn't have to deal with a bunch of harpies!"

"We're only trying to help, unlike you!"

"Help?! It was your stupid idea for this in the first place. Why couldn't he wait until you'd decide when the next damned ball, party or whatever would be?!" Link snapped.

"You're insufferable!" Zelda screeched. "It's not my fault neither of you know nothing about clothing!"

"You're the one who wants to dress him in purple silk!"

"I said he would look nice!"

"He looks like a fool! You don't put purple silk on a man with his coloring!"

Malon, Navi, Impa and Lywel watched the argument with various degrees of interest and amusement. Shad sat on a bench with his head in his hands, muttering.

"How do you know?!"

"Because I do!"

The hosts of the Courage and Wisdom Triforces stared at one other, refusing to cede. Both heaved for breath, their eyes alight with friendly anger. Neither spoke for several moments before Malon tilted her head.

"Link?" she called softly. She looked between him, Shad, and the various bolts of brightly colored cloth scattered around them all.

"What?!" he snapped, never looking away from his long-time friend.

"Are you...well...gay?"

"WHAT?!"

All eyes turned to the crimson Hero. Malon bit her lip, clearly worried she had offended the younger man.

Several patrons leapt into the air as Link's tirade melded with Zelda's shrieks of laughter.

[-]

Several measurements and draft patterns, two arguments and one nearly drawn blades later, Zelda and Link apologized.

The fact that their apologies included yet more threats of violence was something Impa and Navi merely roll their eyes at. Malon and Shad stared in shock as the two would-be siblings strode calmly down the walk way while promises of bloodshed spilled from the lips.

Had they lost their minds?

It was entirely possible, given the day's events.
As the sky had been threatening, the first celestial teardrops fell as screams tore through the market. All eyes turned in one direction, every instinct honed for a threat. Impa looked at Zelda, who turned to Link. Their purchases scattered across the cobblestone as they ran, unified by a warrior's purpose.

There was only one reason voices would raise in such a shrill cadence.

Standing at the entrance of the market was Ganondorf.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Breaking Out, Breaking Down by Bullets for My Valentine
Dignity by Bullets for My Valentine
Pretty On the Outside by Bullets for My Valentine
Breaking the Mold (II)

Zelda's breath caught as she stared at the monster before her. Deafened screams became piercing knives to her numb mind. Without warning, she threw her arm towards the Demon King. A current ran through her, a fiery balm to her icy spirit.

Her teeth clenched as the still air of the market began to whip around her.

A golden sphere extended from her hand, growing with every second it flew free. She watched as the magic of the Triforce tore through the darkening market, illuminating Ganondorf's vile army as they chased the citizens of Hyrule. A ray of hope, the Light energy radiated warmth to combat the soul-chilling ice which seemed to resonate from the presence of such heinous evil.

Ganondorf raise his hand and met the sphere with a blast of black lightening, smirking as he watched his greatest adversaries stare in shock. Amusement filled him as he chuckled, knowing his laughter could be heard above the screams. His gaze slid from Zelda's gray, impassive eyes to Link's form and his smirk widened. Malicious glee wrapped around his heart as the Hero's glacial eyes filled with hatred, turning as black as the noon sky.

The sounds of pain and fear, the scent of blood and death sent triumph through his veins. His blood boiled with the need to destroy them.

To break them in ways they could never imagine.

"Let's play," he whispered as the Triforce of Power glowed bright against his dark skin. He vanished without another word.

Navi whistled for Epona as Link, Zelda and Impa began running once more, racing through the crowds toward their prey. She mounted the horse and tore after them, her body tingling as she felt Twilight descend over the land. She barely crossed the bridge leading to Eldin Province before the wooden pathway exploded behind her.

She never looked back.

As she gasped for breath, Navi saw regiments of the Hyrule army spill from surround villages to combat the beings which filled the Province.

Without thought, she spurred Epona forward, seeing the sky splinter with magic.

Midna watched the battle around her through the shrouds of Twilight. As her body began to materialize, her eyes met Navi's before she tore them away. Her eyes glowed as the Fused Shadow called to the heir of its maker.

Impa gripped her blood-soaked sword and spun, unflinching as she decapitated another Bulblin. Her heart torn, she continued to fight as she struggled with the urge to answer Midna's call and the need keep Zelda within her sight.

The answer burned through her mind and brought tears of pain to her eyes with the sheer strength.
of the command. "Go, Shadow Sage," she heard Zelda growl through their bond.

"I am your Guardian."

"You are also a Sage. I will not die," Zelda promised as she allowed a Darknut's mace to tear her skirt. Her movements freer, she felt relief mix with terror and rage. "LINK!"

Link fell to the ground and rolled to the side as Ganondorf's broadsword sliced the air. Wasting no time, he grabbed a fallen ax and rose to his feet. He swung the heavy weapon to deflect the older man's blade, the Triforce of Courage a beacon in dark fog which encompassed them. The steady pulse of Power allowed him to prepare for the beast's attacks.

His muscles became Zora steel, his bones Goron iron as he dodged, parried and attacked with equal ferocity. His eyes never met the orange orbs of the bane of Hyrule as blood seeped from various wounds. A growl tore from his throat as the wolf in him demanded death from the one who hurt his family.

Justice would prevail.

This is the thought which ran through Impa's mind. The power of the Fused Shadow thrummed between she and Minda, following their will. Indigo and violet magics covered the vast field, trapping the various warriors inside.

With each beat of her heart, the Sheikah Guardian felt the strength of her love, of her rage and horror at the atrocities the darkness had committed, consume her. Snakes of searing emotion wound themselves around her heart and soul. Turning away from the Twili woman, she rejoined the battle without a word.

Midna's fiery yellow gaze pierced the hearts of darkness around her as the Twili surrounded her. She clenched her fists and made her way through her protectors, intent on destroying those who threatened her world and the world of her friends. As with Zant, strands of white-orange power sunk into their corrupted hearts and allowed their own poison to consume them from the inside out.

Ganondorf wrapped both hands around his sword and spun, using the force of both his body and the massive blade to knock the ax from Link's hands. He smirked once more, renewed triumph throbbing through him as the Hero fell to the ground. A chuckle fell from his lips as the young man bounced several times before laying still, blood pouring from the back of his head. As he strode towards the unconscious warrior, a soft voice stopped him.

"We have unfinished business," came the whispered words. Zelda swallowed as fear tightened her throat. Struggling for breath, she took a step forward towards the Gerudo King. She held her head high with pride as the area around them continued to darken with unnatural fog. Though afraid, she knew her duty to her people...

To her family...

To herself.

With deliberate slowness, Ganondorf turned to face the Queen. He sheathed his sword and took several steps towards her, chuckling when she backed away. The dark mist inched closer, isolating them from the world. "Yes, we do," he murmured as he moved closer still.

Nary a muscle twitched, nor did a single iota of unease fill him as he laid a hand over hers. He ran a thumb over her Triforce before tracing her white knuckles. His smirk widened as she began to shake, her eyes betraying her rage and terror. He slid his fingers up her arms, slowly...
Sensually…

Allowing her rapid pulse to beat against his calloused fingers, he wrapped his hand around her
delicate wrist, marveling in the warmth of her tanned skin.

A crack sounded as he clenched his hand into a fist, snapping the bones in her forearm.

Her scream completed the melody began by the thundering of heart. He sighed roughly, closing his
eyes as he brought her wrist to his nose and kissed the rapidly bruising flesh.

When he opened his eyes, he smiled and released her arm. "I've missed you Zelda," he whispered.

Ice flooded her veins as Zelda drew forth the powers of Time, Light and Wisdom.

Before she could discharge the searing energy, he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her
against him.

His mouth silenced her second scream.

[-]

Across the battlefield, Impa, Navi, Midna, the Guard and Sages all lifted their heads. Louder than
the sound of cannon fire, more deafening than shattering sword, was the sound of the Light
Queen's screams echoing through their minds.

Woken by the siren's wail, Link instantly turned his eyes in Impa's direction.

"WHERE IS SHE?!” he heard her bellow as she tore through the mêlée. He scrambled to his feet as
fresh blood ran down his matted hair. Ghostly fingers traced the path his warm blood as it trickled
down his neck and into his tunic. A malicious laugh filled his mind as he tried to tear through the
vanishing mist.

Midna wrapped an arm around Impa as she launched herself at Link. "LET ME GO!"

"No," the Twilight Queen responded easily. She held tighter to the feral Guardian, the air around
them burning as Shadows clashed. "She must be the one to kill him!"

A language nearly forgotten spilled from Impa's lips as she broke free of Midna's arms, barreled
past Link and reached for the fading pinpricks of golden light. All sounds of war faded to static as
her vision narrowed to focus on the last lingering particles of Zelda's presence.

She never saw the unnatural dark fog dissipate from the Province, leaving a number of poisoned
bodies in its wake.

She never heard Link, Midna, Navi...never heard the Guards, nor the Sages call her name as she
ripped at the folds of Time and Reality.

She never saw the sky fill with the power of the Goddesses, invoked by battle of Light and Dark.

She never felt her skin split as the Shadows within her became pure chaos, tormented by her grief.

Navi watched as the Goddess' wrath made itself known. She saw the blood flowing from gaping
wounds in Impa's skin as shock settled over her. With calm she did not feel, the fairy walked
through the black mud towards her companions. The numb silence left in the wake of her friend's
mental screams wrapped around her spirit as she gently clasped Link's hand.
"Come," she told him as she backed away. "We must fight."

Link tore his gaze from Impa, his eyes filled with disbelief. When he saw her unshed tears, he understood.

Zelda would not want anyone leaving their soldiers to fight alone...to die because they, her friends and family, were too distracted to defend their nation.

With a nod, he pulled his hand from hers and unsheathed the Master Sword. "I thought I was meant to kill him," he murmured as they calmly faced the platoon of dark creatures rushing towards them.

"No," she replied as she pulled an arrow from a stolen quiver and lifted a bow of similar origin. "Power without Wisdom is useless. Strong without any true strength; there is no foundation for success. Courage would merely be another weapon when faced against Power."

Before another word could pass between them, a wave of tarnished gold light ripped through the land, flattening those who still lived.

None were sure of how long they had been gone. Some would say it was minutes, others would claim hours. Yet something all agreed on was that Time stood still as Ganondorf and Zelda reappeared.

Battle forgotten, they could only stare in shock.

A dagger was lodged in Ganondorf's ribs, his breastplate missing. Wrapped tightly around the bloody dagger was Zelda's hand, her forearm clearly broken. Their eyes were locked in a battle, red-black and white-gold magic burning around them.

Two-thirds of the mighty Triforce, one burning black from corruption, the other blazing white from purity, shone brightly. Dust rose around them as Ganondorf thrust his hand against Zelda's chest, throwing her several feet away.

Held immobile by the force of the opposing powers, Impa could only watch. Tears poured from her cheeks as she saw Zelda jump to her feet and rush forward once more.

Her body was numb to the pain, her nose unable to smell the stench of war around her. Her eyes were blind to all but the wrathful man before her, her ears deafened by his soft voice. She tasted nothing but the foul venom of his mouth coating her palate. As the beat of her heart coursed through her battered body, she felt strength flow through her.

Her icy fear evaporated in the scorching heat of her rage. She held his orange, malice-filled eyes and felt her lips twist in a silent snarl. The hair on the back of her neck stood as he drew the blade from his ribs and threw it towards her with startling accuracy.

Anger rising to heights beyond description filled him as he watched her effortlessly evade the weapon. A fleeting sense of pleasure cooled his burning heart as he saw the color drain from her face only to be replaced by a green tinge.

"I'm sorry my pet. Did I injure you?" he whispered to her alone, propping himself on an elbow. A cruel smile shaped his lips as he licked her blood from his fingers. "I can kiss it better if you like."

"Never," she whispered in return. Her voice as soft as a butterfly's wings. "Never again," she promised herself.

Link watched helplessly, as bound as those around him. He shook his head as Zelda charged the
beast once more, hands clawed.

Historians would say the battle was over before it begun, though it was the bloodiest Hyrule had ever seen. Yet none would speak of how it ended save to mention Queen Zelda had destroyed the evil which had plagued the country since her childhood.

Those who lived and were victorious would remember nothing but a flash of gold light.

Yet the ones who were close to the Sage-Queen of Time and the Sage-King of Darkness would remember.

They would know...

It didn't matter to Zelda who saw her wrap her hands around Ganondorf's throat.

She never cared who would witness his black veins become white as she filled his evil heart with things he would never understand.

She would not realize until much later that only one other heard their whispered exchange.

That their words were no longer private.

"I am free of you," she breathed in his ear as his pulse throbbed under her fingers.

His ragged claws gouging into her back, tearing her skin as if it were paper, causing pain she did not feel.

She didn't hear her bones snap as hands beat against her arms anything he could reach.

The blood in her mouth remained tasteless.

Her eyes never focused on the power around them as it began to lighten and shoot towards the sky to reach the Goddesses.

"You will...never be...free," he told her just as quietly. "I am...inside you."

All she felt was the skin under her hands as his heart started to struggle from minimized oxygen.

The only thing she heard was his words and rasping, moaning breaths.

She tasted nothing but the air around his body, fouled by his scent.

Her sight was blind to all except his glowing eyes which slowly dimmed.

"Well," she murmured as she lifted her hands, only to bury them in his hair as he struggled for breath. "I guess I'll have to push you out."

His weak, broken chuckle would haunt her for years to come as he stared deep into her eyes. "You never...learned to...my beautiful...Queen. You shall...always be mine...my pet. You will...never...be free."

He watched with happiness as her eyes filled with tears and her face twisted with hatred. He licked his lips as she hissed. "You...are sweet..." he whispered as his body wept streaming crimson tears.

Her hands tightened around his throat once more, crushing the delicate bones and passageways under his skin. It wasn't until the warmth of life left his flesh that she pulled her hands away. She
stood on shaking legs, unflinching as the broken armor around his hips sliced through flesh and muscle.

Ignorant of her own wounds, she took several deep breaths and raised her head once more. "Ganondorf is no more. All those who fought for him in this battle, on this bloodstained land shall die with mercy. Those who are not in attendance yet can be proved to have fought for him shall stand trial."

Link felt mobility return to his limbs. Without hesitation, he dropped to a knee and rested a hand over his heart. The woman before him was not his friend, was not his pseudo-sister. Nor was she his comrade and fellow trainee under Guardian Impa's teaching.

No, the woman standing before him in nothing but under-armor, clutching a bloody sword with grime covering her battered body was his sovereign. His Queen.

All around the field, Hylians dropped to their knees after swift execution of her order. Today was a day of new beginnings…and none were foolish enough to pretend otherwise.

"Hail Queen Zelda. Long live the Leader of the Sages."

One brave soul lifted his head. Though covered in grime, much like every other warrior in the Province, Advisor Mikal Evat spoke. His voice carried through the vast field, aided by the repetitive murmurs of his question. "What now, my Lady?"

"Now," Zelda said after a long silence. She allowed her eyes to drift over the crowd as numbness filled her once more. "Now we repair the physical damage, both to our bodies and our country. Now we take time to heal the wounds to our hearts, minds and souls. Now we pray no evil shall befall us in such a manner. And if it does..." She allowed her voice to trail off before lifting her head higher yet, her impeccable posture straightening further. "And if it does, we remember this day. We recall the warnings of Ganondorf's evil, and we heed them. Never again shall our land be threatened because the one who speaks warnings of doom is ignored."

As her lungs filled with the smoke of cannons and torches, as her palate became entrenched in the taste of blood, death and pain once more, she bowed her head. "Now...now we mourn our losses. And we pray the Goddesses accept and nurture them."

All but one head bowed in prayer as sobs tore through the land.

Impa stared at the grieving Queen with red, tear-filled eyes. She rose to her feet and wrapped her arms around her Charge, heedless of those around her. She pressed a kiss to Zelda's brow and said nothing as the reality of what happened consumed them.

Though Ganondorf had been defeated...

Something told Impa the fight had only just begun.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Let the Flames Begin by Paramore
Arise by Flyleaf
You're Going Down by Sick Puppies
Dance with the Devil by Breaking Benjamin
Life Starts Now by Three Days Grace
Face Down by Red Jumpsuit Apparatus
Facade by Disturbed
Breaking the Mold (III)

Though storm clouds had rolled through the healing land of Hyrule, none were ever as dark as those during the last battle.

Gentle blankets of rain fell constantly, the heaven's tears cleansing the earth. The war-torn nation closed their borders. For just under a month, Hyrule was isolated from the rest of the world as the formerly golden land mourned.

Nearly a moon cycle had passed since one-third of the Triforce had been returned to the Goddess Din. Zelda stared out the window at the quiet, soothing rain. The rhythmic tap of water against glass settled her chaotic thoughts as she moved from her perch to her desk.

Silence reigned as she slowly made her way across the office. Despite weeks of surgeries and potions, her injuries were not entirely healed. The weakness strained her patience far more than the pain.

Impa drew a slow, heavy breath as she watched the Queen take her seat.

Her heart hurt.

The days following Ganondorf's defeat, Zelda had slept little and rested even less. Despite her injuries, the young woman had refused to remain in bed.

This restlessness, however, was not what concerned the Sheikah. While her own injuries had been painful, most had healed rather quickly due to their magical origin.

No, what concerned her was the silence.

Other than to address the country, Zelda did not speak. Not verbally, nor mentally. A constant hum normally resonated through the bonds normally told Impa the other woman was at least thinking.

There was only silence.

There were no whimpers in her fitful sleep, nor screams as she woke from what was clearly a nightmare.

Her nightmares were something she did not want to consider. Aware of Impa's train of thought, Zelda kept her eyes on her papers. When she sighed, no sound escaped her throat. She laid a bandaged hand atop her cracked sternum, grimacing briefly.

Pain fluttered like butterflies between her more extensive injuries, a sensation she did not voice. The gouges in her back and the tears on her thighs would take nearly as long as her bones to heal.

And yet she still continued to work. Her splinted arm barely hindered her writing as she slowly dragged the quill over the scroll. Her bandaged fingers never shook as she carefully wrote her name and titles along the bottom of the parchment.

"Zelda," she heard Link say as he entered the room. She lifted her hooded eyes and stared at him
with nonchalance.

Having grown accustomed to her silence, Link sat in the chair opposite her desk and gently hovered his hand over hers. He watched her emotionless eyes flicker for a moment before becoming lifeless once more. "How are you?" he asked, catching and holding her gaze.

Suppressed words threatened choked her as Zelda shook her head and gestured to the paperwork before smiling tightly. She continued to meet his stare, knowing he knew…and praying he would say nothing.

"Okay then?" When she nodded, he exhaled slowly and folded both hands in his lap. He glanced at the Guards and Impa, waiting.

Only when they hesitantly left the room, faint hope trailing behind them, he turned his focus to her once more.

"Zelda...we can't help you if you don't speak," he murmured. He watched her shake her head, mouthing "no words". "Yes you do. I know you."

When she shook her head, she blinked back tears.

Why wouldn't – couldn't – they understand?

"It's all right to grieve," he told her as he brushed his fingertips over her cheek. When she flinched away, he placed his hands in his lap once more.

The threat was clear in her eyes as she glared at him. She shook her head once more, aggravated by his insistence – by all of them.

"You don't want to grieve?" He waited for her to nod before sighing. "It wasn't your fault."

It was, she thought to herself before clenching her eyes shut. She would make not a single sound, not even in her own mind.

Link frowned as he watched her fall deeper into her depressive numbness.

"Selective muteness," he recalled one of the castle's healer telling him, "is something a person may not have control over in the beginning. In the case of Her Majesty, I assume the shock of the battle rendered her unable to process her emotions, leading to her silence unless it dealt with the country as a whole."

The healer had met his eyes. He had watched sad, knowing tears spill down the older man's cheeks as he whispered. "We can only assume what damage was done to her mind while she and the...beast were outside of time. What began as a defense, her silence, has possibly become a method of control. You know, as well as I and select few others, what horrors our Lady has faced.

"Link...what you must remember is that this is not a normal...episode. I am well aware that the Queen has allowed you to help her in the past. This is something you have never faced. Whatever is in her mind is something you cannot comprehend at the moment. I say this not to be cruel but to enforce the fact that she is wounded in a way most of us, even her Guardian, may never understand."

The Hero shook his head and turned his gaze to his friend once more, smiling sadly when he saw her curious, vulnerable eyes staring at him. "Yes, I'm thinking about you. No, I don't know what's going on. I don't understand why you won't or can't tell us what's wrong. But...I made a promise.
I'll keep your secret." Again, he hovered a hand over hers.

Zelda slowly turned her uninjured hand so her palm faced his. She shivered as the heat of his skin seared her cold flesh. Her eyes fell to her desk once more in fearful submission. When her name, whispered at first then murmured with authority, reached her ears, she lifted her head as lightning tore through her veins. Her name, spoken with such love and sadness, wrapped bands of pain around her heart. She opened and closed her mouth in a fruitless attempt to convey her emotions.

When tears filled her eyes, Link felt his heart break. His rage at the one who broke her, now dead by her hand, became buried at the sight of her pain. "What did he do to you Zel?"

She slowly shook her head as her shoulders trembled with restrained sobs. "What did he tell you?" She listened to his quiet words as his fingers ran ever so gently on the scars covering her palms. She laced their fingers, desperate to stop the intimate touch. When he asked if the dead sorcerer hurt her during their last battle, she allowed her tears to fall. She squeezed his hand ever so softly.

"He tried?" the blond man asked, his voice nearly inaudible. The feel of her nails pressing against his knuckles told him the answer. "He tried to take you," he repeated in confirmation. "He tried and...failed?"

Impa watched from a hidden passage, her heart heavy as a mournful mewl escaped Zelda's pale, chapped lips. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes and bit her tongue to remain silent. Now she knew...

And for once, she wished she didn't.

Link closed his eyes and brought Zelda's shaking hand to his lips, as a father would his frightened child's. "He failed Zel...he's gone, my dear sister. He can't hurt anyone again," he reassured her as she allowed the barest hint of sobs to flow from her choked throat.

Swallowing hard, he opened his eyes and released her hand. Slowly, so as not to break the spell of vulnerability which filled the room, he moved around the desk. He knelt beside the overstuffed chair and took her clammy hands in his once more.

"I promise, he can't hurt anyone again...not you, not me, not Hyrule...not anyone." He laid his head in her lap as her silence broke enough to allow the sounds of her pain to tear through his mind. Sobs of heart-wrenching agony mixed with moans of terror.

He had failed her.

Again.

Oh keta, Impa thought to herself as tears ran down her ashen cheeks. She could only imagine what had happened while her Charge and the demon king had been outside time and space. Her mind could barely wrap around the fact that no one except Zelda knew how long they had been gone.

In the past few weeks, she had rarely questioned why the Hylian woman had been dressed in only her under-armor. Giving the circumstances, losing her outer gown had been expected.

To know she had been unable to save the fragile woman in the room before her from the horror of attempted rape brought such grief to her that she became ill. Fleeing the passage, she fell to her knees as her body protested the truth.

Failure and grief churned within her, wracking her with shudders.
Once again, something had happened which caused Zelda to hide from her.

For the second—yet who knew if it was only the second—time, her Charge had been harmed in a way that she only felt comfortable sharing with Link.

Overwrought and lost within her tremulous heartbreak, she never saw her brethren flank the walls, offering what silent support they could.

Zelda clenched Link's hands in her once more as her control over the bond broke. Though she wouldn't allow Impa to feel her, she felt her Guardian. Her eyes filled with fresh tears as she bit her tongue in an attempt to regain her silence.

"You should sleep," Link told her as he raised his head to catch her gaze. When she shook her head and clenched her eyes closed as tightly as she gripped his hands, he kissed her knuckles once more. "I know it's difficult. But...you can't heal without sleep."

When he opened his eyes, he felt his heart skip a beat.

The look of utter devastation on her features told him more than words ever could.

Healing was something she would not comprehend, let alone experience, for a long while.

As he rose to stoke the fire, he vowed to himself that he would involve Impa somehow.

Time was of the essence.

[-]

After lunch three days later, while Her Majesity was preparing orders for borders to open once more, Link and a trusted healer approached Impa.

Without hesitation, the Hero and healer spoke, telling the lost Guardian how she could help her Charge. They explained with detail how the muteness was something even Zelda herself could not control and how she was more than likely as frightened by her silence as all of them.

When Impa left the meeting, her heart was heavy and her mind full.

But for the first time in a month, she felt as if there was something she could do.

Even if her safest course of action was to wait...

It was something.

[-]

Months passed slowly like summer clouds. As the season began to change, Zelda slowly withdrew from her silence. Though she spoke little, the sound of her voice was a balm to the wounded hearts of those around her.

The end of spring brought flowers to full bloom to the war-scarred land and summer filled the air with the perfume of fruit. Early fall turned the fragrant breezes to cooling blankets which wrapped around Hyrule, calming the burns left from war and interrupted life.

The market, newly repaired, was filled once more with people. Farmers, aristocrats, merchants and traveling sales-men mingled without disdain as coin and trade flowed like Lake Hylia's crystalline water through the crowded streets.
The merriment reached even the subdued castle. Though the Queen had continued to rides through the country when her body was healed enough to endure a horse's pounding gait across uneven terrain, her previous frequency was missing. None questioned her need for time to herself, nor did anyone press the matter when she no longer stayed for refreshments and celebration.

After all the country had been through, who would deny the Mother of their peaceful land time to recuperate?

Even the troublesome advisory fractions (officially known as the Council, Parliament, House of Lords and Ladies, Advisors) kept their comments to a minimum. How could they not, when she acted as Queen in every capacity? They had never approved of her frequent rides to the various races of Hyrule, so when it became commonplace for her to ride only once a week rather than nearly every day...they said nothing.

When foreign diplomats called upon the Queen of Hyrule for a formal meeting, she met each one with a smile and kind words. Though the politics were as ruthless as ever, she never spoke harshly or raised her voice.

Not even when they were wrong.

No, none of the governing bodies which balanced the Queen's power with the needs of Hyrule commented to anyone that she knew of about her continuation of silence. Without a reason to, for once, each person kept their opinions within their own circle, no longer criticizing her.

Yet the lack of comment from subjects and legal-men alike did nothing to keep Impa from worry. As she always had, she rode with Zelda to meet the people. She stood near at all times, as vigilant as ever.

As she stared out a window overlooking the market, Impa felt the weight of the last half-year age her. A broken sigh escaped her lips as she watched people bask in peace.

"I'm going to write," she heard Zelda say. She barely turned her head to catch the quiet words, knowing the brunette woman wanted privacy.

"I'll be here," Impa told her. A sad smile pulled at her lips as she watched the other woman in window's reflection.

Without another word, Zelda turned and walked down the corridor with slow, deliberate steps. She entered the double doors which led to their chambers, misery filling her heart.

"I should be happy," she told herself as she made her way through the passage connecting the sitting room to her bedroom. When the heavy wooden door closed behind her, she leaned against it and took several deep breaths. After a moment of meditation, she slipped her shoes off and inched toward her bed. With deliberate quickness, she pulled a battered leather book from its hiding place and all but ran to Impa's room.

Though she hadn't asked, once again, her conscience whispered snidely, she curled in the corner of the Sheikah's bed and opened her journal. With a reservoir quill and a bottle of ink, she began to write.

Comforted by the earthen scent which wrapped around her like the quilt she burrowed under, Zelda allowed herself to relax. Words flowed from her fingers in a rush, a torrent of emotion spilling onto pages. As usual of late, a commentary of the past six months was the first thing she wrote, followed by the actions of what had happened since her last entry. Unwanted tears filled her eyes as
she poised the quill over the page before writing with the slowness of a child in grammar school.

I find myself conflicted. I want to tell her...want to release Link from his promise. But the words will not come. The nightmares rob me of sleep, and the memories steal any rest during the day.

She hit her lip softly as she twirled the feather between her fingers.

I'm trying not to push her away. I just...it hurts to speak. The sound of my voice reminds me, makes it all the more real. Every day I see the fresh scars and wonder if I could have done something different.

I wonder if I did something wrong to deserve what happened. I must have.

And at the same time...I wonder what I'm feeling. When I see Link, I want what we had before. Before the last fight. Before his understanding turned to pity. Before his eyes filled with resignation because he knows I'm going to break.

Again.

But I won't.

I can't.

I can't put him through that.

It's not fair.

When Impa caught me slipping, it closed something off in me. I've had smaller slips since then. But...they aren't...how do I look them in the eyes when I want Link to hurt me and for Impa to hate me?

I used Link. I used him to make myself feel better and it did nothing but make them hurt worse. I can still hear his voice. Feel his hands...his mouth... I can feel his hips dig into my thighs as I press closer and pull away at the same time. And at the end, all Link did was shake his head, say he understood, promise not to tell her and acted like nothing happened.

Tears fell on the pages, smearing the ink as she wrote without pause. Her hand all but flew across the paper, turning pages with wet ink as the need to tell someone, even if it were only herself, consumed her.

I slipped! I want to again...I want someone to hurt me again, because then everything makes sense. Link's as gay as an arrow is straight, and I still want him to hurt me! To...to...to take me. Rape me. Abuse me. Hurt me! Make me as disgusting and unworthy as I feel. As I am! It's all my fault. ALL of it.

And I can't do that to him again.

I know he's waiting for it. But I can't...I won't. To watch his heart tear itself to shreds every time I writhe against him in a twisted shadow of lust... It's not fair to him. He doesn't want me and he's not evil. I know that. But I can't help it...it quiets the voices. Makes the memories go away. Makes the hands stop and the hips stop and makes the pain stop. For just a while, I can forget what happened...

But I can't do it again.
I know Impa blames herself for my disappearing from the battle. She shouldn't.

How could she blame herself for something I never told her?

That...

That since I was a child, I have been companion to Ganondorf?

The pen fell from her numb fingers as a sob tore through her. Without thought, she curled around the book under the heavy quilt. Emotion shredded her mind as she inhaled the scent of her Guardian, of the one who would protect and love her no matter what, with each breath.

It wasn't until hours later, having grown concerned when Zelda did not exit their rooms that Impa found her. Relief loosened the bands of fear around her heart when she saw golden-brown curls spilling from under her quilt. Warmth infused her as her racing heart began to slow. With little sound, she lit a fire in the grate, settled the blankets around Zelda's curled form and kissed her brow. She pulled the quill and closed journal from the sleeping woman's hands.

She barely lifted the cover before a grunt caused her to slam the book closed and quickly lay it on the nightstand.

Zelda would tell her what was wrong when she could. Though curiosity nibbled at her mind, she shook her head.

A happy smile graced her lips as she watched the other Sage rub her face against the pillow like a kitten and uncurl ever so slightly.

The soft, sleepy mewl which bubbled from the younger woman throat made her shake with silent laughter.

Given enough time, she knew Zelda would heal.

They all would

[ ]

Leaves the color of apples, caramel and spring grass began to fall within the two weeks it took for Zelda to meet Impa's eyes. When she did, she whispered the words both had been waiting for. "Can I tell you what happened?"

Hope surged their bond as the block crumbled, blown away by love and trust. As Impa opened her arms for Zelda, Zelda rested her head on Impa's shoulder.

….and began to speak.

The words fell like autumn leaves as memories wrapped around their minds. She spoke of the battle after she had sent Impa to Midna's aid.

Tears filled her closed eyes as she recalled how Ganondorf's darkness, which was rooted in a dimension between their world and the Sage Chambers, collided with her light, the same light which descended from the Goddesses. Her heart bled as she spoke of the icy fear which had torn through her soul when the backlash of their powers sent them outside time and reality. Her lips, bloody from her constant habits of worry, trembled as she let the memory of the kiss to slip from her mind to Impa's.
Very few words were needed to portray the ensuing actions. The sound of her torn clothes, the cries she released as her battered body was forced to the ground echoed through their souls. Their ears all but bled as the sound of discarded armor rang through their minds like bells.

Impa tightened her arms as much as she dared and said nothing...

Waiting...

Offering the comfort she had desperately wanted to give for half a year.

Zelda continued her story. She told her Guardian how she had searched for the dagger hidden in her boot, how she had found it lying several feet away.

Breathless, she vaguely heard herself describing what had happened when the blade had slid between the evil King's ribs, covering them both in blood.

"And then you returned," Impa said after several moments of silence.

"And then we returned," Zelda whispered in confirmation.

"Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for listening. For caring...for loving me even when I wanted you to hate me."

A smile pulled at Impa's lips as she pressed a kiss to Zelda's head. "I can't hate you, keta. It's impossible...remember?"

"Well, if you didn't hate me after I ran you through with your own sword...I guess you never will," Zelda quipped.

Though fragile, their soft laughter chased the weight of her previous words from the room. Sunlight faded to moonlight as they sat on Zelda's bed, curled together, lulled to sleep by the sound of the others' hearts and soothed by their constant, steady breaths.

When dawn broke the silver haze of their dreams, Impa softly admitted she had heard the last words spoken between Zelda and Ganondorf.

Zelda merely closed her eyes and asked her to go back to sleep.

Soft snores filled the room within minutes, their dreamless minds calm, their souls momentarily free of their shared horrors and self-defined sins.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Well, this isn't how I planned to end the trilogy chapter...but oh well. Please allow me to make several comments before you review.

I am in no way a psychologist. I have no formal training in therapy, especially therapy for abuse survivors. However, I know from experience that the road to healing is a long, winding, treacherous path. It is painful and depressed. It will do things to every aspect of your being that you didn't think possible.
Always remember you aren't alone.

Just like Zelda, many victims and survivors blame themselves in some way, at some time. As I stated before, this story is meant to portray the TRUTH about abuse and the healing process. Yes, this last bit of the chapter was a bit choppy. As I also stated before, no one has the all facts in the beginning. That doesn't mean asking questions is wrong. As Link demonstrated, asking questions doesn't always need a verbal answer...the questions may not get an answer at all. That doesn't make them any less therapeutic.

So if you have questions, ask them. The only "stupid" question is the one not asked. Silence often does more damage to everyone involved than any truth.

[-]

If you're thinking about hurting yourself, commuting suicide or have been abused in any way, I urge you, PLEASE contact someone. There are many free hotlines to call. RAINN and National Suicide Hotline are the most well-known. If you live outside the USA/Canada, please look at your local phone books and/or use the internet. If you know someone who was abused and/or may be thinking about self-harm, urge them to get help. And tell a trusted figure of authority. As displayed in this chapter, victims can't always speak for themselves. Or have misconceptions about themselves and others.

Is this true for everyone? No. But it's common enough to be harmful to many people.

[-]

Selective mutism is something I haven't research in a while. If I stated anything incorrectly, I apologize and will correct my error.

[-]

Songs:
All the Same by Sick Puppies
Nobody's Home by Avril Lavigne
Chapter Seven

Truthful Admissions (I)

Another six months passed, and with it Zelda and Link's birthdays, before the country of Hyrule returned to relative normalcy. Fall faded to winter, which slowly gave way to spring. Cautious new lives began to grow across the land. Tentative plants broke through thick soil and reached for the warm sun while newborns ventured from the safety of their dens. Through the changing of seasons, pregnancies and births were celebrated across the country.

It stood to reason that as the country grew, one would ask their Mother and Hero of their plans. Would they marry?

When both Link and Zelda stated they would never court each other, all began to wonder.

Did their Queen have a suitor?

The answer was no, though there was always much speculation. Rumors flew through the fertile country and neither paid them mind.

While Zelda turned inwards for her contemplation of love, Link did the opposite.

He knew it had only been a matter of time before the truth made itself know. Better to reveal himself by choice, rather than mistake.

The lack of secret-keeping was something Shad reveled in without shame.

Both men were seen together throughout Hyrule. Often holding hands, neither flaunted nor hid their relationship. Many objected to their union, yet few were brave enough to say anything.

Why challenge them after everything the country had been through?

Despite the lack of aggressive opposition, Zelda did tell them to keep their behavior appropriate when in the presence of others.

She had no intention of watching them grope each other, thank you very much. And she doubted anyone else did either.

Shad's laughter and Link's blush would continue for days whenever they were with the Queen. After all the jokes Link made at her expense, surely it was fair of her?

As Link and Shad celebrated their social freedom, Zelda contemplated her lack thereof. While her friends would be accepted, she knew it would be difficult if not impossible for her. All the governing bodies which advised her, even the Advisors themselves had begun to press her to marry. Other monarchies had begun sending petitions for meetings with their potential suitors. She had told them all, time and time again, that she was no ready to marry.

None of them heard her.
With a heavy heart, she dropped her pen and laid her head in her hands. Fingers in her hair, she took several shuttering breaths and fought tears. Crying would not help her. Raging would not help her. Nothing would. Because the law was clear.

She must marry.

Blood pounded through her head as she squeezed her eyes shut. She would not let the tears fall. Would not let anyone see her weakness.

The pain of a broken heart.

Her fear of what might and would come.

Because if she married...it would.

With a cry of disgusted horror, she swept an arm across her desk. Her most trusted Advisor, Mikal Evat, leapt from his chair and took several steps away. He moved his eyes between the fallen objects and the monarch.

His heart bled for the woman before him.

It was clear as the noon sky that she had aged far beyond her physical years.

"May I ask what is bothering you, my Queen?" he inquired as he knelt to collect the papers, pens and other implements.

"Leave it," Zelda told him without raising her head. Her voice was harsh to her ears, yet she did not apologize. "I'll get them later."

Ignoring the request, Mikal stacked the papers on the corner of the desk before setting the writing chest and globe beside them. "My Lady..." he began as he slowly stood. He rubbed his knees and took his seat once more, waiting for her to lift her head. When he saw her peek at him through her curtain of hair, he sighed. "I cannot claim familiarity such as Guardian, Marderone Impa and Sir Link have with you. Yet I had hope over the past few years you have begun to consider me as a friend...for I think of you as such. Forgive me for my impertinence, Your Royal Highness, I mean no disrespect. But..." He sighed once more and ran a hand over his neck, wondering if it would be wiser to hold is tongue.

Zelda lifted her head and ran a hand through her hair so it was clear of her face. "Please, continue. I do consider you a friend, Mikal, though I might not always say such."

Clearing his throat, the middle-aged man blushed. "Thank you, my Queen. As I was saying, I mean no disrespect. While it is my duty to advise you, I wish to speak not as an Advisor, but as a friend. Something is clearly bothering Your Majesty, and I wish to help."

A grateful smile pulled Zelda's lips from their former state of frown. "Thank you, sir," she said quietly. "My name is Zelda, the formality is unnecessary."

With a bow of his head, Mikal sighed once more. "As you wish, Zelda."

The young woman leaned back in her chair as she considered the man before her. Weighing her words, she spoke carefully. "Our country has been through much in the past few decades...as you know. My mother died in childbirth, my father two years ago. We have been at war for longer than I care to admit, and our war ended just over fourteen months previously. During this time we have lost many of our people...to both sides of the fight." She met his eyes in challenge.
"You are correct," he told her without hesitation. "Our country has been through a lot. More importantly, each person has been through much. Many have lived multiple lifetimes in the course of a few years. Yourself included," he added as he held her gaze, compassion infusing his words. "You have suffered as much as any of us, if not more so."

Silence reigned for several minutes. When Zelda spoke, her voice was quiet as her reluctance made itself known. "There are very few people who are not planning my wedding, good sir. One of them is my Guardian, the other is my brother-in-arms. Should I count you among the few?"

His eyes widened slightly as he realized what she spoke of. He looked her in the eyes once more, nearly crying at the silence screams he saw trapped behind the tears. "You may," he told her. "Is this what has bothered you, my Queen? That you may marry?"

"That I must," she told him as she lowered her head to her hands once more. "It's the law. Your fellows have made it clear they want someone by my side in marriage."

Taking a moment to think, the Advisor looked between his Queen to her Guardian, eyebrow raised. When he saw her scowl, he knew she was not at all happy with the recent events. He couldn't blame her, as it was true his associates had been bringing the subject up in conversation more often than needed as of late.

"I am of the mind," he said slowly as he returned his attention to Zelda, "that we are all free citizens. I have studied the laws, both ancient and modern, in regards to marriage...a favor for your late father, who knew this day would come. While the law states you must have an heir, it does not stipulate you must be married. Nor does it in any way specify the heir must be of your own body." He smiled softly as the haggard face of the Time Sage raised once more, hope shining in her eyes.

"Through the ages, many of our leaders, no matter their station, have had heirs which weren't of their body. Adoption or merely a contract can make an heir. Nor were all their predecessors married. I know many a men and women who have stated heirs in their wills whom are single and childless."

"Then why..." With a sigh, she trailed off, already knowing the answer. "I do not want to marry," she told him firmly.

"Maybe not now," he responded with an amused smile.

"Not ever!" she growled, clearly annoyed.

"If I may ask, as your friend...why?"

Sitting back in her chair, Zelda's face voided of all emotion. She stared at him, her expression one of calculation. Her eyes narrowed as she hissed. "My reasons are my own."

Impa shook her head and said nothing. She herself wondered the answer and knew this time, she could not be the one to push Zelda for answers. She watched Mikal as he frowned.

"There is nothing wrong with marriage, my Lady."

"Are you married, sir?"

"I was," he admitted honestly. "My wife died during the Uprising."

"I'm sorry," Zelda whispered, her anger diffusing the face of such loss. "And no children?"
"No," he said quietly, a fond smile on his face. "My nieces and nephews are more than enough. If I find a woman I love...maybe. But at the moment, I have no children."

"An heir?"

"Yes. You know him, I believe."

Zelda raised an eyebrow in question, curious as to who this heir could be that she would know so personally his eyes would sparkle with the secret. "Please, tell me."

"He is one of the bravest young men I've ever met. And also very stupid at times. Truthfully, I think he enjoys acting like a child. And with that boyfriend of his, he's getting into more trouble than ever." Mikal nearly laughed at the dawning amazement on Zelda's face.

"Link?!"

"Who else?"

Sputtering, Zelda struggled for words. Link had never told her. He told her everything...sometimes more than she wanted to know, but everything none the less. Swinging around, she turned to Impa in accusation.

"Did you know?"

Biting back a smile, Impa shook her head. She cleared her throat so as not to laugh. "No, Zelda, I didn't know."

Sulking for a moment, the nineteen year old wondered why the younger man hadn't told her. Had she said or done something to indicate she wouldn't want to know?

Sensing her thoughts, Mikal shook his head. "Link wanted it kept quiet. He didn't want anyone being accused of favoritism. Or extortion."

Wrinkling her nose, Zelda sighed in disgust. "As if any of us would..." Shaking her head, she muttered. "The nerve of some..."

"Yes, well..." Clearing his throat, he shook his head. "As I was saying, there is no legal reason to marry. Just as there is no reason you cannot name an heir who is not of your body."

Averting her eyes, Zelda rubbed her face. "The point is, as Queen, I am pressured to marry."

"And you do not have to."

"For the country I do."

"Says who?"

Their eyes locked in challenge once more. Confusion bled from Zelda in waves as Mikal felt his heart break further. "Hyrule has had single and non-married monarchs." He smiled once more as she nodded. "I do not mean just the official history, my Queen. I speak of the controversial relationships which never made the official books, yet which every member of Hyrule speaks off. The most notable being—"

"Queen Eldora," Impa breathed from behind Zelda. She waited until Zelda faced her, confused once more, before speaking. "As you know, Queen Eldora was the only woman to have a male Maderone...her brother."
Zelda nodded. "Yes. And when she died, he perished a week later. Her children were killed in battle and he had no family other than her."

"Correct. That is the official history." Taking several deep breaths, Impa glanced at the other Sheikah in the room, who shared at her with hooded eyes. They would say nothing if she chose to reveal one of the many secrets in the Nohansen family. When her focused returned to Zelda, she smiled grimly.

"You know there is no longer a formal restriction against romantic relationships between Guardians and their Charges, though many of the Charges peruse relationships with men. After Eldora, the ban was lifted, allowing Guardians and Charges to be involved romantically without fear of death. However..."

"Before them," Mikal said softly, "these relationships were the best kept secrets in the land. Eldora was not the first to seek love and comfort with her Guardian, and she was not the first to do so with her sibling."

Zelda looked between both Impa and Mikal, her ashen cheeks being red only to turn white once more. "You mean...they were..." Too shocked to speak, she continued to look between them.

"Yes," Impa whispered. "They were lovers. Though Eldora had a husband, he was infatuated with a maid. You know it wasn't uncommon for those of royal descent to inner-marry, even if such a practice is now considered taboo. And you must also remember Eldora lived many years ago. When she lived, it was common for bloodlines to stay close together."

Mikal glanced around as if searching for spies. "As I said, this will never enter the history books...but even today, the people still speak of them. They were lovers, but more so, they were Guardian and Charge. The fact that they were siblings was, and is still, considered trivial."

Swallowing, Zelda realized he was right; Eldora and Kelen were indeed the most notable unmarried couple in the history of the Nohansen family. "And her children?" she asked, breathless with wonder.

"Most likely Kelen's. The King at the time, as I said, was infatuated with a maid. Kelen and he resembled each other in such a way that confusion of the children's sires was common. It is said that the children of the maid and the Queen were playmates, best of friends until the Princes were killed in battle."

Zelda sat back in her chair once more, shocked to the core. Her thoughts were pure chaos as they ran through her mind, confusing her heart with their contradictions. "I think," she said after nearly a half-hour, "I need to find Link." She stood quickly and all but ran to the door. "Impa, will you—"

"Of course. I'll see you at lunch?" she asked, understanding Hylian's need process their words.

"Yes...yes, of course. At lunch," Zelda murmured as she walked from the room, lost in thought.

As the door closed behind the Queen, the Guards following her with little sound, Mikal turned to Impa. He folded his hands in his lap and stared at her with knowing eyes, a soft smile causing his lips to twitch. "Now, Maderone Impa..." The words rolled from his tongue as his smile widened, the true title of her station doing little to put her at ease. "I believe we have something to discuss."

Eyes wide, Impa could do nothing but stare as her heart fell into her stomach.

[-]
Zelda walked aimlessly through the castle, descending the floors without thought. Her mind was chaos, her heart nearly in her throat as she considered the implications of what she had been told.

"Zelda!" Link called for the fourth time, breaking her stupor. He grinned as she blinked and looked around. Chuckling, he shook his head as she blushed and apologized. "It's ok. What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I..." She glanced at Shad and bit her lip, conflicted.

Shad matched Link's grin with one of his own, kissed the Hero on the cheek and bowed his head to his Queen. "I understand, my Lady. As it is, I have business to attend. Farewell for now." With a full bow, he backed away before striding through the main castle doors and towards the market.

Link raised an eyebrow as Zelda wrapped a hand around his wrist and dragged him to the nearest empty room. "Zelda, c'mon! Ow, hey, slow down!"

"Hush you baby." Quickly looking around the drawing room, she pulled him through the door and locked it behind them. "You know the story about Queen Eldora, right? And Kelen?" When he nodded, she rushed on, pacing as her hands flew through the air in agitation. "Well, I just found out they were lovers, her children were probably his and the King at the time had basically taken a maid for his common-law wife. And that while it's not in the history books, everyone knows."

Link nodded and spoke without thought. "Everyone does. They bring it up whenever someone mentions you and Impa...there's a lot of stories about you two."

"Ex-cuse me?" she whispered, swinging around to face him. She placed her hands on her hips and glared at the retreating man. "What did you just say to me?"

Gulping as he realized his error, Link cursed himself. "A...I mean...Zelda, be rational... Please... They're just stories."

"LINK!"

He spoke without hesitation or pause, cringing as her green eyes filled with fire and her face turned crimson with rage. "A lot of people think you and Impa are in a relationship that's not platonic and figured neither of you like public displays of affection."

"What do you mean 'already'?" she whispered as she narrowed her eyes. She stalked towards him, arms now crossed over her chest.

"Um...I mean...it's just...you two..." He clenched his eyes shut and pressed closer to the door. "Don't kill the messenger!" Mentally clutching his hands and prayer, he wondered if kneeling would allow him to keep his head. Please don't kill me, please Zelda. I promise I'll never make fun of you again, he thought to himself. Deep in his mind, his inner wolf ran around in circles. Please please please please please don't kill me, he begged without words. I'll even let you have Epona!

"Link, tell me this instant or I'll—"

"You two are so in love a blind man can see it!" He opened one eye, saw her gaping in shock, and sighed in relief. Carefully, he laid a hand on her shoulder and led her to a chair. Once she was seated, he sat on the opposing coffee table. "Zelda...you and Impa are in love. You might not know it, might not admit it, but you are. It's in your voice, your eyes, your touches. She looks at you like I look at Shad, like Midna looks at Navi. You look at her the same. You both speak to each other with such...adoration."
"But..." she whispered, confusion and misery stealing her strength. "She...she sees me as a daughter." She stared at her hands, flinching as he began to laugh.

It took him a few seconds to realize he was the only one laughing. As his chuckles died, he knelt and took her hands in his. The sight of her tears shook his heart. "Oh Zel...please don't cry. I wasn't laughing at you. Trust me, please, as your friend...your brother. Impa does not see you as a daughter. A sister-in-arms, maybe, but not even a 'we share a parent or two' sister. You didn't see her during the battle when you vanished, or when you came back...from any battle, not just the last one. When you fall asleep somewhere, you don't see the..." He paused to search for words.

"The rapture that takes her over when she looks at you."

"She is so gentle with you Zel. She doesn't know...I know you haven't told her. It's not because she thinks you're fragile. She's gentle because she loves you. You are her world. I mean, she exists for you. And only you." He placed a finger to her lips as she began to protest, her tears hitting their clasped hands. "No, it's not because she's your Guardian. It's because you are a beautiful, amazing, strong—if crazy—woman."

A weak giggle escaped despite her. "You're crazier than me."

"Maybe...who knows." With a shrug, he squeezed her hands and smiled. "Zelda, Impa loves you for more reasons than I can count, most of them I don't even have words for."

"I love her too," she said. Her words were the gentlest of breezes, breathed so softly the air barely stirred.

"I know you do," he told her as his smile widened. "And there's nothing wrong with that."

Her smile widened, warmth pouring from her heart and filling her veins, chasing away her misery. Then her smile fell. "Everyone wants me to marry," she spat, bitter. She pulled her hands from his and pressed against the couch.

Seeing the emotion building in her eyes, Link backed away and sat on the table once more. "Well...then don't."

"I have to."

"Said who?"

Pressing her lips together, she turned away, unable to answer.

"Is it a law?"

"...no," she admitted reluctantly.

"Has someone...tried to...coerce you?" he asked quietly.

"No," she said just as quietly.

"They why do you have to?" he questioned, truly puzzled.

"Because I do! It's what's expected of me! It's what everyone wants! It's what Impa told me I would do eventually!"

Understanding fell upon him in pieces. "Zelda...my sister, my Queen...excuse my language, but you don't have to do shit for anyone. After what—" Biting his tongue, he took a deep breath. "After
everything you've been through for your country, to protect your people and Impa...you don't have to do anything. Ganondorf's dead, and he was the only bastard in existence with enough magical power to control your mind.

"The people...they don't care. The aristocrats," he spat, his disdain for them clear, "are nothing more than children playing grown-ups. You owe them nothing. You are their Queen, yes. You admit to being the people's advocate, ok, I can accept that. But marrying when you don't want to...someone you don't love, who you will clearly be afraid of and probably murder within the first hour...no. That's something you do not have to and will not do. Even if there was a law, it wouldn't be done. And you know why? Because you have people who love you. Fuck some old rules and traditions, screw some people who can't get their noses out of the air," he growled as the injustice of the situation got the better of them.

Zelda stared in shock, having never heard Link speak two foul words in one statement before. She blinked as he began to pace, unable to remain still as anger flooded him.

"The woman loves you, you love her. If you love each other, and everyone's demanding you marry, marry her."

Silence hung between them for so long, Link stopped pacing and faced his friend once more. "I'm sorry, I—"

"No," she said hollowly as she raised a hand. "You're right. But the thing is...I won't marry anyone. Ever."

Breathing slowly and deeply, Link closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down. He knew his anger was unnecessary and doing more harm than good. Unclenching his fists, he sat on the table once more. "Why?"

She glanced at him, the quiet word making it impossible to hold her thoughts in any longer. Unable to hide the truth, even from herself, she stared at her hands. A shudder ran through her as she spoke, her voice void of emotion. "Because...if I marry...then I'll have to produce children. If I marry Impa, I could never deny her her rights."

Link said nothing for a while as he searched for words to explain something no one other than Impa had possibly ever spoke to her about. "First, forget marrying some random person for the country's benefit," he told her. "Because, like I said, none of us who love you will let it happen. Now, as for Impa, there's more than one thing wrong with your statement.

"If you marry Impa, Impa will know the truth. I know you Zelda, I can see you breaking ever day...your resolve to hide is weakening. I'll tell her if you want, but it's your right to decide. And because she will know, Impa won't care about what you think she deserves." He raised a hand as she had done previously. "Don't. I get it...you don't understand what I'm saying. I accept that. But if you can't understand, I still want you to hear me out.

"What Ganondorf did you, from the first time to the last, was abuse. Not sex, not love making, not anything but abuse. He tortured you in ways I can't imagine...and what I can imagine, I don't want to think about. He raped you Zelda, for years. Tore your heart, soul and mind apart as he hurt your body. He didn't care for you, not like Impa does. His only care was to break you, to make you give him your power."

She touched the Triforce in her hand, her fingers shaking. "But I didn't."

"That's not the only power he wanted," he murmured. "He wanted your spirit, your loving heart and
your sharp mind. He wanted you to cede to him, and you didn't. He didn't love you. He didn't even like you. He despised you, sister-mine. He loathed you because you had love in your heart, because you could control your want to destroy him when he couldn't control his want to destroy you. You had what he never did...what he never could have had. Family. Love. Friends. Hope. Faith. Joy. Happiness. Laughter. Pleasure."

"He had pleasure," she told him as she held his eyes with desperation that stole his breath. "He had pleasure and joy. He had happiness and laughter. He had friends."

Link shook his heads. "No, Zelda. He was a sadist...his pleasure was something none of us, no sane person would consider healthy. He enjoyed giving pain; that is not pleasure. That is demented. He had lust, nothing more. Not happiness, not joy, not pleasure. He had cruel laughter, a mocking sound. He had allies and minions, but no friends.

"You do though. You have me, Malon, Navi, Midna, Shad and a whole host of other people. You have the Sages, your favorite Advisors, the merchants you've called friend. And above all, you have Impa."

"She won't want me if she knew," came her miserable response seconds after the last name left his lips. "I'm...damaged goods."

"Broken. Not damaged...damaged means you can't heal. You are not an item for trade, Zel...you're a woman. A Sage, a Queen, a warrior. Never an item, never a 'good'. Your body was taken by force, your mind, heart and soul manipulated through your love. Nothing you did was ever your choice." He took her icy hands in his once more. "None of it. You were backed into a corner by someone much stronger than you, someone who knew how to break you. He used you against yourself...and it's not your fault. You were a child. And even in your teenage years, you are still not to blame."

A hush fell over them once more as she pondered the wise words of her otherwise rash friend. "I thought I held Wisdom," she said with a fragile grin.

He shrugged and grinned in return. "Egh. Sometimes we trade...don't tell Rauru."

She giggled softly and ran her thumbs over his calloused knuckles. Biting her lip, she gathered her courage like a cloak around her and took a deep breath. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?" he questioned, nearly as muted as she.

"I guess...on some level...I can accept love," she hesitantly explained. "But...what comes after love?"

"More love," he answered without hesitation. "More love, more trust, more hope, more faith. More happiness, more laughter."

"That's not..." Her bloodshot eyes filled with tears as she shook her head yet again, her hair a curtain between them. "That's not what I meant."

"May I hug you?" When she gave no reply, verbal or otherwise, dread filled him. He watched as her shoulders began to shake, though she made no sound. "Zelda...please...say something," he begged.

She raised her head and he brushed her silky hair away to reveal terror had turned her eyes to beryl. Without another word, he pulled her from the chair and to the floor where he wrapped his arms around her.
"There's no reason to be afraid of me Zelda. None what so ever," he whispered into her hair as she cowered against him, her nails digging into his chest through his tunic. "I'll never hurt you my sister...never."

[-]

Impa paced in silenced, fighting the compulsion to find Zelda. She hasn't called me, she reminded herself. Her eyes never moved to Mikal as he watched her. Having said few words since his initial statement, he waited for her to speak as she continued to pace.

"She's afraid."

"That's reasonable."

"I don't know why," she growled.

He folded his hands in his lap once more and spoke calmly. "Impa, I am confident the Queen is safe. If she is in danger, you will know. Fear is not always an indication of danger."

"But...she's with Link."

"Who is her brother in all ways but blood," he pointed out quietly.

"Who is also male," she spat.

He raised an eyebrow in question. "Have you a grievance with the males of our country?"

"I have a problem with any male who comes near my Charge, especially those who cause her fear!" she roared.

Much like Zelda and Link, a hush fell between them as the truth remained unspoken.

Unspoken, but not unknown.

[-]

An eternity passed before her shakes faded to trembles. Her lips were numb, her nerves alight with hyper-awareness. Her mind was sensitive to the changes around her. As she breathed each unsteady breath, a shudder ran through her core. No matter that he was her brother, her most trusted friend next to Impa...he was a he.

Memories flashed before her unseeing eyes as her ears filled with the sounds of her own pain. A quiet whimper escaped her throat, a nearly silent plea for the end. A hand cupped her chin and lifted her head, forcing her to meet the eyes of the one who held her. An arm tightened around her and her breath caught in her throat.

She couldn't run.

Couldn't get away.

Again, not again...

"Zelda," Link warned as he saw the reason begin to leave her. He growled, his blue eyes flashing gold as the wolf in him stirred. "You will not run," he told her. "I shall not harm you, I swear."

Yet more silence met his words as she nodded, clearly biting back a response both knew he would
"If I let you go, will you run?" he asked quietly as he felt her skin heat unnaturally only to become ice under his hands. He continued to hold her eyes, demanding words.

"No," she whispered. "I won't run."

He released her chin and loosened his arm around her back. When she huddled against the chair, he spied a blanket hidden between the cushion and the frame. Pulling it free, he wrapped it around her and sat back.

"Do you want to talk?"

"That's not what I meant," she repeated, referring to their earlier conversation.

The meek answer caused him to bite back a sigh. "I know. I'm sorry. I...I wasn't sure how to answer you. What was the question? What came after love?" He waited for her to nod before choosing his words. He kept his eyes on her as he thought, knowing her terror could return with one wrong word.

"After love comes everything I said. But...that's not what you want to hear. Are you sure you want to hear this from me? I could get Navi or Midna..."

"No," she said quickly as he began to rise. She wrapped a hand around his wrist. "Please. I want you to tell me."

He sat slowly and made no comment about her hand. "You want to know what comes physically after love, right?" When she nodded once more, he rubbed his neck. "It's...like a dance. Slow at first. Hesitant. The music, the passion, is there...but so are nerves. You might not even know the steps."

"You owe me," he told Impa as he paused to search for words.

A flaw he'd discovered months ago by mistake, the Triforce connection he shared with Zelda allowed him to create a "bridge" between his mind and Impa's. Fragile though it was, there were some benefits.

Unfortunately, both of them would forget this discovery as time wore on, so great was their determination to heal alone.

For now however, he merely waited for her reply as he watched his sister.

[-]

"What for?" she snarled as she stared at a window.

"For explaining something I shouldn't even be considering talking about," came his vague reply before the bond shut.

Impa ran a hand through her hair and sat in Zelda's chair, sighing. "You said we had something to discuss...so talk."

Mikal smiled. "What do you think about Zelda's marrying?"

He coughed to hide his laughter as her face grew red with rage. "Didn't we just have this conversation with her?"
"Yes," he admitted. "But now...I'm asking you, Impa."

"My thoughts on the matter are about my Charge's happiness."

"One of the most diplomatic answers...it's also one you repeat quite often." His voice softened, as did his smile. "As a friend, let me help you...please. How do you feel about the prospect of Zelda and marriage?"

She bit back a retort and turned her focus to the wall. "I despise the thought."

"Why?"

"Because she does."

"That's not the only reason, is it?"

"...no."

"What is the other?"

The only sound which met his words was that of the harsh, bitter end-of-spring wind against the castle.

[-]

"A dance," she repeated skeptically.

"A dance which starts slowly. It may continue to be slow through the entire song, or it may speed up...no one can ever know for sure. The orchestrator likes to hide in another room," he added.

Rolling her eyes at his teasing, she sighed and pulled the blanket tighter around her. She drew her knees to her chest. "Sometimes...the music starts before it should."

"Then you sit the dance out until the time's right."

"Did you?" she asked after a pause.

"Did I...sit out?" Blushing, he glanced away before sheepishly meeting her eyes. "Partially?"

Link held his breath as she blinked in confusion several times. Her brow furrowed before her eyes filled with amusement, though the darkness still lingered. When laughter spilled from her chest, he sighed in relief.

"Why are you laughing at me?!"

"Because," she gasped between giggles. "You look...like you got caught...with your hand...in the cookie jar...in the middle of lessons!"

Pouting, he struck his tongue out, folded his arms and turned away. "Fine, see if I try to help you again."

She tried to calm, but the moment she did, she caught sight of his expression and burst into renewed giggles.

For once, neither wanted to continue their previous conversation. Normally they would pick up where they left off...but not this time.
No, this time they were going to go search for chocolate chip cookies fresh from the ovens.

Whoever said chocolate couldn't solve everything had never met Link and Zelda.

[-]

Impa smiled as laughter drifted through the office door. Her smiled widened when Link stuck his head in the door.

"Impa, Zelda demands cookies," he told her as Zelda tugged urgently on his hands. "Like a three year old might I add. Ow! Don't hit so hard."

"I assume you want me to join you."

"Please?" Zelda whined from behind Link.

Laughing at their childish antics, she stood and made her way towards the door. "Cookies sound wonderful right about now," she said as Link stumbled from the door so she could leave the room.

When the lock clicked to indicate the door was shut, Mikal smirked to himself. He might not have gotten words, but the answer he'd been searching for was as clear as the afternoon sky. Humming, he also left the office.

There was a box of hard candies in the library calling his name.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
All the Same by Sick Puppies
Go by Thousand Foot Krutch
Riot by Three Days Grace
Stricken by Disturbed
Taking Over Me by Evanescence
After a meal of cookies and milk, followed by Link and Zelda groaning in agony as they clutched their stomachs, the trio retired to rest before dinner. As Link snuck off to find Shad so the archeologist couldn't escape the dinner he'd agreed to attend, Zelda napped. And Impa...

Impa wrote.

The pages met her bitter tears without judgment, just as her words brought forth no single emotion. Her hand cramped from the speed and length of her words, and still she did not stop.

When she lifted her head from the pages, shock filled her as she noted the lost hours. Massaging her hand, she closed the book with a sigh. The mattress under her barely moved as she shifted her weight to lean fully against the wall behind her.

Exhausted from it all, there was no denying the need for comfort. With little thought, she gathered clothes for dinner and quietly made her from her room, through Zelda's and towards the bathroom door. A glance towards the bed showed her the privacy curtains were still pulled; the Queen was asleep.

Unfortunately, with the burst pipes within her own washroom, the use of Zelda's was necessary.

The sound of running water never registered with her chaotic mind.

It took her only a few moments to strip. Without thought, she walked around the divider with nothing but a washcloth in hand.

Steam contained by the unyielding stone barrier wrapped around her cool skin. Blinking in shock, she stared at the oblivious, naked woman before her.

Swallowing, she tried to divert her attention. Her skin flushed from the heat as sweat gathered at her brow. Her eyes trailed down the pink body even as she admonished herself.

Golden-brown hair which shone in the sunlight hung limply. Layers of silk, darkened by the water, pressed against supple muscles and ended several hand-spans above pale, round globes. The perfect curves of her back, the gentle swell of her bottom appeared to be carved from marble as water ran down them.

With her focus on Link's words, Zelda continued to face the wall, unaware of her audience. She ran her hands through her hair and shook the heavy locks to free them of any remnants of soap. She arched her back and tilted her head towards the sky, relishing the comfort of heat on her body and in her lungs. Her eyes remained closed as the hot rain fell over her in waves, washing away her tears and pain.

Smiling softly in relief, she ran a hand over her neck and shoulders in an attempt to release the gathered tension.

The Sheikah turned her gaze to Zelda's face, breathless at the vision just out of her reach.
Pure ecstasy parted the Queen's rosy lips in a silent sigh. Droplets of crystalline water traced the contours of her face like the fingertips of a gentle lover.

_She's my Charge_, Impa whispered to herself deep in her mind. _She trusts me..._

She choked on her thoughts at the sight of the Hylian's delicate neck. Offered to the steam, the fragile veins under her petal-soft skin stretched towards the warmth. Heart pounding in her chest, she struggled for air as the barest hint of pale breasts.

Zelda shook her head and ran a hand over her face to clear her thoughts before raising her hands above her head. Reaching for the water, she laughed as it enveloped her. Humming, she reached for the soap once more and ran her sudsy fingers over her face, eyes still closed as she carefully massaged her water-logged skin.

Her stomach burned as molten metal coursed through her veins. Her lungs fought for air as her heart pounded, too full of chaotic emotions to hold still. Shuddering, she bit her lip to keep silent. As her gaze continued to travel down her body, Impa felt her mouth become dry. Rather than detract from her physical appeal, the scars which marred the tan skin created an unsurpassed beauty that reached deeper than her flesh.

Round hips gave way to muscular thighs. The trails of curling steam lead entrapped eyes to scrupled caves and prettily arched feet. As she drew her focus back up her body, she felt her stomach knot and something to flood her as the hips of a goddess continued be angled from her sight, keeping stomach and breasts hidden. "Zelda..."

Her name, whispered ever so softly with reverence, reached her ears like a caress. Zelda pushed her hair from her face and turned towards the front of the divider. She glanced at Impa and blushed, unable to meet her eyes as she reached for her discarded bathing gown. Link's words ran through her mind as her blush darkened. "Impa. Was there something you needed?"

The answer, a single word, sat on the tip of her heavy tongue. With another swallow, she shook her head. "I-I thought you were asleep," she mumbled as she tried to keep her eyes on Zelda's face.

She nearly choked as the heavy cloth molded to the Queen's body, held in place by her damp skin.

Pulling the cord which would stop the water flow, Zelda shrugged. She spoke as she began to wring the water from her hair, her head bent as she did so. "I was. But I thought you were asleep too, so I figured I'd jump in the shower before you woke." She braided the limp locks and raised her head. "Sorry."

"It's ok...no reason to be sorry."

Hearing the hesitation, she finally took note of Impa's state of undress and her pebbled flesh. "Oh Goddesses! You must be freezing. Why didn't you say something?" Quickly pulling the cord once more, she all but pushed the Sheikah under the steady flow. "Goddess Impa, get sick why don't you. I'll wait until you're dressed to leave." Shaking her head, Zelda quickly left the washroom.

Speechless and having no reply, though it mattered little since her companion had all but fled her presence, Impa sighed and took her place in the shower. Frustration tore through her as she lathered the rag and began to wash, an aggrieved pull of the chain creating a hot downpour. Seared in her mind, the memory of what she had seen continued to play before her eyes. Licking her lips, she shook as she took deep breaths. She closed the bond as lust blossomed in the pit of her stomach, leeching towards her feet and heart without pause.
A silent moan stirred the steam as she leaned against the wall. Panting, she stared at the downpour. Her vision became a haze of colors as her body throbbed with longing, her hands aching to touch the one who would never be hers.

As quickly as the thought entered her mind, it left.

Returning to the water, guilt clawed at her confused soul and lost heart as she scrubbed. She shouldn't be thinking about Zelda. Not only because she was her Charge, no matter if it would no longer result in her death or not, but because she was a young woman. A young woman who was half her age, who, as far as she knew, had never touched another sexually.

*Except for Link,* whispered a traitorous voice in the back of her mind. Jealously choked her, only outweighed by her shame. Regardless of what her pseudo-son and her Charge had or hadn't done, the fact was that Zelda trusted her. She had raised the other woman since birth, had been there for her in ways no other could or ever would be.

By the time she left the hot water, raw patches decorated her limbs.

[-]

Zelda ran a brush through her dry hair as she stared at the washroom door. Curiosity filled her. Why was the bond closed? And why had Impa been in there for almost an hour?

Sighing, she began braiding the length of her hair once more. Her brow furrowed as she thought. How long had Impa waited? From the flush of her skin and the gooseflesh, it had been a while. But why not say something? Or had she just not heard her?

And why had she looked so shocked? Even if they normally wore bathing gowns in front of each other, Impa had seen her naked numerous times.

What about her eyes?

A knot formed in her stomach. What about her eyes? She had never seen Impa's eyes become so dark, so hooded...so drugged. The fire which shone in the red depths caused dread to thread through her heart.

She had seen it before, in another.

Lust.

Sitting in silence for a moment, she felt amusement break through her worry. Laughter bubbled in her chest and she giggled. *How absurd. Impa...lusting for me.* As she fell backwards on the bed, she wrapped her arms around her stomach and shrieked with laughter. "Oh Din...what Impa would say if she knew!"

"If I knew what?" Impa asked as emerged from the washroom. Fresh guilt left a vile taste in her mouth as she watched the other Sage roll around on her bed, looking more like a child than a woman.

So young...

Giggling madly, Zelda gasped her air. She tried to speak, only to dissolve into laughter once more. It took several times before she could gasp the words, her entire body aching from the strength of her amusement.
"You...lusting for me... Link said—" Shrieking laughter stole the rest of her words.

Swallowing the tears which sprung in her eyes, she shook her head and forced a laugh. Knowing Zelda found the truth amusing only convinced her she was correct. She had no business feeling anything "new" for the other woman. "Well," she commented in a teasing tone, "Link shouldn't say anything until his every thought isn't about Shad."

Gasping for air, Zelda finally sat up, clutching her stomach as her laughter faded to giggles. "Then he won't ever speak."

"And that would be bad how?" Impa asked with a blank face.

Still giggling, Zelda stood and laced her arm through Impa's. "Because then you'd get tired of my voice. C'mon, I'm hungry," she stated.

Laughing softly as Zelda all but dragged her towards the door, Impa smiled. "I can tell."

As they walked, Impa felt her heart shatter for what would never be. Pushing the recent events from her mind, she turned her thoughts towards the present.

Because that was what mattered...the now, what was possible, what she could do.

Anything else was a waste of time and energy to think of.

[-]

Despite his discussion with Shad regarding the differences between Hyrule's government and the politics of the individual races, Mikal watched Guardian and Charge enter the dining room with curiosity.

Something was wrong, he realized quickly.

With a frown, he studied each woman as they took their seats. Zelda appeared tickled beyond reason, and Impa seemed to...not hear what she was saying.

Yes, something was definitely wrong.

Biting his tongue, Link looked between the Sages, wondering what could have caused the lingering agony in Impa's eyes. And somehow, Zelda didn't see it.

How was that even possible?

She was one of the most empathic people he knew.

He was wrong.

She knew.

The waves of pain which flooded the bond, despite the obvious block Impa tried to place on it, broke her heart.

"Impa, what's wrong?" she questioned softly as soup was ladled into their bowls.

"Nothing," came the quiet, distracted response. "Just...thinking."

"You're miserable."
Silently cursing Zelda's perception and her own lack of control, she broke her bread and began to eat. "I'm just remembering everything that's happened over the years."

Though the men continued to converse, a hush seemed to fall in the small room. Their meaningless words trailed off as they abandoned all attempts to appear unaffected. Each turned their eyes to the women before them. "Is something wrong?" Shad asked quietly.

"Just...the loss," Impa murmured, her voice trembling with unnamed emotion.

He nodded in understanding and glanced at Link from the corner of his eye. When Link shook his head, the archeologist turned his thoughts inward. It wasn't his business to pry.

Mikal frowned and said nothing, eyes gaze darting between the women. He tried to decipher what would cause such agony to spill from the otherwise stoic Sheikah.

Link's mind whirled as he looked from one Sage to the other, his stomach churning as suspicion bubbled within.

Zelda's amusement, now forgotten in the shared pain of warrior's the world 'round, he knew was due to their...earlier conversation.

Just as he knew, without a word being said, that the self-disgust growing in Impa's eyes, was caused by the aforementioned amusement.

Barely resisting the urge to rub his face, he turned to his father figure.

This isn't good, he thought as their eyes met.

Mikal shook his head and turned back to his food. There was, unfortunately, nothing they could do.

Ignorance was blinding them both.

With a quiet sigh, he pushed the subject from his mind. They had to work this out on their own.

[-]

The rest of dinner was a somber affair. Tension ran between the silent group, each one waited for the inevitable.

They parted ways without words, each lost in their own thoughts.

Long after exhaustion had claimed Zelda, Impa lay awake.

Staring at the ceiling, tears fell down her cheeks without a sound until none were left. As her eyes grew heavy with sleep, she curled around her pillow like a babe and faced the wall, her heart heavy with pain and lost love.

Nightmares ripped her mind open until dawn, images of Zelda's scorn and hatred torturing her. The sight of the pain her love would cause the other woman caused her to bite her lip bloody in her sleep.

When she woke, her determination was firm.

[-]

Days passed into weeks before their previous sense of normalcy returned. Zelda never asked why
Impa cried at night, and Impa never spoke of why Zelda became withdrawn, spending more and more time with Link. Their mutual silence continued to distort the truth they knew until nothing but lies dominated their thoughts.

It was these lies which eventually caused their friends to send them out for the day.

They had been encouraged, nay, ordered to leave the castle and spend time together. Though they spoke little, the decision to enter the Lost Woods was made. Rather than ride, they walked through the Provinces until they reached the woods, their thoughts heavy.

Animals and creatures alike watched the friends as they made their way into the trees. Foxes shook their heads, having no clever words for the heartbroken women.

It wasn't until after an hour of walking through the thick trees that they stopped for lunch. The ruckus sacks they carried were sat on the ground and a blanket spread. Food was eaten with little talk, though their eyes met frequently. Only when they were packed and ready to begin their trek once more did Zelda speak.

"What happened?" Zelda questioned softly.

"What do you mean?" Impa asked quietly. She kept her eyes on the pathless forest before her, unwilling to look at the other woman.

Zelda glanced at Impa and bit her lip, wondering when they had grown apart yet again. "What happened that made us so...distant?"

Sadness filled the air between them as Impa searched for an answer which wouldn't reflect how she felt. "Nothing really occurred, there was no single moment of change. It just...happened," she finally said.

Hearing the defeat, Zelda shook her head. "Something had to happen," she said as she stopped walking. She set the pack on the ground and stepped in front of the Sheikah, seizing her gaze and holding it with a determination neither knew she had. "What was it?"

"Nothing happened," Impa insisted as she looked away. Swallowing, she closed her eyes. It had become harder to look Zelda in the face, to stare in her eyes. Self-disgust killed her lust, but nothing could destroy her growing love.

"Something did." Zelda stepped closer. "Impa, please...talk to me."

"I don't know what happened," she snapped.

Taking a step back, Zelda bowed her head. She turned and reached for the bag. Her voice was hollow, broken by the emotional rebuff. "All right. I'm sorry...I'll leave you alone."

Something within her broke as Impa stared at the wounded woman. She gently wrapped a hand around Zelda's wrist and the Hylian reached for the sack. "No, I'm sorry," she whispered. When Zelda turned her head to face her, she sighed. "I...you're right. Something did happen." Dropping her own bag, she released the narrow wrist under in her hand and sighed once more.

"Then what was it?" Hugging herself, Zelda turned to face Impa fully. Fragile hope bloomed in her heart.

Was it possible that she wasn't being rejected...but pushed away in defense?
Running a hand through her hair, Impa began to pace. She moved between the patches of sunlight and shadow without thought, her head began to ache. "I...I wish I could change it. Make it so it never happened," she murmured to herself. "I didn't mean—but that's no excuse. I shouldn't have stayed anyway."

Zelda watched Impa's fluid movements become sporadic with agitation. Biting her thumb nervously, she shifted her weight from foot to foot as she spoke softly, desperate not to incite the anger which boiled just under her Guardian's skin. "Is it something bad?"

"Bad?" Impa parroted with a laugh. "In a way, it could be. I could be devastating."

"Would you rather not talk about it?"

Their hearts skipped several beats before Impa spoke. "Yes."

Failure eclipsed hope within seconds. She said nothing for a long while, unable to find words as her heart became heavy with the implications of a single word. "Then...is there anything I can do?"

Biting her cheek, Impa kept her gaze averted as she continued to pace. "I doubt it."

Dejected, Zelda swallow the lump in her throat. "All right," she whispered.

Seeing her walk away, Impa bowed her head. "Zelda...please. Stay."

"You won't talk to me."

"I don't know what to say."

"The truth! Tell me what changed," she demanded as she swung around.

Unshed tears glistened like diamonds in her eyes, the flawless emeralds clouded with pain. Impa dug her nails into her palms, loathe to cause them both more pain. "We changed," she admitted through clenched teeth. "We, as people, changed."

"HOW?!"

"Because we did! You're beginning to find a world outside myself and Link. And I...I'm ready for the same." The lie fell from her numb lips with little effort. Everything within her screamed to take back the words, to erase them from her mind.

A knife twisted in her heart as her stomach clenched with betrayal. "You...don't want to spend time with us?"

"I want more out of life." Though true, she gave Zelda a look of reproach. "Why are you the only one who can have more than a few people to interact with?"

The words were a whip to her battered soul. Shame burned the tears from her eyes and Zelda drew shuttering breaths into her frozen chest. She met Impa's gaze without hesitation as she held her head high. Her back straightened as her shoulders rose from their hunched position. "Very well. I won't bother you any longer." Without another word, she grabbed her bag from the ground and turned on her heel, heading for the castle.

Realizing she had more than likely destroyed whatever happiness they had left, Impa hung her head.
Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Things I'll Never Say by Avril Lavigne
There and Back Again by Daughtry
Don't Walk Away by Sick Puppies
Taking Over Me by Evanescence
Crashed by Daughtry
You Found Me by Kelly Clarkson
Fight Inside by Red
Chapter Eight

True Confessions of the Heart

"We changed because I changed!" Her deceleration came without warning. Without thought, Impa spoke quickly when she saw Zelda's determined steps falter. "I changed Zelda. My...my heart has changed."

"Really?" Scorn dripped from her words as the previous rejection continued to tear at her broken heart. "Well, it sounds like something you'll have to tell those new people you want to meet." Jealousy laced her statement as she continued to walk. "Since your heart has changed. Thank you for telling me."

"It changed towards you!"

"So you hate me then...thank you for telling me."

"Damn it Zelda!" Once more, Impa wrapped a hand around Zelda's wrist. She held tightly, ignoring the younger woman's attempts to pull away.

"You forget yourself, Maderone!"

Flinching at the use of her three-fold status, Impa tugged gently on the bond. "No," she whispered. "I haven't. That's the problem. I haven't forgotten who and what I am to you. Please...look at me."

Despite the voices within her being telling her to pull away, Zelda slowly turned to face the Sheikah. She said nothing as she waited.

Hearing the silent begging of a shattered heart, Impa sucked air through her teeth. She raised a hand to touch Zelda's cheek and felt her own heart crack as the other woman recoiled. The damage she had done stared her in the face...the damage she had tried to avoid, she had caused. Cursing herself, she released Zelda's wrist, idly wondering when she became so thin.

"I have always taken care of you. Since before you were even born, I was there for you. I watched you grow from an inquisitive, bubbly child to a passionate adult. I’ve watched your mind mature...I helped you nurture it into the sharp blade it is today. I have trained you to be a warrior of unsurpassed skill," she stated without pride. "Above all else, I have done everything in my power to make sure you could survive if I wasn't with you." She began to pace again.

Zelda bit her lip as a flicker of hope began to melt the ice within her spirit. Crossing her arms, she said nothing as she continued to wait.

"My entire existence is based upon you. Hate you? Never...it is impossible. I might become angry with you, for sure, but never could I hate you. Nor could I want to. I love you. I breath for you, my heart beats for you. Everything I was, am and ever will be is for you."

"Then why—" Biting her tongue, Zelda shook her head and scolded herself to be silent.
"Why did I say I wanted to be with other people? I lied," she said with a laugh as when she saw Zelda's unguarded shock, "I lied to you. I wanted you to believe it. Spend time away from you?"

Barking with laughter, she continued to pace. A sardonic smile graced her lips when she spoke once more. "Oh Zelda...what about this do you not understand? Maderone, Guardian, Protector...no matter what title you use, I exist. For. You. My entire world begins, ends and revolves around you. Always. End of story. It can never change, and I don't want it to.

"You know how loyal we Sheikah are. Multiply that by an infinite amount and you still will not be able to grasp how I feel about you. I am more than a mother, more than a friend, more than a sister, tutor, healer. When you were unconscious after battle at thirteen, I almost killed myself. When I found you that monster had even thought about touching you, and to know he tried, I was ready to tear my heart out. I failed you!"

"You didn't!" Zelda howled as she cut through the explanation without hesitation. "You never failed me! Ganondorf was a monster. How could you know what he was going to do?"

"It doesn't matter what I know or not, I failed to protect you. Even you, my keta, cannot understand how I feel when it comes to you," Impa said with a sad smile of resignation. "And I know you would never feel the same. Why speak of it and bring you pain?" The faster she paced, the louder her footsteps became. Leaves and branches cracked under her feet as the air grew heavy with emotion. Anticipation ran between them like lightning, searing their nerves to the point of icy-hot chills. Both women panted softly, struggling for air as words previously unspoken threatened to break free.

"No," Zelda replied with a snap. Her voice, laden with emotion, was like fire to Impa's ears. "I can't. But I know how I feel about you. And damn it all, I love you! Not as a child, but as a woman!" Prying the bond open with her love, Zelda tore through every filter, every barrier each of them had ever placed on their soul-deep link and let her emotions flood through. "I love you Impa! I love you like Link loves Shad, like Navi loves Midna! I love you like my parents loved, like Mikal loved his wife!"

Her voice broke as tears spilled unnoticed down her cheeks in a mourning for time passed in silence. "I love you in ways that only happens in story books. I refuse to marry for my country because I can't have you! And I want you! You, and only you! You are the only person I've ever loved, have ever trusted enough to love! You're right, you have been there since before I was born. My mother gave her life so you could care for me, love me! She was a seer, Impa, you know that! She gave you-us-her blessing!

"So tell me I don't understand how you feel. But never, ever presume to know how I feel!" she yelled without stop. Her words echoed through the trees as she stared at the frozen, blurry image of her Guardian.

Not daring to breath, unwilling to even blink, Impa returned her stare. As Zelda's heart poured through the bond, her own tears gathered. How could she have been so wrong? "You're too young, Zelda."

"It doesn't matter what my age is! I know what's in my heart!" she shrieked before sobbing.

Her thoughts remained quiet as she closed the space between them. Wrapping an arm around Zelda's waist, she laid her head on the shaking shoulder and took several deep breaths. When Zelda's arms returned her embrace, she let her tears fall. "I'm sorry. I'm so damn sorry..." Pressing a kiss to Zelda's forehead, she hugged her tightly. Her resolve crumbled around her as she whispered the words she had been longing to speak for years. "I love you too my darling. Oh what words could never say..." Mimicking Zelda's previous actions, Impa released her heart from its cage,
mixing her emotions with those of her Charge. A nearly silent gasp made her smile.

"I love you as others love. Not as a child, though I tried to convince myself as such for a long time, but as a woman. I want you as my wife and no one else's. You were my Queen long before your father passed. Your majesty comes from your heart, not from any title you hold. You are the only ruler of my heart, of my being. You captured my love long before I knew I loved you."

Any other words they hoped to speak became silenced as they fell to their knees, clutching each other as sobs of relief and happiness tore from their throats.

For once, if just for a moment...all was right in the world.

The Goddesses smiled upon their daughters with joy. Golden sunlight filtered through the trees to wrap around them in approval, shielding them from the reality of past and future pain.

If only for just this moment, they would have nothing but each other...and they were fine with that.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
There For You by Flyleaf
All Around Me by Flyleaf
Your Guardian Angel by The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus
Crashed by Daughtry
Again by Flyleaf
Running Blind

Chapter Nine

The long walk from the forest to the castle was a blur of muted sound and color, their focus limited to one another. Elation ran through them, tickling from the inside out. Giggles of emotional drunkenness spilled from their lips as they made their way up the castle stairs and into the halls.

Laughter filled their days, their joy infectious to those around them. How could it not, when the life had returned to their eyes?

As with all things, however, disapproval lurked among the celebrants.

Dawn's soft light filtered through gaps in the privacy curtains, stirring the warm haze of her dreams. The gentle multitude of colors washed away the lingering threads of ever-present nightmares, enhancing the warming presence of her happier dreams.

She nearly returned to the night's comforting embrace, but her body's urgent demands forestalled any such luxury. The feel of cool water on face and hands minute later dispelled the last remnants of sleep.

A smile pulled at her lips as the bond pulsed with love.

With little sound, she slipped inside the hidden room, soft snores assuring her the other woman was asleep. Glowing embers and splinters of dawn's rays allowed her minimal sight.

Who knew it was so easy to trip over air?

Giving into the childish impulse, she grabbed Impa's ankle and ran a finger over the sole. Snorting in her sleep, Impa's leg jerked from the light touch. The unusual sensation was repeated as quiet laughter parted her dreams.

"Wha...'elda, let go," she mumbled, pulling the covers over her head. "'m sleeping."

Swallowing another laugh, Zelda tugged on the raised leg. "Im-pa! Wake up!" Abandoning all semblance of maturity, she launched herself into the air. Landing on all fours astride the other woman, she bounced as well as she could.

"Up, up, up, up! Impa, wake up! Please!"

Groaning, Impa pulled the blankets away from her face and stared at the pleading Queen with one narrowed eye.

By all that was holy, what drugs was she on?

"Why...i's not even morning."
Pouting, Zelda sat on her stomach, earning a grunt of annoyance, and sighed. "Be-cause," she whined. "I'm awake."

"Oh," Impa stated as she opened both eyes. "Well, in that case..." Her hands were a blur as she ran them over Zelda's ribs.

Squealing with laughter, Zelda fell back. "Mercy!"

"Nope. You woke me at five in the morning. No mercy." When the younger woman scooted away, she followed, her fingers moving between each rib like hummingbirds, quick and strong.

Gasping for air, the brunette shoved Impa's shoulders, sighing in relief between giggles as the tickles ended.

She pressed her hands on either side of the Zelda's head, entranced. Struggling to breath, she stared at the panting woman under her. Her wide eyes were sparkling, her glistening red lips parted just enough to sip at the air. Her robe hung off her shoulders and lay open, exposing the blue pajamas underneath. Thick flannel hugged her chest as it rose and fell quickly.

"Good morning," she whispered huskily as she met Zelda's eyes once more.

"Good morning," Zelda repeated as she stared at darkening red eyes above her. Smiling hesitantly, she ran a hand through Impa's mussed hair. Her smile grew as the silver strands resumed their tousled positions. "So, what are we doing today?"

Saying nothing for a moment, Impa swallowed and tried to think beyond the sudden fog which filled her mind. Shaking her head, she returned Zelda's smile with ease. "Since you so rudely interrupted my sleep the first thing I am going to do is pee," she started as Zelda began laughing once more, "then we can get dressed and head to the kitchen."

"And I thought Link was bad," Zelda mumbled as Impa stood and walked into her bathroom.

"Yes, well, I have to eat a lot to keep up with you," the Sheikah called without turning. "Go get dressed, I'll meet you in your room." She shut the door, forestalling an answer, and sagged against it. Listening closely, she exhaled sharply when the false wall closed.

A twist of the iron dial brought cold water into the bowl. She slashed her face with closed eyes, desperate to cool her burning flesh.

She met her own eyes in the mirror as she raised her head. Water ran down her face to wet her chest, unshed tears of emotion she dared not name. Touching the mirror, she wondered.

What it was she saw in Zelda's eyes? She could see something, some unknown truth, some unnamed emotion stirring in the depths of her green orbs.

*She'll tell me with time,* she told herself as she turned from her reflection.

Some thoughts were best left after one was fully awake.

Especially when the sun had yet to rise.

[-]

Humming, Zelda smoothed her vest and glanced at her attire.

She was, without a doubt, infinitely sick of dresses.
A shiver ran down her spine and spread through her limbs, the only warning she received.

A death chill, icy and devoid of life, battled the fire of survival within her veins. Her eyes closed on their own accord as she sought control, her stomach churning as her heart raced.

No thoughts entered her mind, no memories played across her flesh. No voices whispered in her ears and no hands pulled at her. Opening her eyes, she stared in the mirrored wall, meeting her own haunted gaze.

Paralyzing terror had become frequent as of late, often without reason. She shook her head and swallowing hard, trying to push it from her mind.

It was nothing to worry about. With time, the spells would lessen...just like they had before.

Right?

"Are you ready?" came the half-heard question as she left the dressing room.

Biting her tongue and telling herself to find some control, Impa took in her Charge's vacant expression.

Now was not the time to appreciate her...attire. That much was clear.

"Hm?" Blinking, Zelda smiled and nodded. "Yes, sorry. I was thinking." She kissed Impa's cheek and opened the passage door beside the older woman. Pausing, she turned around. "You're not wearing your armor."

"Very astute. I'm not."

"I like it."

"I'm glad."

They left their chambers with quiet, measured steps, conscious of the sleeping occupants of the castle. They nodded to the alert posted guards and cleared their throats loudly when they passed those asleep on their feet. The few early rising maids and servants bowed their heads in greeting as they hurried to and fro.

His back head bent over the table, Shad didn't notice their scrutiny as they stepped into the kitchen.

Impa smirked and Zelda looked away, blushing at his disheveled appearance. "You, um...might want to..." Tugging on the end of her shirt, she stared at the ground as she swallowed a laugh.

Shad rubbed his eyes and squinted at their hazy forms, barely awake enough to realize he'd forgotten his glasses. Frowning, he mimicked Zelda's gesture and matched her blush with one of his own. His shirt was not only turned inside out, but backwards and caught in his belt.

"Thanks," he mumbled before turning back to a steaming kettle. "Tea?"

"I think that would be appropriate this early in the morning," Impa mumbled as she sat at a small table in the corner. She watched Zelda search through the shelves and smiled.

"You can always go back to bed," Zelda said as she blindly tossed various items in Impa's direction.

Catching the succulent fruits without pause, Impa's smirk widened. "Well, I could...but that
wouldn't be nearly as fun."

Shad carried the kettle and mugs to the table, mumbling under his breath. Smiling to himself, he sat across from Impa and poured tea as Zelda carried a loaf of bread, cheese and cold meat to the table. Catching Impa's eyes, he raised an eyebrow.

She narrowed her eyes before looking away with a sniff. He snorted and swallowed his smile.

Ignoring the exchange, Zelda set beside Impa. She made quick work of her finds, dodging Impa's hands once the sandwich was assembled. "Make your own."

"Greedy," Impa muttered as she picked up the discarded knife.

"What are you doing up this early, Shad?" Zelda asked as Impa pretended to sulked.

Looking up from his tea, Shad hummed with a shrug. "Just...am."

"Link still asleep then?"

"He's in bed anyway," Impa muttered under her breath.

After giving her mate a filthy glance, Zelda turned back to Shad. "Everything ok? No one's hurt?"

Shad turned his attention to cracking a DekuNut. "Everyone's perfectly fine. I just couldn't sleep is all."

Zelda's boot slammed into Impa's leg before she could speak. She met Impa's smile of faux-innocence with a glare. "Behave," she hissed.

Biting her tongue so as not to earn herself a welt on the opposite leg, Impa nodded. Her smile widened as she saw the anger shining in Zelda's eyes.

She really was beautiful when angry.

And enticing.

Shad rubbed his forehead and cursed Link for putting him in this situation. It wasn't his fault the Hero had food poisoning and was too vain to let him stay in the room.

Staring at the ceiling, he groaned softly. "Someone...save me," he begged as they began arguing about why innuendos were, or were not as the case may be, appropriate.

"Is this necessary?" Pausing, he looked at Impa. "At five o'clock in the morning?"

It would take two hours before both agreed to disagree before the poor man would escape the now-busy kitchen.

Link had no sympathy for his lover.

Only laughter.

[-]

The world made itself known the moment they stepped from the kitchen, leeching pleasure from their hearts.
Diplomacy in the form of an unannounced representative stole a few hours of precious daylight. Even the hastily arranged appointment, much to Mikal's scandalized horror, was not soon enough for one so rude.

A petty argument between the healers from the castle and Hyrule Hospital resulted in headaches and wounded egos aplenty.

What fool had asked for outside consultation was still being determined.

Who needed ten healers to treat food poisoning?

Their ride to the outlying villages was postponed, apologies sent by way of the Sages.

The meeting, for which a day's scheduled was rearranged despite normal customs, was far from productive. Four hours of tedious negotiation resulted in no changes to the martial treaty and trade agreements.

Impa rang for lunch and told the Guards to bar all others when the haughty woman left.

Mikal brought their lunch tray, a scroll under one arm.

However, "all others" did not include the soldiers' drillmaster unfazed by the stalwart Sheikahs. He prattled until the food was cold and migraines consumed any attempt of thought.

He left the office with a scowl and Zelda's mental footprint on his shining, armored arse. Food forgotten, they pulled the drapes and rested their heads against the nearest surface.

Lulled into a false sense of peace, neither expected raised voices to break their light doze.

Raising her head, Impa squinted at the door.

Who would be yelling so loudly?

"—not care what you were ordered, sir, open this door!"

"We can't do that. The Queen has—"

"If the Queen wishes to retire from her duties, she may do so to her chambers."

Sharing a look of pained horror, they sighed. Zelda waved to Mikal, who opened the door with a sympathetic expression. As the Guards took their place within the room once more, Mikal opened the drapes enough to light the room properly.

"Napping, I see," Secretary Obliw Venet said as he strode into the room.

Irritated and pained, Zelda did not hesitate to inform him he resembled a molting peacock with his attitude. As he sputtered, she raised a hand. "I am unwell, sir. Frankly, you are trying my patience. What is so urgent you must barge your way into my office without permission or announcement?"

Sniffing disdainfully, he looked at the gathering men and women around him. "We," he said as he gestured to various members of the House, Council and Parliament, "are concerned...Your Majesty," he added.

"Again," she stated. Her voice became colder as she narrowed her eyes, her patience running thin. "What is so important you disobey my direct orders?"
Several members of the various legal bodies heard the threat in her clipped words and left with barely concealed haste.

Mikal coughed and smiled to himself, amused. How quickly cowards would reveal themselves!

"We are concerned about your current...status," Venet stated. He flicked his eyes as Impa before sniffing once more in dismissal.

"What status, sir? I am Queen," she stated with calm she did not feel. "What more is to be said?"

Unfazed by the anger building within her, he sat without pause or invitation.

Several more of his broken party vacated the room, unwilling to incur the wrath of Her Majesty or her Maderone. Once more, the double doors closed to retreating backs.

"Frankly, my Lady, we are concerned you are making a mistake regarding your romantic relationship with the Sheikah woman."

"GET OUT!" Zelda roared. She leapt to her feet, dimly aware of her chair crashing to the floor behind her. "Leave my presence, NOW, and you leave with your throat and tongue intact."

Sniffing once more, he stood. "I see when my advice is not wanted."

Impa wrapped an arm around Zelda's waist in restraint.

It wouldn't do to have the Queen strangle her citizens.

She scowled at the remaining High Council members, hissing her words. "You heard. Her Majesty has order you to leave. Do so."

Mikal looked between five people and cleared his throat. Flinching, he met Zelda's gaze with obvious submission. "My Lady Sovereign, I am but your humble servant. Your word is law and I shall not hesitate to follow your orders, whatever they may be. But...would it not be wise to allow Secretary Venet to speak?"

Silence reigned for several minutes. No one dared breathe as Impa sat Zelda in her chair once more and laid a hand on her shoulder, tension radiating from them. "I believe you are correct," Zelda said with calm she did not feel. "You make speak, Secretary Venet. But I warn you...tread lightly. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am," he stated as he sat once more.

"Wipe that smug expression off your face before I slap it off," Zelda growled. "And I did not tell you to be seated? Rise from my chair!"

As if having sat on a bed of coals, he rose without hesitation, his shock clear. Straightening his suit, he stood next to his colleagues once more. "My apologies, my Queen."

Closing her eyes, Zelda forced herself to calm. When she felt the tension drain from her muscles, she lifted her head and looked at Mikal. Smiling with the sweetest expression she could muster, she gestured to the chair. "Please, sit, my friend."

Swallowing a smirk at the display of favoritism, Mikal took the offered seat with a bow. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

The Guards clenched their jaws, even their stoic expressions threatened as amusement swelled
within the tribe.

Venet cleared his throat, striving to soothe some of the damage he'd wrought. "I apologize for my rude behavior, Your Highness. I am just...very concerned for you."

Green eyes rolled heavenward as a tired sigh pulled itself from a rigid form. "Let us stop the games. State your business and leave."

Agony pierced her mind, the room around her blurring as splintered light filtered through the curtains. His words were muffled to her ears, despite the clear enunciation.

"You cannot produce an heir, my Queen," he stated.

She pushed the pain away.

Mikal watched as a smile graced her lips while she leant back in her chair.

Interesting.

Glancing at Impa, Zelda pat her hand gently as the older woman's anger flared between them. Red eyes burned with affront.

"Let's hear them out, dearheart."

"It is your choice, as always," was the Sheikah's only response.

Smoothing a lock of blond hair behind her ear, she smiled demurely.

"I have not been told I am infertile, sir."

A quiet inhale, the sound of breath caught with shock, measured the slightest of pauses.

A muscle in his cheek jumped as his flushed face grew darker. Mortification and annoyance glittered with his narrowing eyes, the only sign of displeasure he would show.

Sometimes, in moments like this, it was nice to be Queen.

"What I mean is...you cannot produce an heir with another woman."

"I am aware of how children are born, contrary to popular belief."

Mikal nearly bit through his tongue as he watched the other man struggle for composure.

"You see why we are concerned?"

"I do not. As Advisor Mikal Evat has recently reminded me, my heir need not be of my own body. They need not even be related to me. I fail to see how my current relationships concern anyone but I and my partner."

"Sh-she is your Guardian!"

"Again, I fail to see how this is a problem."

"It's not right."

"By whose definition of 'right', ma'am? Surely not Ganondorf's I hope," Zelda stated with a sardonic chuckle.
"She is meant to protect you."

"She has, sir. And she always will."

"Her emotions will compromise her judgment!"

"She is standing right here," Impa muttered.

"It's unnatural!"

"You've wasted my time and tried my patience, sir," she said between clenched teeth. Eyes narrowing, she forced calm into her words. "I have asked, now I am ordering: leave my office!"

"No grown woman keeps herself from a man for the sake of child and needs nothing!"

An audible crack of anger and energy rent the air, wisps of power rising from the Queen's skin. Hands trembling before she pressed them to the heavy desk, she rose to her feet and met his eyes. Her voice was soft, authority a tangible coating to her steady words.

"There are many things I will tolerate for and from my people. Many do not like my person, nor my leadership, and this I accept. Belligerent arrogance, however, is beyond anything I will tolerate."

"You've no respect for authority, nor the culture of this golden land. Not only have you committed various degrees of treason within the last half hour, but sacrilege as well."

"Our nation suffers no fools within their government, and as such, you are no longer part of it. Secretary, nor Lord, is a title you possess any longer. I've half a mind to strip your land as well, if it wasn't for the wards under your care."

Her posture righted further on its own accord, outrage making itself know through regal grace. She turned her attention from the blanching faces of former-Secretary Venet and his remaining colleagues to the Sheikah guards lining her office.

"Please show them to the gates, this meeting his over."

She sat without another word, unfurling a random scroll as if she hadn't a care in the world. She heard, rather than saw, the solemn triad being escorted down the corridor.

If from experience or courtesy, it would be never known by Mikal followed the group. The double doors shut quietly behind him, the room emptied.

Vertigo assailed her, forcing her eyes closed as her forehead met the rich wood. Magic settled within her once more, leaving behind nothing save pain. Blood pounding in her veins, she sought the will to breathe.

Damn her temper.

Tension screamed from the younger woman's slight frames, drawing Impa like a moth to flame. Her hands ran gently over hunched shoulders and a stiff neck, offering what comfort she could. Her own pain had faded to a memory as the medication took hold, the lingering symptoms easily ignored.

Time passed unmeasured as they remained frozen in place, thoughts trapped in by everything and nothing.

"Why must people always try to hurt us?" came the quiet question as the bowed head rose.
"Because they're jealous...they want to be happy and aren't," Impa whispered as she pulled her hands away, already missing the contact.

"But he was right...wasn't he?" Zelda's voice broke, belaying the anguish which had nothing to do with physical pain. She kept her eyes on her hands – hands which thankfully were no longer trembling.

"About what?" When silence was the only response, she turned the chair by sheer stubborn will. Kneeling on the carpet, she wrapped her hands around Zelda's, noting her cool skin.

"Speak to me keta, please. I can't answer you if you don't tell me."

Misery birthed agony within her heart, choking her as her body sought to relieve its burden. Memories of pain, of fear, threatened to overwhelm a wavering mind. Insidious, mutinous whispers from unsavory voices became an undeniable itch within her ears, blocked only by the sound of screams she did not – could not – bring forth.

Red eyes met hers. Beautiful, red eyes, the color of blood and rubies. Lovely irises which began to lighten, to fade from the color of life to shades of fire. A whimper, the barest cry for help, escaped trembling lips as she recoiled.

"Please…no…"

So quiet was the room around them, so close was her proximity, Impa heard the breathless plea. She asked no questions as ice wrapped around their bond, radiating from the younger woman's shaking hands as fear engulfed her. Without thought, she pulled the other female from the chair and cradled her close.

Words reached her through the tsunami of fragmented memories. "It's all right Zelda…you're safe. I promise, I've got you."

Odd. The words didn't match. Why didn't they match? It was a voice she recognized, but it…wasn't echoing the others.

The distant feel of another's heartbeat gave her an anchor. A lifeline. Holding tight to the faint sensation, she forced the past to settle, to loosen its strangling grasp upon her.

Warmth encircled her, slowly banishing the cold and filth. It slowly, tormenting, crept through her limbs and chest. Breathe stuttering, the sight of a damp, cold cave floor gave way to ornate Gerudo rug.

Shuddering violently, she burrowed into the life-saving warmth even as every instinct screamed to flee. The broken words fell from white lips automatically, a habit long formed.

"'e was right, right..."

Snippets of conversation and emotion surfaced in an instant, her thoughts recoiling violently from past to present.

"About what?"

Confusion and worry dominated Impa's words, her primary focus to alleviate the sudden terror which had consumed her Charge.

"D-don't yo-you w-w-w-want m-me?"
Tightening her hold, Impa swallowed her sudden rage. Now wasn't the time. Later. Later she could deal with whatever bastard had convinced the woman in her arms that desire was a threat.

"Listen to me Zelda. I don't care who told you love was about doing whatever is running through your mind. I have no idea why you are frightened of me, of this subject.

"I'm not going to press the issue. Right now, I want you to forget whatever you think that idiot was 'right' about. He was wrong. I have what I want; your love. That's all that matters to me. I care about you and what you want. I love you. That's not going to change."

"B-but...don't you...". Trailing off, she hid her face in Impa's neck, trying not to cry out as ghostly hands ran over her.

"I have what I want. Nothing else matters."

"P-pro-promise?"

"Always my love. Always."

Though she still wanted to know what had inspired so terror, Impa didn't speak of the incident again. After visiting Link and having a meal of broth and bread with the resting Hero, they decided to retire early. The day's events caught up with them as they changed for bed.

Cuddled in Impa's arms on a sofa in the sitting room, Zelda allowed her thoughts to become words. "Was he right...about you not...being with anyone because of me?"

"You can ask anything you want," the Sheikah whispered as she pressed a kiss to the Hylian's forehead. "To answer your question...yes." Sighing, she stared at lamp on the fireplace mantle. "I had a lover before."

"When?"

Smiling sadly, she replied with fondness. "When I was still in training. We were young and stupid...and lucky."

"Him. And I do. Not in the way you mean, however. We were friends for a long time. He died when you were a toddler," Impa added softly.

"Oh..." Not sure what else to say, Zelda stared at her hands.

"What are you thinking about?"
The truth was on the tip of her tongue, waiting to be told. Pushing it away, she chewed her cracking lip. "Everyone makes it sound so...complicated."

"By 'it' you mean sex?" When Zelda nodded, Impa fought a smile. "And what did Link say?"

Blushing, she mumbled. "That it's a dance where the orchestra is hidden."

"Awfully insightful for Link. Must be Shad's influence."

"Hey!"

Smiling, she ran a hand through the long, dark golden tresses laying on her chest. "He is correct, in a way. Lust in the body's music...it makes you want to dance. Sometimes you don't know the steps, don't even know why the dance is happening, but you move anyway." Trailing her thumb over plump, pink lips, she sighed softly. "Sometimes the dance is slow, so slow it's almost as if nothing's happening. The steps are light, barely noticeable. Another other times it's quick, your movements are heavy as you fight gravity."

Feeling foolish for continuing the charade, Zelda tilted her head back to meet Impa's eyes. "And if I want to sit out a dance?"

"There's no reason you can't."

"I thought it was...improper to sit at a ball."

"The hostess makes the rules."

"So, who's the hostess?"

The hesitation lasted only a heartbeat before Impa spoke, her voice firm. "Though it is a shared role, you are."

"Why?" Confusion and curiosity shone in Zelda's wide eyes.

"Because."

"But...why? That's not a reason."

"It's your right."

"I don't understand."

Words unspoken hung between them as secrets threatened to break free.

"It's not something I can explain." Unable to find the necessary words, Impa closed her eyes and forced herself to remain calm.

Frustration would help neither of them.

Opening her eyes, she met Zelda's worried gaze without pause. "Even if I hadn't been with anyone before...it's your right. No, don't look away. I love you keta. Sesha-nole, light of my heart...you mean everything to me." The language of the Shadow tribe fell from her lips with ease, surprising her. The word long forgotten warmed her heart. The rightness of such an endearment for her beloved brought a smile to her lips despite the delicate situation.

Deep in her mind, Zelda turned away as she forced herself not to speak her mind. Her throat ached
as everything within her screamed, begged to tell the truth. To admit the implication she hadn't been with a man was a lie.

Though lacking a soul and with a heart of stone, Ganondorf was a man.

Cold fingers ran down her spine as she recalled just what sort of man he was.

"Whatever you've been through, whatever it is that's scaring you now...it's not something I know. Do I want to? Yes. But you'll tell me when you're ready." Once more, she pressed a kiss to Zelda's forehead. Impa hugged her tighter as she pressed closer, shielding her from the cool room. "I know you don't understand. It's not something that can be taught...it has to be experienced."

With little thought, Zelda stared at the lamps. The words floated around her mind like ink in water, slowly taking over everything else. The hypnotic rhythm of the dancing flames calmed her as she began to process the words. "Do you want me?" she heard herself ask. Swallowing fresh tears, she tilted her head back once more. Love gave her strength and courage to fight the demons which threatened her spirit. "Do you...I mean...I'm not your ex, but...do you want to be with me...sexually?"

Several thoughts ran through Impa's mind, and once more she bit her tongue so as not to speak prematurely. Taking a moment to choose her words, she began playing with the silky curls once more.

The longer she thought, the more depth she realized the two statements held. Though the bond was filled with more emotions than she could name, she knew the woman in her arms was anxious for her answer. "Breathe," she whispered as she heard steady breaths become shallow. "I will answer...I just need to think."

"Sh-shouldn't it be...an easy answer?"

"Maybe. But it's not. In asking this question, which I'm glad you asked, you told me several things. I want to make something clear before I give you a full answer. My former lover, Farore rest his soul, is not you. You are not him. This isn't a comparison between you two, and never will it be. He was my friend, and lover, but never did I love him as I love you. And this is what I want you to think about. I love you, Zelda. I don't know what you believe that means, or what love entails, but I love you.

"And because I love you, I want this first," she said as she gently tapped a finger her heart and head. "I was once told that the heart lives above the hips, and the brain above that, the spirit at the top. The spirit controls the mind, which interacts with the heart. Below the heart is a wall which bars what lies between your legs from ruling anything above it; everything above it rules that below. Do you understand?"

"...no," Zelda whimpered miserably. "I'm sorry."

There was a power greater than lust? Unfathomable.

"There's no reason to be sorry," Impa said with a soothing tone. "You've done nothing wrong." Praying her words wouldn't cause irreparable harm, she took a deep breath. "Do you know what intimacy is?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand it?"
"Not really." Momentarily forsaken by Wisdom, Zelda stared at her hands once more.

Taking the cold hands in hers, Impa kissed her knuckles. "Intimacy is closeness. It's trust. Love. We are intimate now just with my hugging you. We were intimate many years ago because of how close we are. We trusted and loved each other as friends, as family. It has nothing to do with sex. For a relationship to work, intimacy must come first."

"Am...am I intimate with Link?"

"I believe so. He's your brother, your best friend. You share an intimacy of family. You have shared secrets and memories, you trust each other to always be there."

"What does this..." Trailing off, the Time Sage licked her lips nervously.

"With my answer?" supplied the Shadow Sage. "Everything. You asked me if I wanted to be with you sexually. It isn't an easy answer. I want what you're ready for...what you want."

"B-but...I-I saw..." Her words broke along with her breath. Struggling for air, she cursed her ever-present as threads of numbing fear inched through her heart. "I saw...your eyes...so...they burned...needed..."

Whispered words, barely spoken and yet filled with suffocating weight, echoed through Impa's mind. She said nothing as she hugged Zelda tighter, offering comfort which only loving actions could give. Guilt became a noose around her neck. As the words became a buzz of sound to her ears, the last shattered statement cleared the haze from her thoughts.

"I need nothing," Zelda heard her say firmly. Nary a muscle twitched as her head was lifted and red discs eclipsed the world around her. She blinked as her name was spoken once more, demanding her attention.

"Zelda, listen to me. The only things I need are food, water, shelter from the elements and to protect you. Those are the only things that are physiologically vital to my survival. Anything else is a want." Impa continued to hold her gaze, waiting for the murk numbness of reigned desolation to leave the green pools.

"But..."

"But what?" She spoke quietly. As if Zelda were a child, she reminded herself to be cautious; something had spooked her, possibly some inner knowledge she wasn't prepare for.

"Everyone...needs..."

"Who told you that?"

Pregnant silence met her question. When Zelda pulled her eyes away, her heart sank into her stomach.

Reminding herself only the woman before her knew how long she had been missing with the beast, she kept her voice calm.

"Zelda, did Ganondorf tell you that?"

The name was a knife to her ears. Hissing, she squeezed her eyes shut. "Yes," she admitted as she tried to keep the black box closed.
"He lied," came the firm response. The air around them grew light as Impa wrapped her mind around Zelda's, the bond thrumming with emotion. "He lied to hurt you. He told you that knowing you would never forget because he was the one to say it. Why would you think he was right?"

A flash of a memory tore through their minds. Zelda choked on a sob and dragged her nails down her arms, desperate to escape the pain of knowledge.

Taking her hands without a thought, Impa watched herself through Zelda's eyes. This morning, she thought. Realization brought a flush of shame to her cheeks as Zelda's memory played in full, her Charge's emotions becoming her own. Curiosity filled her as she felt the Queen's skin tingle from her tickling touch. She watched her own eyes dilate, her crimson irises slowly darkening with lust. She watched her eyes trail down Zelda's face, watched her gaze caress her neck and chest as her hands remained pressed in the bedding. She felt the heat pouring from her body in waves.

Worry pulled in her stomach as a minute tremor, unnoticed to herself at the time, flowed through her body. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw her own thoughts run across her face. Understanding shamed her further. After Ganondorf's assault, and if she had hear horror stories of physical relationship, it was no stretch of the imagination to see how her love would believe she "needed" something.

She heard the words of several younger maids, how they either praised or condemned their husbands for their bedroom activities. How many stories of pain and horror had the younger woman overheard?

Like a puzzle completed at long last, the truth became clear. Cursing herself, Impa breathed slowly and deeply.

"Zelda, look at me." Only once she could look in the other woman's eyes once more did she continue.

"He was evil. He lied to you because he could. Whatever anyone else, male or female, has told you doesn't apply. I don't 'need' you and I'm not going to demand anything. I'm not going to hurt you in any way. This morning..." Sighing, she closed her eyes.

Zelda felt a whine bubble in her throat. Why was Impa bowing her head? She hadn't done anything wrong...

Hearing the sound, Impa opened her eyes and smiled sadly. "This morning was my fault. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable and I certainly didn't want to give you the impression I wanted anything more."

Hearing the veiled restraint in her voice, Zelda frowned. "Why are you lying to me?" she asked quietly.

"I'm not ly-"

"You are! You've been lying to me this whole time!"

"What do you want me to say?" Impa asked softly.

"I want the truth. You said you trust me...then trust me enough to tell me the truth."

There was no hesitation before her words, nor did she take time to think them through. Disappointment in herself and Zelda's hurt was a compulsion she could no longer ignore.
"The truth is I want you. I don't need you, I won't die or otherwise endure pain if we...do not engage in sexual activity. You're beautiful, attractive in many ways. But as I said before, my being resides above my primal urges. What I may or may not want physically does not and WILL NOT dictate this relationship."

"It matters though."

"Not really."

Anger coursed through her at the flippant reply. With little thought, Zelda stood and quickly made her way towards the inner doors. "I am not a child to be sheltered, and refuse to be treated as such. I'm going to bed." Without another word, she slammed the doors behind her and stormed to the inner chamber.

Impa laid her head in her hands and wondered how the day had gone so wrong.

[-]

When the Impa retired, she thought the matter was over. Or at the never least, put the rest for the night

Unwilling to ponder Zelda's mood swings, she fell into bed and allowed sleep to claim her. Four hours of broken, fitful sleep later, her eyes snapped open.

Something was wrong.

Nervous energy filled her as she slide from the bed and hastily entered the larger room. The new moon cast no light into the dark room. Though she saw easily enough, the additional light would have shown her what subtle changes had been made.

As it was, she wasn't focused on the subtle. The curtains were parted, showing her what she needed to know.

Zelda was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
See Who I Am by Within Temptations
Chapter Ten

Eclipse (I)

(TW: Self-harm/attempted suicide with non-graphic memories)

The cool air stung her exhausted lungs, and still Zelda ran. The moonless night lengthened the shadows, filling her pounding heart with dread. As her boots dug into the earth, she felt her heart constrict.

Impa was awake.

And she knew.

Adrenaline pushed her shaking muscles to run faster. The midnight fog became knives to her numb face. Hot, bitter tears filled her bloodshot eyes as pain tore through her body.

She couldn't stop...

Not now, not when she was so close.

A whimper pierced the silence as the whispers grew louder. Every word Impa spoke churned in her mind, a blinding desert storm. Unrecognizable, the twisted words became weapons against her traitorous heart.

Hope was something she had felt in full force.

Hope was dangerous.

It had gotten her killed before.

[-]

Chaos brewed within Impa as she paced. She knew from the state of the room, lit by a roaring fire and several lamps, Zelda had left voluntarily. Her Sheikah suit and sword were missing, telling the frantic Guardian her Charge had run away.

Forcing herself to calm, Impa slowed her pacing until she stood before a balcony door. Staring at the black sky, she reached beyond her panic. Time was of the essence.

Link. He knew. Somehow, he knew, he could help.

What made her run? she wondered as she continued to stare.

Paralyzed by the single question, answers slowly began trickling through her conscious. The stirrings of another's emotion within her became a fledgling taking flight.

A nightmare, the second-hand fear told her.
A nightmare laced with a truth so painful it blinded Zelda to anything but the need to flee.

Focused calm engulfed her, steadying her as she grasped for control. The essence of a Maderone, now called Guardian, eclipse a mate's panic.

It took but minutes to dress properly. As she slid on her boots, the bond pulsed with awareness.

Zelda had spoken once of whispers. Voices of the past, she had called them. Voices of the dead, of souls she had failed to save. Yet as Impa heard the incomprehensible whispers, there was no grief.

Only terror.

Soul-numbing, heart-wrenching, fight-or-flight inspiring terror spread from her heart like a poison. Striding confidently from her room, she turned her attention inward. Insidious, incoherent whispers slowly increased in volume.

Ghostly fingers ran over her covered skin, shudders wracking her body. Slipping through the doors, she locked them and quickly made her way towards Link's room.

The fingertips drew paths down her body, a mockery of a lover's caress.

Link's door opened with a nearly silent click, banishing the voices and hands from her presence.

[-]

Only when Zora's Domain was within her sight did Zelda slow. Struggling for air, she carefully began the climb towards the top of the waterfall.

"Who dares enter this area before dawn?" called a heavy voice.

The sound of a Zora, though young, caused Zelda to smile. "It is Zelda, young Prince. I must speak with your mother."

The Prince regarded the Hylian Queen with narrow eyes. After several seconds, he turned and silently made his way upstream, returning with his mother within moments.

The spirit of Zora Queen Rutela took one look at Zelda and quickly made her way to the riverbank. "Oh child...what have you gotten yourself into now?"

Sitting near the edge, Zelda glanced towards the Domain's entrance. "I had to get away." A single tear fell down her cheek as the spirit placed a hand over hers. "I don't know what to do..."

"What has happened?"

"I can't forget," she whispered.

Rutela closed her eyes and wrapped her transient arms around the mortal woman without another word.

[-]

Weakened by fever, it took while to gain Link's awareness. Bleary eyes gazed at, blinking in confusion as they struggled to focus.

"Wha' you doin' in m'dreams," he mumbled as he stared at the blurry image of…Impa?
Only Impa had silver hair and would come here at dark.

Smiling at the Hero, Impa shook her head and whispered. "You're not dreaming. Try not to wake Shad, please. I need your help."

The urgency of her tone and the desperation in her expression cleared his head. Groaning softly, he rolled unto his side and looked her over. Taking only enough time to wake fully, he spoke with a swiftness which conveyed his affection for his pseudo-sister. "What happened to Zelda?"

"She's fled. I don't know when, though it's been long enough her bed is cold."

"Why did she run?" he murmured with a frown as his stomach churned. Swallowing heard, he closed his eyes and tried to gain control of his body.

Loathe to keep the young man from rest longer than needed, she answered quickly. "I'm don't know. I can hear the whispers, though I don't understand them. I…I'm not entirely sure she's aware of reality."

His pale face blanched further as his fevered eyes filled with horror. Vertigo he struggled to rise from the bed. As Shad began to stir, the ill Hylian felt a warm hand press his torso back into the bed.

"Stay. I just want to know where she went," Impa commanded softly, staring at the determined warrior.

Admitting defeat, Link rested his head and glanced at the nightstand. Longing for the cool mint water, he whispered his request. His shaking hands wrapped around the goblet and he drank hastily. When he laid his head back once more, he met Impa's eyes.

Bile rose in his throat as he spoke. The knowledge of his sister's mentality churned his stomach worse than any illness ever could.

"She would go to the others first. Rutela, Saria, Malon...other women. She's running blind...no destination," he added as his eyes became heavy with fatigue. Shivering, he burrowed further under the heavy covers. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his glassy eyes dilating as his fever rose.

Shaking his head weakly, Link tried to clear his mind. "I'm not really sure where she'll go. There's no...pattern. Just that she runs far. Always goes where she thinks she won't be found."

"Hiding in plain sight?"

"Sometimes...sometimes it's just to run. He broke something in her Impa. He tore her to shreds. 'm not 'posed...tell...but...you need know."

Impa kissed Link's clammy forehead and stood. "I understand. Go to sleep, child, I'll tell you when she's home safe." Wanting to know more, to ask him the truth, she bit her tongue and turned away. Now was not the time.

Useless tears ran down his cheeks. "Impa...follow her...but don't chase her."

The cryptic words echoed in her mind as she left the room.

[-]

Rutela watched her friend sprint down the riverbank. The moment her admission had faded from
the air, Zelda had leapt to her feet and began her descent down the mountain. Sighing, she ran a
hand over her son's back before fading from sight.

The Prince followed his mother's friend without a sound, the rushing water carrying him to her
within seconds. He swam beside her, unnoticed. He watched as her tears evaporating from her
warming cheeks.

Why the Hylian would seek his mother only to leave with few words? When they reached the edge
of the Domain, he slowed himself and continued to watch her as she ran. Though he rarely meddled
in Hylian affairs, the Queen of Hyrule was clearly in need of a friend.

He was not that person.

Turning back, he slowly made his way upstream, pondering the brief interaction between his
deceased mother and the living Queen.

Zelda did everything she could to silence her thoughts. While comforting for a moment, the warm
arms of the Zora Queen's spirit only stirred her chaotic emotions further. The change in land
beneath her feet caused her to slow.

Eldin Province.

Staring at the clearing, her eyes automatically found the place which had changed everything.

Where her hands had taken the life of the monster which had destroyed her.

Had broken her.

Ruined any chance of happiness she would ever find.

Knots of pain began in her stomach and spread throughout her exhausted body. Panting as the
memories replayed before her unseeing eyes, she fell to her knees. Blood splattered the ground as
she bit her tongue, desperate to remain silent. Even here, far from any other, she would not allow
him to make her scream.

Not again.

Not ever.

"You will never be free. I am inside you," whispered the voice of a dead man. A phantom pulse
beat under her fingers as she dug her nails into the ground.

"I guess I'll have to push you out," she breathed in memory, haunted. The metallic taste of her own
blood choked her as her fingers pressed deeper into the dry earth.

"You never learned to, my beautiful Queen. You shall always be mine, my pet. You will never be
free," he taunted.

"My pet." He's whispering again. I hate when he whispers. It sounds so...loving. The ruse, this
game he insists on playing hurts more than anything he does. It hurts worse than what he's doing
now. My body bleeds, but my shattering heart is the only pain I know. What he's doing...what he's
taking...the marks he's leaving...

His words of love, his endearments, they mean more than these scars.

A sob broke memory, shattering her thoughts. Renewed strength filled her as she tore her eyes from
the grassy mound. She forced herself to run once more, a futile though it was.

Who could escape death?

[-]

Impa blinked away useless tears as she spurred Epona. Dread filled her as she allowed the bond to direct her, incoherent whispers gaining the barest hint of clarity.

And then there was silence.

Twin, fiery pains dragged their way up her forearms, a red haze eclipsing the dark horizon.

"Faster," she told the faithful mare. "Faster, Epona...before we're too late."

Epona lowered her head and thrust her hooves into the ground. A chestnut blur, she sped through the Province, heading north-west towards Faron.

[-]

Cradled between two boulders in the mountain pass between Kakariko Village, Eldin and Faron Provinces, Zelda closed her eyes. Allowing the numbness to take her, she smiled to herself as silence fell within her mind.

Her sword lay on the dusty ground beside her, streaks of darkness marring the reflective metal.

Beneath smooth skin, a blanket of scars littered her body from scale to sole. Scars only she knew existed, hidden from the world by copious amounts of potions and salves.

A porcelain doll, she was without flaw – without evidence.

Until now.

These would be the marks they would see, the cleansing she so desperately needed.

She couldn't push him out...had never been able to.

It wouldn't erase him from her, but maybe…maybe it would drain some of his essence.

[-]

Fatigue stunned her mind within minutes of the pain, resonation from her soul rather than her body. She barely paused to slow Epona before leaping to the ground.

The cliff-side was unforgiving as she scrambled up the uneven terrain. Her fingers dug into the biting rocks, tearing at the calloused flesh.

Knowledge filled her as the bond pulled her towards a hidden plateau.

"Please Goddesses, keep your daughter safe," she prayed breathlessly as she searched for a way over the boulders blocking her path.

The scent of blood gave little hope for divine intervention.

[-]

Floating within the peace of self-inflicted pain, Zelda hummed to herself. This was control, this is
what she sought and lost day in and day out. This is what she needed.

...what she was taking from Impa.

Their love was real, she knew. She also knew it would never work. The Sheikah deserved better...deserved someone not broken. She had been through too much, had seen too many horrors to ever be whole.

She was so unworthy of her position as Queen her own Advisors doubted her decisions. The Sages no longer spoke with her, no longer asked her advice. Even Wisdom remained unlit, dormant.

Worthless. Pitiful and a waste of life.

Much like Ganondorf.

With a struggle, she wrapped her arms around herself while heart skipped. The coming dawn was wrapped within a gray fog.

Worry nibbled deep within her, giving some balance to the darkness of her mind.

Unable to ignore or acknowledge the emotion, her head fell back.

A single tear slipped from her eye.

She remember them. Everyone she had failed to save. Everyone her hesitation killed.

Mostly she remembered her friends.

Link, who continued to suffer from long-healed injuries gained during his travels on her behalf.

Midna, who still struggled to repair her world in the wake of Zant's betrayal.

Impa...who had never had a life.

Who would have one now.

Because now her pain would end. She had killed him, and now he would kill her. He had stolen everything she held dear. Link and Impa breathed, but they did not live while she was here.

It would kill Impa to know the truth.

What a whore she had been, how she had lain beneath the one who committed genocide without thought.

Willingly.

Had begged him to touch and take her.

The fight had ended long ago, leaving behind a resigned acceptance of her fate.

His death had been a duty.

Hers was another submission to her Master's will.

[-]

Impa slid down the rocks, the sky lightening. Din painted fire across the horizon as she scrambled
over the jagged rocks towards an alcove.

The bond's pulse of life became erratic, stealing what little breath she had.

The air was heavy with copper. Her eyes burned as the taste of salt coated her tongue, churning her stomach. She squeezed herself through the narrow opening between two boulders.

Her heart stopped when she saw Zelda's still form.

The red clay was black with blood, her tan skin as white as a summer cloud, her suit was matted with the precious liquid.

Lying beside her, blemished mockingly by thin brown lines, was her sword.

"Zelda," she whispered as she knelt in the dark mud. She pressed her fingers to the younger woman's neck in frantic search of a pulse.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Dancing with Tears in My Eyes by Ke$ha
Erratic, a weak pulse struggled to kiss her fingers.

Relief filled her veins as Impa wrapped her arms around Zelda's limp form. Lifting her, she cloaked them in Shadows. A split-second decision found them in the Twilight realm.

Midna paced before the Mirror, watching her reflection with mounting anxiety. Link's contact, brief though it was, had been troublesome at best. Her sister Queen was missing, lost within memories of blood and anguish.

He'd also mentioned to listen for Impa between delirious, exhausted ramblings.

And listen she did. The Fused Shadow bound them, connecting the two worlds in ways even the Sages could not comprehend.

It was, with the saddest admission, the only reason she could open the portal.

"Midna!" Impa called in a broken gasp before the writhing Shadows had parted. "Infirmary. Where?"

Midna wrapped Twilight around, transporting them within a heartbeat.

"What happened?" she asked as several Twili healers ran towards them.

"I don't know. She left during the night. When I found her...she was like this," Impa said hollowly as she stepped back. Grief shook her from the core as she watched the healers scramble to complete multiple tasks at once. She swallowed, hugging herself as tears blurred the room. "I don't know what happened."

Wrapping her arms around the other woman, Midna took several deep breaths. It strangled her heart to see one friend nearly dead by her own hand and the other dying along with her. "She'll survive. She's a warrior."

"I don't think she is...not anymore..."

Neither spoke as the healers worked, the words a jumble of meaningless sound as they transfused the lifeless Queen. Red blood glittered within glass bottles, a testament of shared genes.

A world away, and still there were similarities to be had.

This realization sent Impa to her knees. Dragging Midna with her, she began to sob.

Her split-second decision could have cost Zelda her life.
Her broken heart shattered further as she replayed the last half-hour over and over within her mind.

If she had had been a few minutes later in waking...

If the Twili had different blood...

If...

If only she had woken when Zelda needed her...

If only she knew what had caused such desperation...

Chaos tore through her heavy thoughts once more.

Screams of agony pierced the air as she howled with grief, unable to control herself any longer.

She never felt her hands twine in her hair, her nails gouging deep into her scalp.

She never saw Midna pull away, nor did she hear for a sedative to be brought.

All she felt was Zelda's icy skin, slick with her own blood as she held the woman through the transport.

All she saw was the bloody ground and lifeless body, a body void of all hope.

She heard nothing but the silence of a struggling heart, its beats so feeble it could barely be found.

Midna helped an apprentice healer settle Impa onto a cot once the sedative took effect. Taking the bowl and rags from the man, she began washing away the blood as she best as she could. Ever few moments she cast anxious glances towards the other bed, unable to speak for the grief with choked her.

"My Queen," the apprentice said softly. Turning to face the young woman, Midna saw the glass she held. "You should drink."

Taking the water with little thought, Midna swallowed the cool liquid as fresh tears pooled in her eyes. When arms wrapped around her waist, she closed her eyes and leaned back. "Navi," she whispered. "Why didn't she come to us?"

"Because we aren't who she needs," Navi said just as quietly as she looked between the sleeping women. "We don't know what's changed in the past few weeks other than they are now in a relationship."

"Is Link—"

"I told him. But he has to stay in Hyrule. He's still too ill to leave bed. Not that he doesn't try I bet."

Her smile was bittersweet the Twilight Queen mumbled. "Silly wolf is always getting into trouble."

"That he does," the fairy agreed. She tightened her grip on her lover before pulling away. "What are you doing?" she asked the healers.

Hearing the harsh tones of the passive woman, they stilled their hands and lifted their heads in shock. "This suit is unnecessary, madam. It must be removed."
Navi felt her anger spike at their insensitivity.

"Leave it."

"But, it could—"

"Madam, you have done your job. The Hylian Queen would be most displeased, as would her Maderone, if you were to undress her. Leave the suit."

Casting anxious glances between the four women, the healer nodded to her assistant and left them alone.

With a sigh, Navi hung her head.

Other than keep both Zelda and Impa comfortable, there was nothing she could do.

This time, it was up to them.

[-]

It was dark.

And cold.

So cold. Colder than any place she'd ever been before.

But also hot. Scoring heat which turned her slick flesh to ash in seconds.

Sweat soaked the blankets and sheets wrapped tightly around her, binding the light material to her. Like ropes, they cut into her sensitive skin, sending panic through her waking body.

Had she been captured again?

Pain flared in her arms in time with her pulse but she paid it no mind. Her heart hammered in her chest as she thrashed against her cocoon.

There were hands on her legs. Fingers dug into her ankles, spreading her legs and pressing them deep into the mattress as something laced tightly around them, anchoring them to the corners of the bed.

Her hands. Why were they tying her hands?

Blood-curdling screams rent the air as Zelda thrashed on the bed. Medical personnel ran around the infirmary, searching for a way to calm the terrified woman as she fought the restraints.

None focused on the bed opposite hers.

Despite the medication running through her veins, Impa woke with little hesitation. Though her mind was heavy and her thoughts slow, she reacted without thought. Adrenaline tore through the physiological poison as she instinctively swung her feet to the floor and stood.

Only to fall to the ground, unable to support her weight.

Midna and Navi ran into the infirmary, pushing through the frantic crowd with little patience. They helped her to sit on the bed, speaking in a rush as they did. Their words made no sense to her, nor did they matter. Zelda was screaming. The bond was alight with agony which spread fire through
her numb cells.

Who was torturing her?

She didn't know. But she did know screaming was useless.

Yet she couldn't stop.

There were hands pulling at her, voices trying to speak to her. Another scream tore from her throat as she threw her weight into the air, desperate for freedom. Her eyes darted around the room and saw nothing but blurred.

Acid tears poured down her cheeks as she searched for him. Where was he? What had she done to deserve this new game?

The screams were silent now, muted by her sobs. Impa swayed where she sat. She couldn't get to Zelda. But why? Why wouldn't her body cooperate?

"Impa! Focus! I know it's hard, but you have to."

Who was ordering her to focus? "Midna...what happened? Zelda—"

"Try to focus Impa. You were sedated. Zelda's alive."

"Why wouldn't...she be?" Impa asked. Muffled by an incessant buzzing, her voice sounded odd to her own ears.

Snapping her fingers before the Sage's face, Midna growled softly. She had asked for a sedative, not an anesthetic. Navi's hand upon her shoulder made her take several deep breaths.

Breathing. Could she breathe? Yes...yes, she could breathe.

For now.

Taking deep gulps of the precious substance, Zelda clenched her eyes shut and writhed in pain.

Why did it hurt so? If he wasn't here, it shouldn't hurt...no one should have touched her yet. That wasn't how it worked.

The healers spoke without listening to one another, each as confused and frantic as the next. They watched her pull from their touches, her expression one of immense pain.

Yet other than the wounds on her arms, there were no injuries.

So why was she hurt?

That is what Impa forced herself to think as she struggled to regain use of her mind and body. If someone said Zelda was alive, then something happened for her to almost not be.

"But what was it?" She looked between her friends with confusion. Her recollection of the previous hours was a puzzle she couldn't yet put together.

Navi took Impa's hands. "She tried to commit suicide, Impa. We're not sure why. You brought her here...do you remember?"

Pieces of a broken memory flashed before her hooded eyes. A horse, blood, red clay. Link, Midna,
an empty bed. Blood...so much blood. It clung to her palate, the scent was so heavy.

"Zelda," she breathed. "She ran away."

Sharing a glance, Navi and Midna looked at one another before turning back to the confused woman. "You said that earlier."

"She ran...Link was sick. He didn't know where she went. Did I find her?" Impa whimpered as her words filled the air around her. Desperation curled in her stomach as fear threatened to choke her. Zelda had run, had been gone for hours.

But what had happened?

"Yes," Navi assured her. "You found her and brought her here."

"There was blood..."

"She tried to..." Midna trailed off. "We don't know what happened, but it's clear Zelda tried to end her own life."

The puzzle fell into place as Impa's eyes opened fully. "Zelda!"

The Twili and fairy held her arms, forcing her to remain sitting. "Stop before you hurt yourself," Navi admonished. "You have to wait for the drugs to wear off."

"She was screaming...I need to get to her!"

"Impa, wait. Please. She's not going anywhere." Midna glanced at healers blocking the bed. While she hadn't seen the bindings themselves, she had seen Zelda arch from the mattress.

No, her fellow Queen wasn't going anywhere.

But why wasn't she? Why wasn't she allowed to move? This wasn't his usual game...tying her down didn't happen unless she was awake.

A whimper escaped her raw throat as those muffled voices spoke again. Opening her eyes as instructed, she stared at the faces of multiple Twili.

Another sound. Louder this time.

Clearer.

Yes, it was defiantly a whimper. Impa said nothing as she silently begged the women holding her to help her stand.

With another glance, they did as asked, supporting her between them as they walked towards the crowding healers. "Move," Midna said without hesitation. When they parted, she and Navi lead the Sheikah to the bed.

Someone was beside her. Shifting her eyes to the side, Zelda stared at the figure. They were whispering her name.

Calm filled her at the sound of the soft, melodic voice.

Uninhibited, her lips formed a forgotten name. "Impa."
With a shaking hand, Impa laid a hand on Zelda's forehead. Her muscles jumped as the drug continued to course through her body, yet she paid the tics no mind. Staring in the wide eyes of her Charge, she felt sorrow choke her.

"Unbind her," she growled without lifting her head. The eyes of one lost in their own mind stared back at her. Green eyes, usually filled with intelligence and compassion, eyes which normally shone with love, were glassy with insanity and dull from blood loss.

In spite of their misgivings, the Twili unbound the still limbs of the Hylian. They dropped the restraints, leaving them tied to the bed. They moved away from the women without a word, unnoticed.

Shouldn't the eyes above her be orange? Why were they red? Blinking in confusion, Zelda felt someone lift the weight from her, uncoiling her from the cocoon. She continued to stare at the red eyes as her mind spun with emotions she had no names for.

"Where is he?" she whispered. It was a question she was allowed to ask, one she was required to ask.

"Where is who?" Impa questioned softly as she ran a hand through Zelda's damp hair.

"Master."

The air in the vast room became heavy as cold dread filled the hearts of the three sane women. Navi and Midna left the infirmary once more with mournful expressions.

"Who is 'master'?"

Swallowing, Zelda adverted her eyes. This person did not know him. She mustn't speak.

"Sesha...tell me, please," she heard the newcomer beg. The word, so foreign...why did it warm her? Was it a spell?

"Impa," she repeated. What was this feeling? Why did she tingle?

"Yes, Impa. C'mon Zelda...please, talk to me. Who is 'master'?"

"No. Mustn't tell." When had she been let free? The new awareness filled her. Glancing around quickly, she felt fresh panic rise in her chest. Bile burned her throat, choking her.

One was always worse than many.

Useless tears filled her eyes as she hugged herself. Pain throbbed in her arms and she ignored it once more. It was nothing compared to what she had already been through. What she would go through.

"Who are you?"

"Impa...don't you remember?" Horror wrapped around her heart as she spoke. Impa felt her brightly burning hope begin to dim.

What had happened to her the younger woman's mind?

"No," Zelda murmured. She touched bandages on her arms, noticing them for the first time. Confusion clouded her voice once more. "What...where am I?" Running her fingers over the bandages once more, she frowned.
The only time she was healed was by Master, and never was it to the extent of dressing the wounds. Looking around the room, she began to really see it.

This was a medical facility, not a bedchamber or a room of torture.

The bed she lay on was much too uncomfortable for sleep.

So the woman beside her couldn't be a friend of Master...could she?

"Who are you?" she asked yet again.

"I am Impa, your Maderone...Guardian. Sheikah. Shadow Sage."

Rubbing her numb fingers together, Zelda furrowed her brow as her mind began to clear. The heavy fog of insanity parted, breaking through the memory-projected sights and sounds. She shook her head and cast her eyes around once more.

The glowing veins in the walls told her she was in Twilight Palace.

That meant...

Agony so profound she lost her breath crashed into her like waves on the beach.

She had failed.

Turning her head away from Impa, she blinked back bitter tears. Curling onto herself, she hugged her knees.

Unsure of what to do, Impa allowed her own confusion to quiet her racing thoughts. Anger burned bright within her, yet she restrained it. The sight of the broken women made her think.

With each new thought, she moved backwards through her memories.

Every memory gave her more pieces to a shattered picture.

And each piece told her a story she prayed wasn't true.

Zelda bit her lip as sobs wracked her frame once more. Without the constant whispers, she could think.

Could know.

Could feel.

And how she hated to feel.

Self-loathing boiled within her, consuming her thoughts. With shaking hands, she tore at the gauze. Everything faded away as she watched her fingers pull uselessly at the layers of cloth. Her broken nails searched for stitches, her eyes longing for the sight of the liquid rubies which flowed in her veins.

Two hands wrapped around her wrists, stilling her frantic movements. "Stop Zelda," she heard someone say. A cry escaped her throat as she felt arms wrap around her, pressing her hands into her stomach.

"NO!" The loud word, spoke with such determination, rung in Impa's mind as she held her Charge
tighter. Scowling at the healers, she watched them retreat before returning her attention to the thrashing woman. Surprised by her sudden strength, she laid back, pulling Zelda with her. For both their safety, she wrapped a leg around the Hylian's flailing knees, holding them in place.

"Zelda, stop! I'm not going to hurt you!"

She had to get away. She only had seconds, mere moments before it started again.

"Nonononopleasepleasedon'tno!" A rush of meaningless words left her lips as she fought. Even as the strength drained from her, she continued to fight. She thrust her mind into the one holding her, trying to take control. It didn't matter that she was invading another.

All that mattered was survival.

She wouldn't survive if it happened again...she wouldn't.

Gasping in shock, Impa threw her head back and tightened her hold as Zelda's mind slammed into hers. Gritting her teeth, she tugged violently on the bond, shoving her out and back into her own self. Working quickly, she wrapped the bond around the golden mind like a blanket. "Easy keta, easy. I'm not going to hurt you. But you have to calm down."

The last of her strength faded as she growled. Bucking her hips weakly, she shrugged her shoulders. "Let go."

"Only if you promise not to hurt yourself."

"I promise, now let go!" she snarled.

Her voice, so broken to her own ears, snatched the air from Impa's lungs. The first glimpse of a hidden memory flashed before her eyes and she loosened her hold.

Realization filled her as her suspicions were confirmed.

They laid in silence as Zelda wiggled from under Impa's arm and leg, shivering all the while. She hovered on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor as her vision swam. When a hand rested on her shoulder, searing to her cold skin, she flinched. "Please...don't..."

Pulling her from the edge, Impa gently rolled her to lay back. She pulled her hand away and lifted herself unto an elbow, staring into fearful emeralds brimming with tears. "Zelda, please, talk to me. What happened?"

Maybe it was having failed at death.

It could have been the constant threat of insanity.

Perhaps the shock of recent weeks caught up with her once more.

Whatever it was that caused Zelda to close her eyes also made her nod. Silence long kept began to crack as she opened her eyes, staring at the garnet orbs before her.

Her body filled with energy as her breath quickened. Hyper-aware, she licked her lips and continued to stare. Lead filled her gut as her heart beat against her chest, threatening to break free as the bands around it finally unraveled. Truth spilled through the bond as her skin tingled, goose-flesh appearing where the ruined suit didn't cover her.

"Ganondorf tortured me."
Words barely whispered met Impa's ears. Swallowing, she rested a hand between them in silent comfort.

When icy fingers touched hers with obvious hesitation, she knew that somehow, some way, it would be ok.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Bring Them To Light by Apocalyptica
Painful Revelations

Chapter Notes

Major TW: talk of child abuse/torture. I consider 13 still a child. Talk of self-injury. This is Zelda's story regarding Ganondorf's long-term abuse. Not everyone has the same definition of "graphic", so skip this chapter if you don't think you can stomach it.

AN: I know I normally post the songs at the end of the chapter. But there's one I want to post now. "Wash Away Those Years" by Creed.

Chapter Eleven
Painful Revelations

As silence settled in the infirmary, Zelda continued to hold Impa's gaze. With fragile trust, she laced her shaking fingers through the steady ones of her Maderone. Swallowing harshly, she began to speak.

"It started years ago. I don't...know why. It was before the first big fight. I was supposed to meet Link for a midnight ride. I knew I shouldn't have left the castle...but I was young. I thought I could do anything. That I was invincible.

"I remember there was a half-moon that night. And it was fall. I'm not sure why I changed my mind not to meet Link. I just...did. I walked for a long time. And when I stopped, he was there. He laughed when I drew my sword. He grabbed it with his bare hands and threw it away. He told me I couldn't win, would never win in a fight against him. I said I could and would...he laughed again.

"I was angry, foolish and reckless. I rushed him, hands bare. He wrapped a hand in my hair and pulled me off him. I stared in his eyes, so full of fire. He shook me like a dog would shake a rat before whispering. I saw everything he said. He used the connection of the Triforces to get in my head. He told me he would kill everyone I loved if I didn't do what he said. I fought him, told him he was a liar."

Her anger, previously inspired by her love's suicide attempt, spiraled into fury at her words. The knowledge that her Charge had disobeyed her warred with the truth that Ganondorf had harmed her. Everything became black as she ground her teeth, caught in a whirlwind of thought.

A gentle squeeze of her hand opened her eyes. The sight of fearful tears running down Zelda's cheeks caused Impa to take several deep breaths.

Now as not the time to lose herself within her anger.

"I'm sorry. Please...don't be afraid," Impa begged as she kissed icy knuckles.

"I knew you'd be angry," Zelda whispered as she tried to pull her hand away.

"Being angry doesn't mean I love you any less...doesn't mean I don't care," the Sheikah insisted as she continued to hold the shaking hand. She sat up and used her free hand to pull the covers over Zelda's trembling form. "You've lost a lot of blood...staying warm won't be easy for a few days."
Mumbling her thanks, she waited for Impa to recline once more before continuing her story. Taking a deep breath, she laced their free hands together and held tightly. Using Impa's warm hands to anchor her to the present, she closed her eyes as the memories swelled within her wounded mind.

"I know he was a liar...everyone did. But...I believed him. He killed a few people every time I told him I knew he was lying. So when he told me he'd kill you if I told him about our 'meetings', I couldn't not believe him. He'd already killed my tutors and broke Link's arms, though Link doesn't know it was Ganondorf's orders the creature was following.

"He...he told me in excruciating detail what he'd do to you. I knew, KNEW you would go after him if I told you. I-I wouldn't be the reason you went through that. So I kept it secret. He called me at night to come to him. Usually he tried to take Wisdom from me, sometimes he tried to make me give him the Ocarina of Time or other items. When I refused, he would beat me. One day after I told him I would never give him anything, he kissed me."

A single tear rolled down their cheeks as their breathing hitched. Impa allowed her eyes to close as each word brought memory upon repressed memory into her mind through the bond. Even if she didn't know the entire story, she knew where it was going.

Zelda whispered, digging her nails into Impa's hand as pain ran through her body. "I couldn't breathe he held me so tightly. It took me days to get the taste of him out of my mouth...the feel of his tongue..." Shuddering, she snapped her eyes open and stared at the woman beside her.

"It wasn't until after that fight when I was thirteen that it changed again. He was angry the next time he saw me...horribly angry. I'd escaped during the battle. Injured, but alive. He...he said if I wasn't going to obey him, he'd make me."

A whimper escaped her as she pulled her hands free and wrapped them around herself, shivering. Hands pulled at her clothed body, demanding things she wasn't willing to give. When a warm touch sliced through the icy hands, she opened her eyes once more and stared at Impa. "He was taller than me...I was only thirteen..." Sobbing, she buried her face in her arms.

Though muffled, Impa heard her words in the otherwise silent infirmary. She kept her hand on Zelda's shoulder, ever careful not to move it. Biting her lip to keep quiet, she hugged the bond and embraced the truth...embraced everything Zelda had kept from her.

"H-he pushed me to my knees a-and...and..." A shudder tore through her as she gagged, clawing at her throat. Memories flashed before her eyes, dragging her into the past. Her body fought, her flesh remembering what her mind wished it could forget. She begged quietly as hands wrapped around her wrists and pulled her nails from her throat.


"I can still feel him!" Sobs stole her voice as her throat closed, her tongue immobilized by a phantom body.

"I know keta," she whispered as she pressed the unsteady hands to her heart. "But try to stay with me. Stay here. I'll never hurt you, you know this."

"You'll hate me."

"Never. I can't hate you. I love you too much."

"He told me he loved me," Zelda admitted as she opened her eyes. Desperation swam within the
confused pools of agony.

"He lied."

Neither spoke for a while. When Zelda voiced her memories once more, she did so without pause. So long had she kept silent that now she was unable to do so again.

Unwilling to do so.

"He forced his...in my mouth. I couldn't talk the next day... For a while, this happened. A kiss, a...and then one day, it was more. I was swimming. I felt him coming near and begged you to go away. It was just after my fourteenth birthday. He stripped and made me touch him before I had to...do that...again...

"I started cutting. Shallow cuts. I used potions to heal them so you wouldn't know. I didn't hurt when I cut...I was numb. I liked being numb, because when he hurt me, I didn't feel it.

"It wasn't until I was fifteen that he raped me. By then he'd mostly used my hands and mouth to...get off." Closing her eyes, she swallowed harshly. "He usually beat me, but not hard enough to break anything too badly. Sometimes he used a belt, sword or whip...but usually just his hands.

"He told me he loved me, Impa. He weighed so much more than me. He...he took me somewhere. I don't know where, but it had a bed. He tied me down and tore me clothes off. He bit me everywhere, drawing blood. My breasts were black by the time he was done. He made me watched as he stripped slowly. His eyes...they were so full of fire, so... He said he loved me and that because of that love, he needed me. He always told me that. He said that everyone needed and I was going to make it better for him.

"Then he untied me. I tried to run, tried to scream for help. He grabbed me and threw me against the wall. I remember hearing a lot of cracks, but none of the mattered. He used my mouth again before throwing me back on the bed. He grabbed his belt and whipped me until I couldn't move. He said it was my fault. That I shouldn't fight. He said if I hadn't fought, he wouldn't have hurt me. He put my legs over his shoulders and raped me."

Blood dripped from her lip as she lifted her head from her arms, her eyes open once more. Pressing her legs together, she met Impa's horrified gaze. "It hurt so much. I thought...I thought I was going to die. There was a lot blood. He...he seemed to like it. I-I don't know if it was...normally...but... He raped me and laughed as I screamed. I passed out before he...finished.

"When I woke, he did it again. And again. Until I passed out again. It was dark when he poured water on me. He told me to wash before sending me back. Link found me that night. He wanted to tell you, but I wouldn't let him. I told him I'd kill myself if he did...I wanted to anyway. He promised not to tell, but only if I let him help me. From that night on, he was almost always there when I came home. He gave me potions, or took me to a healer he trusted when a simple potion wouldn't work.

"He said I was his pet. He was my Master, I did whatever he wanted. When I was younger, I resisted...but after a while...it hurt less if I did what he wanted. If he called, I came. If he wanted my body, I gave it. If I did something to make him angry, I chose my punishment.

"Eventually, I got pregnant. To celebrate, he..." A sound of primal agony filled the air as she pushed the words through her numb lips. "He used his sword. It...I miscarried. The healer said I almost died. I might never have children. But what came later...that one incident didn't really matter. He hated that I lost the child.
"He got more brutal after that. He started using...toys...to hurt me. Used weapons to beat me. Tore out parts of my flesh, drowned me, burned me... But the worst...he let other people hurt me. Take me. Rape me with their bodies and toys. Some of them...women...they used...they weren't normal...toys... Some of them...the creatures...every part of me...

"The last time was a few days before the last battle. It was just him. He was...it didn't hurt too much. He didn't break anything, I didn't bleed. He told me he was sorry for all the pain he'd caused me. That even if I hated him, he still loved me. Would always love me. I...I...he didn't ask, but I...took him in my mouth...and then...

"The day he died, he tried to rape me. But...something in me snapped. I heard you screaming for me. He told me if I didn't make you stop, he'd...he'd take you and kill you.

"So I killed him."

A million questions unasked, a lifetime of knowledge ripped apart hung between them. Neither spoke as Zelda began sobbing, nor did they need to as Impa gently pulled her into a protective embrace. No words, verbal or otherwise, were needed as mewls of pain and broken truth filled the empty room.

Their tears mingled and flooded the pillow beneath them. Unchecked, the bond flared to life around them, a dance of merging colors which became a white flame of pure, untainted love.
Chapter Twelve

Life Starts Now (I)

TW: For wordage

Shared emotion poured between them, soothing their wounds even as memories tore their souls asunder. Time passed without notice, the steady glow of Twilight dimming into darker tones in a representation of night. A day gone by, they rarely moved and never spoke, their thoughts outside of comprehension. Only when food was brought nearly twelve hours after Zelda's admittance to the ward did they fully sit up once more. Murmuring their thanks, Impa leaned against the headboard and cradled Zelda's shivering frame as if she were a babe.

"Why are you scared?" she asked softly as she fed the brunette in her arms. So damaged were her arms, the fine control necessary for holding a spoon was something she did not possess. Repressed anger burned around her wounded heart as the silver haired woman waited for an answer.

"I...lied to you. Hid. For years," Zelda whispered, unwilling to break the fragile peace which had settled around them.

"You did. And it angers me. But...I also understand, in a way. You were manipulated keta, your heart used as the worst of his weapons."

Flinching, she turned her head to the side to avoid the spoon. Shame and self-disgust churned her stomach. "I'm not hungry."

"Yes you are," Impa countered with an amused smile. Despite her nausea, Zelda's stomach growled quietly. "You should eat."

"I don't want to."

"Why?"

Unease threaded through their peace, threatening to break it as Zelda contemplated saying nothing. When she looked up and saw Impa's gaze, judging yet trusting, she sighed softly. "I...deserve punishment."

Pressing her lips together, Impa laid the spoon on the tray across her lap. "No, you don't. You made mistakes."

"I lied."

"And? Everyone lies. I lied to you, did I not?"

"That was different."

"Why? Because I was trying to protect you?"

Tension sparked as they both tensed, preparing for a battle. And then they uncoiled their muscles, taking deep breaths to calm themselves. "It just is," Zelda said after a moment.
"Will you accept that I forgive you?"

"You haven't."

"I have."

Smiling ruefully, Zelda shook her head and listened to Impa's heart even as fear snaked in her belly, winding up her spine without hesitation. "I don't know how to accept that. I'm sorry."

"Why are you scared?"

The question, repetitive to most ears, caused the Queen to flinch once more. Swallowing, she forced happiness into her smile and gained control of her body's responses once more.

The moment she met the Sheikah's eyes, she knew the older woman wasn't fooled.

Had she ever been? Sighing at the question she might never ask, Zelda lowered her eyes in submission as she whispered, her words barely stirring the air. "A lot of reasons. I...I don't want you to hate me."

"Why would I hate you?"

A pause, barely noticeable to most, was a warning to the alert Guardian. She listened to what was said and understood what was not, cursing the dead monster with the very core of her being. "I'm not who you thought I was," she heard Zelda slowly admit.

"That doesn't mean I'll hate you."

"You should."

"Why?"

"I hate me."

"I love you se-keta, I can't hate you."

Tears burned her eyes as she kept them fixed on her bandaged arms. Awareness sparked within her as she shifted, her hips brushing Impa's thighs. "I won't hurt you," Impa breathed in her ear. The warm breath tickled her sensitive flesh, sending another shiver through her quivering nerves.

"Talk to me Zelda, please."

"What do you think of me?"

The question, seeming so innocent, caused Impa to struggle for breath. Swallowing, she said nothing as she searched for words. Wanting to answer the weighted inquiry without saying the wrong thing, she spoke softly and with deliberate hesitation. "I think you are a woman who has endured much in her life. I think you've experienced evil in a way which should be impossible, yet unfortunately occurs every day. I think you were forced to be an adult at much too young an age. I think many things. Yet...none of this is what you want to hear, is it?"

A gentle push against her mind allowed air to pass her constricted throat. Zelda shook her head in affirmation. She turned her gaze to the muscled, black-clad arms wrapped loosely around her. Everything became dark as she closed her eyes, trying to remain in the present. "No, I-I...what d-do you...as your..." Trailing off, she shivered once more, unable to escape the past.
"Look at me," Impa said softly as she tilted Zelda's head up. When slivers of haunted green jewels focused on her, she stared into them without indecision or hesitation. "I love you. What that means to you is something I can only try to comprehend. You are my Charge, before anything else. I will protect you, always, no matter what we call ourselves…even from myself if need be.

"I know that even before today you were searching for a word to explain us." In an attempt to resist the urge to run her thumb over Zelda's swollen, bitten lips, Impa ran a hand through her long hair. "You are my sesha, the other half of my soul. To Sheikah, this word stands above all others. Our language is one of emotion, not logistics. No, don't apologize. Even though we all live in Hyrule, our races have their own cultures…their own societies. Because of this, the word I use to explain our…" Searching for a non-presumptuous explanation, she smiled as Zelda giggled at her inability to speak. "-romantic relationship doesn't carry the same weight for you and other Hylians as it does myself and the remaining Sheikah.

"I am your partner. Is that a safe word? Ok…partner. I am your lover in the sense that my heart and soul belong to you. Many words you would use to describe people in a romantic relationship can be used to describe us if taken outside their literal meaning. You affectionately called Link 'mate' as a child, and it had nothing to do with sex."

"But what do you…think of me?" Pain fell from her despondent words as tears burned new paths her cheeks once more. "Why do you want me?"

"I love you. Not the lies he told you, and there is nothing behind my words. No double meanings, no lies, nothing. Only love. I want to be with you because I love you, just as I always have. My love's evolved over time, this is true, but it's still love."

Silent once more, Zelda broke their gaze and stared at the cold soup as molten steel boiled within her stomach, coating her throat and mouth with metallic shavings. Frustration bloomed around her bleeding heart, spurring her anger. "That's not what I mean and you know it! You can say all the pretty words you want but you're still avoiding my question!"

"What is your question?" Impa asked softly. "I don't understand what you want me to say."

"How can you love a whore like me?" Zelda screeched, her voice breaking half-way through. Healers ran from the back rooms only to turn around when they saw her fiery scowl.

"You aren't a whore," Impa told her without pause. Her voice was firm as she continued to run a steady hand through the dark-gold locks. "You were abused, none of it was your choice."

"But it was! I lied to you and begged him to-"

"Zelda, listen to me! He used your mind and heart against you, brainwashed you. He did things to every aspect of your being I can't even begin to fathom. In no way was any of this your fault."

"I begged him," came the snarled response through clenched teeth.

"Why?"

Having been prepared for an argument, Zelda blinked on confusion. Her scowl became a frown as she furrowed her brows. "Why what?"

"Why did you beg him?"

"Because I wanted to."
"I might not have been there, but I'm here now. I don't need the bond to know you are lying."

Once more, no words were spoken as tension sparked from the silent challenge. Coaxing the righteous fires to burn once more, long doused by injustice, was dangerous yet necessary. It was something Impa knew would have to occur sooner rather than later. As Zelda met her eyes with defiance, she held her breath.

"No, you weren't there," the Queen spat as whispered lies twisted with the truth. Everything she believed, everything she had known to be true became ripped apart with the simple logic of the Shadow Sage, torturing her aching soul. "But I was! I wanted him to do those things to me! I begged him, I begged him not to stop!" she insisted as she poured memory upon memory through the bond. When Impa gasped in pain as blood trickled from her nose, she felt something within her, long quelled beneath a sadistic leash, snap free.

"I begged him to hurt me! I begged him to use me, rape me, kill me! I begged him to take me! I asked for it, all of it! I am a whore, his whore! Don't tell me what didn't happen, don't tell me what I'm not because you don't know! You weren't there, no one was there! No one but ME! Not you, not Link, not any one! Me, me and still me! Me and Ganondorf and his minions, the people he let use his toy! But not you, you were never there!"

Her chest heaved as she fought for air, her heart thundering under her ribs. "You weren't there, you don't know! You didn't know, I made sure of it! He asked me what I wanted and I told him! I went to him willingly, I let him fuck me until I almost bled to death! So don't tell me what you know, because you're wrong!"

Wiping her nose, Impa barely flinched as Zelda kicked the tray from the bed, sending it crashing to the floor. The wooden bowl cracked as it bounced across the room, breaking into three jagged pieces. So focused on each other, neither noticed the apprentice Twili run to clean the mess.

"Why did you beg him? What made you ask for what he did?"

"But I DID!"

"Like hell you did! So help me Din, I will show you the truth if it's the thing I do!"

"I know the truth!"

"You know what he wanted you to know—lies!"

"I know that he was right!" Zelda howled. A deathly hush fell over the ward. Both labored for breath as her words echoed through the empty treatment facility, a knife to their exposed throat.

"And just what," Impa hissed as she narrowed her eyes, "do you mean by that?"

Her tan face was blanched from injury and fatigue, the toll of her rage taxing her recovering body too far. And still Zelda did not back down. With violent movements, she freed herself from Impa's lax embrace and stood on shaking legs. When the other woman followed her towards the door, she swung around. "What do you think I meant?" she snarled through the bond, her voice silenced by conflicting emotions.

"I think you meant that you believe all people view you as...something to be used," Impa said
quietly, her eyes narrowing further as her blood boiled at the mere thought.

"I know they do. And I know it's true," Zelda added as she turned away once more.

"How can you know that?" Impa questioned sharply as she laid a hand upon the retreating shoulder. The nearly unfelt tremor under her fingers caused her to take several deep breaths.

She had done this for a reason, she reminded herself.

That reason was not to release her own anger.

"Because I've seen it!" the wounded, bleeding woman screeched as she faced the warrior behind her. "I see it now!" Scrubbing angrily - clumsily - at the useless tears blurring her vision, she cursed her inability to control such reactions. Her voice, strong just seconds before, cracked under the weight of her attempt to keep her thoughts silent. "I see it every time we wake each other up and end up rolling around. I saw it that day you caught me in the shower...what, you thought I didn't remember? Fuck you Impa! I see it in your eyes, the fire, the need!

"I see your eyes glowing, see you shaking as you fight not to give in!" Howling, she allowed golden energy to spill from her, causing the destruction she couldn't do to herself. Beds upturned as tables and nightstands exploded. Wall sconces and other sources of light flared to life, the wicks burned to ash within moments. Fear poured from her in sickly blue waves, merging with the golden sea tearing the infirmary apart. "I see and hear every thought Impa! You might not know I hear and see, but I do! When I go to bed after you, I hear you whisper my name, moaning in your sleep!"

Purple ether surrounded the ward, locking the devastation within the four walls. She sent a warning to Midna, telling her to keep all others away as the tightened the Shadows which struggled to contain Time and Light. The fabric of reality began to shimmer around them, threatening to rip as Zelda's walls continued to crumble. Each word her Queen spoke was a blow to her soul yet she stood tall, held in place by her love.

"I can feel you burning," Zelda screamed as an unnatural wind whipped around them. A funnel of magic surrounded them, the room engulfed within a cyclone. She noticed nothing as she stared at the softly glowing, somber red eyes of her beloved. "I know he was right, I know! I see the looks! I know why everyone keeps trying to marry me off, I'm not stupid. Link is the only one who—"

Choking, she screamed once more.

"The only one who what, sesha?" Impa asked softly. "Who doesn't look at you like an object, but like a person?"

"YES!"

There was no time to stop the memory, propelled by Impa's pain. It ripped through the bond and tore a bitter laugh from Zelda's broken heart. "I told you, what you saw wasn't what happened! He was helping me resist the call! I was being summoned to Ganondorf, and he helped me stay home! He kissed me, pretended to touch me...and hated every Goddess-damned second of it! In case you haven't noticed, he's gay! Always has been, always will be. I begged him for things that still makes him sick, and he told me no. He was strong enough to order me to stay with him, strong enough that I obeyed him and not that vile beast!"

"And he's the only one who doesn't see you like an object?"

"Yes."

"And what. About. Me? I wasn't allowed to help you like Link was, you wouldn't let me. But damn
it all Zelda, I am not Ganondorf, I am not any of them! I told you, my head and heart sit above my hips!"

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"I had hoped it would."

"Fuck you!"

"That's what you accuse me of without giving me a chance to defend myself!" Impa roared. They stood in a place of muted light, their words carried through the nothingness. Reality became an area outside of Time, outside of creation to a place only the Goddesses themselves could enter.

"It's not an accusation, it's truth!"

"Says you! Now it's my turn! Do I want you; yes. I told you that yesterday. What I want is your heart, your mind and soul. Your body is something I know you aren't ready to give, and I sure as hell not going to ask for it. No, it's my turn to talk. You asked me this yesterday, and without a word of explanation, ran off when you didn't get the answer you wanted. I am trying to understand, please believe that. But my inability to understand does not give you the right to call me a sadistic rapist!"

Zelda instinctively took a step back and hugged herself, the truth of her words like a slap. Sucking in a deep breath, she felt her rage shatter, leaving behind nothing but pain and desolation. Without a word, she returned her fallen gaze to Impa as the older woman paced and continued to speak.

"You say 'fuck you', trying to piss me off so I'll hurt you. I'm pissed off, royally, as some would say, and I know I've said something to hurt you...I can see it on your face. But I will not—do you hear me?—will not raise a hand at you. There are times I take your arm, or lay a hand on your shoulder to get you to stay...but I will not restrain you. Not unless you're hurting yourself or others. Nor will I strike you. Even when we spar, my intentions are not to hurt you. And never will they be.

"Let's get some things straight. No matter how many times you ask me something, I'm not going to hate you or get annoyed. What angered me was the fact that you lied and refused to listen to me. I know you don't understand, and I'm trying to respect that...so respect that I also have a right to speak. I'm not angry at you for what he did to you, it wasn't your fault. I'm angry that, instead of going to someone last night, you ran off. I'm angry that you tried to kill yourself instead of asking for help."

As she drew a breath, Zelda spoke quickly. "I couldn't talk to anyone. It was too loud...I didn't hear anything."

"The whispers?"

Nodding, Zelda hugged herself tighter. Exhaustion swept through her as she forced herself to remain standing. "They're...him. All of them. Everything they said to me. Or would've said. Telling me things...things I have no reason not to believe," she added with a scornful glare.

"You do have a reason not to believe them. You just can't see it yet."

"You lied to me yesterday."

"I did not. I told you the complete truth."
"You tactfully evaded my question, yesterday and today, with sappy spiels about love."

Sighing in exasperation, Impa ran a hand through her hair. "I told you the truth. What more do you want?"

"I want to know why I should trust—" Biting her tongue, she lowered her eyes yet again, mentally scolding herself to slipping in her words.

Realization dawned within Impa's mind in seconds. Irrational and inappropriate giggles bubbled in her chest. Pushing them down, she shook her head and sighed softly. "Why didn't you just say that?"

"Because...you wouldn't have answered me. You don't tell me the truth!"

Shaking her head, she extended a hand without stepping forward. "Please...come here. I won't hurt you. I want to show you something."

Reason flowed from her mind in rapid pulses as the pain of her self-inflicted wounds made itself known. Indecision warred within her as she flicked her eyes between Impa's hand and face. Her softly spoke assurance meant nothing to the young woman; empty words, she believed. Pretty lies, but pretty doesn't make them any less empty. She had submitted to Ganondorf, but she would not submit again.

Not if she could help it.

Seeing the reluctant yet defiant spark dimming Zelda's eyes, Impa dropped her hand. Wishing there were someone or something to guide her, the Sheikah lowered her eyes for a moment.

What to do?

Taking a deep breath, she reached through the dense curtains of confusion. A breath of fresh summer air, the strength of everything that was and could never be changed surged through her.

Zelda might not understand the truth of her love, but she did. She knew that Nayru had given all her children the chance to create unbreakable connections. Pure love, no matter its form; faith and hope; loyalty.

The white fires of her love burned within her heart, cutting through her crippling grief.

Yes, the one who was her world had been hurt. Yes, she had been unable to stop it. But now was not the time to focus on what she hadn't been able to do. Now was the time to see what she could do.

Closing her eyes, she hummed the Lullaby and opened the bond. Slowly at first, a trickle of emotion cut a path through the darkness which had eclipsed Zelda's being. Like the first drops of a spring storm, each streak of emotion left pulsing white paths through the suffocating fog. Rays of silver hope wrapped around the hands which choked life from the unwilling. As the last door was steadily opened, an unhurried flow of love, pure as the Golden Goddesses had intended, pushed the consuming taint away.

"Master" was dead, Impa eyes said as she opened them. Meeting the shocked gaze of her beloved, she smiled softly and spread her hands to show she wasn't a threat. "His body is gone, yet he is still hurting you. Without his body, he is powerless. I can't change the past, keta, my sesha. I wish I could...but even you do not have the power to do that, not like you want. Let me help you now. Please. Let me be your strength...your sword and shield against the monsters you still fight.
"Let me help you live rather than merely survive," she voiced, her unwavering gaze a beacon in the white nothingness around them.

The Goddesses watched, weeping with happiness as another of their children took the offered hand. So many they had lost to the monsters which tried to break their greatest creations. Love, free will, choice...these were things which were meant for all beings. Though it tore their hearts when another of their sons or daughters fell into the hands of one who opposed these natural rights, they took comfort in the knowledge that some, like their daughter Zelda, accepted the help of those who loved her.

Hesitant without a doubt.

Quite possibly even regretting of her decision to do so.

But accepting none the less.

Ignorant of the triad, both women said nothing as they waited. Her heart in her throat, Zelda swallowed and hugged herself tighter as she took a step forward.

"This is what I wanted to show you," Impa breathed. Her words clung to each other and wrapped around Zelda's mind, soothing the muted screams. She watched the Sage of Time take a step closer and opened her arms in invitation. "This is what I feel for you, my love. Whatever you call it does not change what I feel. My body is a vessel, a shell for my mind and soul, for my being. What you're feeling now is what I've felt for you since you were born. Love. Joy. Happiness. Hope. Faith. A list of emotions which all stem from love, all of which are pure. My intention has been, is and always will be to protect you.

"A fleeting feeling of lust does not constitute love. What was done to you, the lies they told you, is not love. It does not come from the white light the Goddesses have created us from. I will not hurt you; every action I take is born from my love. Nothing more, nothing less. My anger is at the injustice of what happened, not you. And at your actions, yes, but never you as a person. Pull it apart; see everything I'm showing you for what it truly is."

The battle between what she had known as truth for others fought against the proof Impa was giving her. Without notice, she took yet another step forward. Could both be true? Were evil and Impa not? But...how? How could she be the one exception the rule?

"I'm not," Impa murmured as the thought slipped into her mind. "They were the exceptions to the rule. There is evil in the world, but in comparison to all those who harbor no such darkness, it is smaller than you'd think. Nothing you did caused them to abuse you. Only they caused what happened."

She moved without thought, her body deciding to believe. Within moments she was inches from Impa's outstretched arms. Her own arms, throbbing with pain, wrapped tighter around her. Closing the remaining distance between them, she laid her head on the older woman's shoulder. Taking several deep breaths, she closed her eyes and forced her knotting muscles to relax.

"May I hug you?" Zelda heard her whisper. Nodding, she kept her head in place as strong arms wrapped around her. Biting her tongue, she swallowed a whimper as she tensed once more. When the arms loosened, she gulped air. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"You've done nothing wrong." Impa pressed a kiss to Zelda's hair as she released the breath she'd been holding. "Nothing at all." Laying her cheek atop the Light Queen's head, she closed her eyes and fell silent.
For now, there was nothing to say.

Their embrace said it all.
Life Starts Now (II)

Their return to the Infirmary was much the same as how the left. Once Zelda was settled into a guest chamber and sleeping, Impa searched for Midna. Before she could apologize for the destruction, the Twilight Queen raised a hand.

"I understand," Midna said without warning. "It's not my place to know details, nor will I ask for them. No one was harmed. Better she break furniture in need of replacing than hurt herself again, hm? I thought so. Besides," she added with a grin, "the work will be good for everyone."

Smiling in thanks, Impa returned to the temporary quarters she shared with the Hylian. After taking a moment to write two notes and send them via a Shadow, she went in search of food. While much time might not have passed since their departure, neither had eaten more than a few bites since the night before.

Locking the door behind her, she caught sight of Navi's fairy form speeding through the corridor. Deciding to follow it, she hoped the woman in spirit form was leading her in the right direction.

[-]

Shad read Impa's letter to Link, who fought the end of his fever. Both men smiled despite their worry. Though vague, the note told them what they wanted to know: both women were alive, safe and together.

Unlike the vague note to the young men, Mikal Evat received a detailed letter. Lacking in formality, it told him what had happened in the past eighteen hours and that he had the permission of the Queen and her Maderone to fabricate whatever story he wished to maintain Zelda's privacy.

As his letter turned to ash in the fireplace, he was lifting his own pen in reply. His story would be simple and partially true; the Queen, under medical advisement, had taken an immediate leave of the country for her health.

None would question his word.

[-]

The days passed in a blur of tears and smiles. Pain, fear, love and joy flowed between the couple as they struggled to adjust with their new knowledge. Within the following days, Impa had proven what she had always claimed: she was not perfect. Like everyone, she made mistakes in her words and actions, often times without any indication she had done so. Only the sight of tears told her she had done wrong, tears which often came moments too late. She did the best she could to walk the unseen line between Zelda's sanity and the demons which haunted her.

Nearly two weeks had cycled since they had entered the Twilight Palace. Recovered from the food poisoning, Link had convinced Shad he was more than well enough to visit his sister. He updated both women on the current goss—er, news. The young Hero also delivered letters from various people, laughing as the majority of them were thrown into the fire with barely a glance at the sender's name. When Zelda begged time with Midna (for girl talk without Impa in attendance, she
explained) Impa seized the opportunity.

Who knew more about Zelda's mind on the subject of her abuse than anyone?

Link.

Taking a deep breath, she ran a hand through her hair and allowed her smile to fall. The emotion needed to fuel such a smile left when Zelda closed the door. Meeting Link's eyes, she allowed her stoic mask to crack. She waited for him to speak, unable to find the words she needed to express her thoughts.

Seeing the glimmer of confusion and pain on Impa's face, Link sighed softly. "How is everything, really?"

"It could be worse."

A sad smile turned the corners of their mouths as Link chuckled. "It could be. Be thankful it's not."

"I am, very much so." Swallowing, she met his blue eyes one again. "I don't know what to do," she whispered.

"Trial and error," he murmured. "Most of the time I don't know either."

"But you were there for her..."

Sky blue pools clouded with haunting memories. Pain dilated his pupils, further darkening the rings of azure. His hand tightened around his mug of hot cocoa. "I was," he whispered. Disgust poured from his words as his knuckles turned white. "I was there. And I hated it. I wish I hadn't been...but she needed me. The things he did to her mind...the places she goes..." Shaking his head, he sat back and looked away. He stared at the flames, willing them to burn away the truth which was branded into his very soul.

"We call them slips. Sometimes it was a call...sometimes a trigger. She would slip in her control over everything. By slipping, she thought she could control what was happening. If she asked, then she wanted it. It meant the pain was her fault. Me and you, we know it's not true. He would have never given her control. He broke something in her...something I tried and probably failed to put back together. You want me to tell you how to help her. It would take me years to tell everything. Because it took years to learn. I'm still learning.

"There's no book, no scrolls, no expert to go to. There's no one to slap your hand and tell you to do it again. You try something, and if it's wrong, you go on to your next idea. Trial and error. What works one time might not work the next. She might ask you, beg you with death in her eyes, and you have to decide if you should give in or not. Or if it would be better to be another person to who takes her control."

Her breath hitched as his black eyes met hers, hatred burning with the depths. Impa stared at the man, jaded by war and hardened by the torture of his sister. "Do you know," she heard him growl, "how many times she begged me to do things I thought was physically impossible?"

"She will look you in the eyes, lost in her own mind, and tell you what she thinks she wants. She will do everything in her power, expect force, to manipulate you. At first, she just wanted what everyone thinks of when they think of torture. Broken bones, blood, screams. But then, that went away. I watched her get used to 'regular' torture as his...games...became more sadistic. I watched the hope die in her, watched her shy away from everyone who would have helped her in a heartbeat if they knew."
"Now it's not about breaking her body, it's about using it. It's about...giving her a reason to believe it's her fault. She wants everyone to hurt her, to be like him, because then he didn't lie. That no one loves her, everyone will hurt her and she will be powerless and worthless. She will try to arouse you, try to make what he did to her seem...erotic," he spat as he stood. Pacing, he searched the room for something stronger to drink than cocoa. Finding a bottle of whiskey, he sat it on the table, emptied his mug in the fire, and poured two fingers. After taking a hearty gulp, he stood and began pacing once more. ignoring the rising scents of burnt chocolate and ash.

"I still have nightmares about what she showed me...what she tried to get me to do. And some part of me wanted to take her pain away. It would be easy, right? Wrong. Fuck-ing wrong! Damn him! She craves him like a junkie. He's been dead for over a year and she still hears him, still feels him. He was her everything for years, that doesn't go away overnight."

Impa said nothing as Link's pacing sped. She listened, wishing it were lies and knowing it wasn't. She clenched her hands in her lap, her nails digging into her palms as the horror gnawed at her heart.

"Like I said, it's a choice. Give in, don't give in, or take the whole situation from her. Be her 'master' without being like him." Without warning, he met her gaze. His eyes tore, so full of rage and pain, held hers without hesitation or resistance. "She wants you beat and rape her...fine. Slap her hands a few times, until the sound of her hand hitting hers, of the sight of your skin reddening hers, makes you stop. It'll only take a few times before you want to cut your hand off. And then...pretend you want her." When she gasped, he chuckled bitterly. "What he did to her wasn't just painful. He was gentle sometimes...caring, it seems. Or so she told and showed me. She'd come home some nights without a speck of blood or bruise on her, looking as if she were in love.

"And then I'd see the shattered soul in her and know he pretended. He broke her by pretending to love her. No amount of pain could have done that. Zelda's too damn stubborn. But being nice, being gentle and loving and caring if she 'enjoyed' herself shattered her. She when she asked for the pain, you have to trick her. That is what you saw the day you found us. She's my sister, and neither of us are attracted to the opposite sex," he said with a scoff.

"I ran my hands over her icy skin and watched the terror consume her until she couldn't hear him yelling for her to leave the castle. I kissed her until she pushed me away, silently screaming for me not to hurt her. Then I held her as she cried, begging me not to tell you. Staring at me, pleading with me to tell her it was an act. And it was." He shuddered and rubbed his hands, trying to remove the body's memory of the necessary actions from his cells. "Sometimes it happened several times a day, others once or twice a month. Sometimes she just wanted to be told what to do...others she wanted to be treated worse than an animal."

Silence reigned as he stared at the wall, his back to the pale Sheikah. She pondered his words for a long while. It wasn't until Zelda's mind brush hers, telling her without words that she and Midna would be returning later than expected, that she was pulled from her thoughts. Smiling, she touched her fingers to her temple. When she turned her attention to Link once more, she sighed softly and allowed her smile to fall away.

"When was the last time these...slips happened?"

Sitting in his chair, Link ran a hand through his messy hair. "The last one was the day before she...ran away. She had a flashback," he mumbled as he averted his gaze.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"It was..." he trailed off and glanced at her, unable to meet her eyes, knowing she would see the
truth written upon his face.

"It was about me," she whispered. "She had a flashback after something I did or said."

"Not purposefully."

"That doesn't change the fact that I was the cause."

"Guilt isn't going to help. Trust me," Link admonished softly. "And it won't help. You couldn't have known."

"I'm not guilty. Do you know what it was that...what's the word?" Impa asked.

"Trigger," he supplied.

"That triggered her?" she continued.

Pouring another finger of the amber alcohol, Link stared at the liquid as he swirled his cup. "Yes."

"Will you tell me?" she asked quietly. She watched him raise the depressant to his lips and take a swallow, Longing filled her as she watched him pour another drink. Shaking her head, she reminded herself that the drug induced numbness would help none of them.

"Do you have to know?" he wondered aloud as he met her eyes. He pushed the bottle towards her and shrugged when she pushed it back, shaking her head once more.

"I'd like to know."

"It was after you told her about Eldora and Kelen."

"What else? What aren't you saying?"

Their gazes met in challenge once more. Reluctance and desperation met with a tangible force of wills. The need to blink broke their battle of defiance. As Link drained his cup once more, he flicked his gaze at Impa. "Everyone telling her to get married...it's driving her crazy. She thinks she owes you something. Even if two women can't have children, she still thinks sex is a necessity," he growled as he focused on the fire. "After everything she's been through...she can't see how it isn't. Any conversation lasting longer than a few seconds about marriage triggers her."

"She wouldn't be free," Impa speculated quietly. "She would be bound to someone else..."

Shrugging, Link closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "All I know is that you need to talk to her about it. While you've been gone, there's been a lot of people wanting to meet with her about marriage. And her being 'ill' doesn't stop them."

"They won't stop until-" Breaking off, she closed her eyes. Rubbing her head, she muttered to herself as her head throbbed with pain.

He watched her with a sardonic expression. "And there, dear Impa, is the problem."

Peeking at him, she glowered. Weren't pompous-natured aristocrats the ones who caused their current topic of discussion, she asked without words.

Tilting his head in defeat, he closed his eyes again. Yes, they were, he responded just as silently.

Sighing softly, Impa allowed her hooded eye to shut once more. Mumbling to herself, she felt the
stillness of the room lull her into much needed rest.

Floating in the alcohol induced haze, Link felt his lips twitch as his tense muscles uncoiled. Something told him they would need their energy. He knew without looking at her that Impa agreed.

They didn't know how correct they were.

[-]

Midna ran behind Zelda, trying to catch her as she chased Navi's ball of light self. Shrieking with laughter, the Queen of Hyrule avoided the Queen of Twilight's grasp. Darting around various workers, the two women ran through the corridors. Navi giggled as she lead them towards Link, following the pulse of the Triforce of Courage.

"Zelda, will you slow down?!" Midna gasped as she narrowly avoided running into a Twili twice her size.

"Nah-o," Zelda yelled. Her child-like voice ran through the halls as she continued to chase the fairy. Jumping into the air to catch the little spirit, she pouted when Navi flew higher. "No fair!"

"Catch me Zelda," Navi called as she flew around a corner and disappeared from sight.

"I'm trying," Zelda whined as followed the bending halls. So focused on trying to find Navi, she didn't notice Link until she ran into him. "Hey, watch it!" she cried as she started to fall.

Swallowing a laugh, Link wrapped an arm around Zelda to keep her standing and quickly stepped back once she was steady. He glanced at Impa who appeared to be both shocked and amused.

The childish voice coming from Zelda's mouth did little to help Impa's confusion. She stared at the Hylian Queen as she berated the Hero for being in her way. When Link quietly admonished her as one would a child, the Sheikah Maderone felt her head spin. What was happening? Flicking her eyes to Link, she wondered if he had answers.

"She's just having fun," Midna said as she panted. Clutching her stomach, she looked between the trio. Smiling at Impa, she nodded to Zelda who continued to berate her brother despite the accident having been her fault. "We all have our childish moments…she just has fun taking it to the extreme."

Nodding slowly, Impa returned her gaze to her Charge. Looking closely, she noticed the mischievous sparkle in Zelda's eyes and the slight smirk which twitched her lips. "I see," she said softly.

Abandoning her futile attempt of chastising Link, Zelda turned her attention to Impa. Without hesitation, she threw her arms around the other woman's neck and hugged her. Giggling, she pressed a kiss to her cheek before pulling back. "So…did ya miss me?"

Blinking in shock, Impa mutely nodded. Who was this woman and where was Zelda? Glancing at Link, she saw him roll his eyes towards the ceiling and try not to laugh.

"What brought this on?" she asked her love mentally while speaking aloud. "And of course I missed you. I always miss you."

Zelda glanced at Midna and stuck her tongue out. "She laughed at me." Midna's fiery eyes rolled in mock-exasperation. As Zelda continued, giving the other Queen no chance to defend herself. The
Time Sage pouted as she turned her gaze to her mate once more. "We were walking through the village, and I saw a flower. It looked like irises that grow in my garden…and I picked it. I was homesick. When I smelled it, I started bouncing around. I didn't know the Twilight energy didn't change plants. So I got a bit over-excited…"

"More like childishly gleeful," Midna snarked with a smile.

"Same difference."

With a sigh of mock annoyance, Impa loosely around an arm around Zelda's waist and kisses her forehead. "There's nothing wrong with being excited or acting like child, keta."

"See," Zelda drawled as she looked at Midna and Navi. "Told you!"

With a giggle, Navi flew around her head and pretended to bounce on her hair. The more Zelda swatted at her, the more she acted out. It wasn't until Zelda caught her wings and held her as one would a bug that she stopped. Pouting, she waited for Midna to free her before resuming her humanoid form.

"Are you ready to go home?" Link asked softly as he looked at his family, his eyes settling on Impa and Zelda.

Biting her lip, Zelda felt her childlike enthusiasm drain from her.

Was she ready

Without a word, she lapsed into deep thought. The wounds on her arms had healed enough that she could return to her duties as Queen…but what of her spirit? Could she return to the land that held so many painful memories and not lose herself in depression once more?

When Impa laced their fingers together, the Hylian tilted her head to look at the Sheikah. Cocooned in her arms and blanketed by the warmth of her strong body, her felt her insecurities lessen. Though the reality of what she would face upon their return frightened her, she knew this time she wouldn't be alone.

Not with her mate and brother at her side.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "I think…I think I am. What about you?" she asked Impa softly.

"It's up to you."

"Do you want to go back?"

"Only if you're ready, my love. Hyrule, the Sage Chamber or the Twilight realm, our location doesn't matter as long as I'm with you."

Navi mentally cooed at the romantic words. Pressing a kiss to Link's cheek, she dragged Midna away to give their guests time to themselves.

Squeeze Zelda's hand gently, Impa lowered her arms. "Come…let's talk." With a glance at Link, she smiled. "All of us."

They entered the room together, hands either clasped together or on another's shoulder. The click of the door latch hitting home was much like a bell in the schoolyard. Their chaotic thoughts settled into an uneasy silence as they looked at one another. When Link's hand fell from the door, he
smiled sadly.

Before they began talking, all knew the decision was already made: Impa and Zelda would be returning to Hyrule.

The only question was when they would leave the Twilight realm.

And more importantly…

What would happen next?

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Master of the Universe by Sick Puppies
TW: A possible trigger warning for Link's interaction with Zelda. It will be fully explained in the chapter itself. This is reminiscent of a Dominant/Submissive relationship. In NO way is this a D/S story. This part of the chapter is merely to explain another aspect of how Link aids Zelda, and will also help everyone understand something that will happen later in the story.

Chapter Thirteen

Smoke Screen

[-]

TW: A possible trigger warning for Link's interaction with Zelda. It will be fully explained in the chapter itself. This is reminiscent of a Dominant/Submissive relationship. In NO way is this a D/S story. This part of the chapter is merely to explain another aspect of how Link aids Zelda, and will also help everyone understand something that will happen later in the story.

[-]

Their return to the golden land was nothing short of a joyous scandal. In the three weeks they had been gone, rumors had flourished to an exponential degree. Though most were ecstatic for their Queen's return and pleased she was in good health once more, many were speculative of the true reason she had left.

The extra week Impa and Zelda had used to prepare themselves for their return did nothing to prime them for what awaited them. While none spoke rudely to either woman, the hostile expressions and hidden conversations told the couple more than any words ever could. Nary had an hour passed upon their return before the first of the rumors reached their ears.

The gossip only grew when Zelda made the decision to eliminate the House of Lords and Ladies less than a week after their homecoming. Since there was no longer a system of aristocracy, she told them, there was no need for a governing body which ensured they were treated better than other citizens of Hyrule. After the death of the previous Queen, many of the titled families in the land had either moved away or began to die off as Ganondorf rose to power.

In essence, the House was a legislative body with a personal agenda. They served no purpose, agreed several of her most trusted Advisors. Though the social classes remained, no longer was there a defining hierarchy based solely on names. Because of this, the House was disbanded.

Shortly after, the Parliament was absorbed into the High Council. Protests rose through the members of both political bodies, yet neither dared challenge the Queen. Something within her had changed, they all knew. Their protests became quiet murmurs of disapproval when shredding the parchment, which bared her signature to impliment the decision, was faced with charges of treason.

She reminded them with a voice of steel that she was not her father and would not tolerate useless
people detracting from her mission. Hyrule came first, she told them with a soft growl, and because of this, she was going to continue to eliminate any obstacles which stood in the way of the country's re-growth. That included any person or political party which hindered her ability to care for the country in any way.

It was the integration which held Queen Zelda Nohansen's thoughts hostage. She drummed her fingers on the desk in annoyance as her repetitive thoughts threatened to consume the entire day. The inability to think of anything except the recent dismemberment or merging of the political bodies created agitation within her.

Maybe it was because the House and Parliament had taken their changes too quietly. Despite their protests and a few members' rebellious actions with her written orders, few had challenged her. Another possibility was the sudden silence from her Adviseors. None save Advisor Mikal had spoken with her for more than a few brief moments since her return.

And yet…no matter what reason she found for her agitation, her thoughts continued. A constant cycle, she recalled everything from her initial decision to disband the groups to when the last name had been crossed from the scrolls listing each former member. As she twirled her pen, she stared at the open doors leading to the corridor. Why was this bothering her so? It wasn't regret. She knew her choice had been a good one for the country. If she admitted the truth to herself, it had also been a selfish one. Yet even the slightly selfish nature behind her verdict did not inspire regret.

Could it be grief? No… While the House and Parliament had been well-managed bodies throughout history, their recent performance had done little to endear her to them. She wouldn't grieve for what had been lost when she was only a child.

"What is it?" she questioned aloud as she cradled her head in her hands. Her fingers brushed the gold leaves of her headdress. Wincing as her head began to throb, she removed the circlet and laid it on the desk. Without a thought, the Queen unbound her hair and ran her hands through the locks.

Smiling softly to himself, Link watched Zelda sigh in relief as she abandoned several of her customary status symbols. Beside the simplistically ornate diadem was a matching ornament which kept her long braid bound. "They're going to fall of the desk," he told her as she laid her gloves atop the metal adornments.

"I don't care," she replied as she crossed her arms and rested her head upon them. Her hair was unbound save the two locks in the front pooled around her face, hiding it from view. "I just want to rest."

"Is everything ok?" he asked as he sat in the chair opposite her.

"No. I can't stop thinking about the disbanding."

Frowning, he reclined slightly. Like Zelda, he knew she had made the correct decision in eliminating the unnecessary groups. "What do you feel?"

"Anxious," came the muffled reply. "Like I'm waiting for something. Link?"

"Yes?"

"Do me a favor?"

"Maybe."

Her lips twitched as she made her request without lifting her head. "Will you get Mikal?"
Brushing his fingers over the top of her head, he nodded. "I think I know where he is. What about Impa?"

"She's…busy."

The words, spoken with hesitation and filled with amusement, made Link raise an eyebrow. "Busy?" he parroted.

Barely lifting her head, she nodded. "Busy."

"Doing what?"

"Things," she replied as she laid her head back down. "Now…go get Mikal like you promised."

As the clock chimed thrice, the Hero frowned once more. "Have you eaten today?"

"Mmhm."

"Zelda…" He trailed off, his warning clear. He drew his shoulders back and narrowed his eyes. An air of superiority and supremacy leaked off him as he stared at her.

He knew she knew he was not making a request. He was demanding an answer.

With a sigh, she sat straight once more. Without looking at him, she spoke softly. Bending to the side as she answered, she lifted her gloves which had fallen as he'd predicted. "I had ground DekuNut and milk for breakfast."

Her eye twitched as she unconsciously twisted her hands together. Anxiety burned her throat as bile churned in her stomach. She knew he would be displeased by her answer. Acidic tears stung her roving eyes as she saw his reaction within her mind.

A lie sprung in her mind. Maybe if she told him she'd eaten lunch…but no, he would know it was a lie. A whimper bubbled in her chest as she placed a hand over her throat. She knew without a doubt that this would not go unpunished. Fear stole much-needed oxygen from her lungs and caused her world to spin. Dizzy with the need to cower before the man standing above her, she bit her lip and forced herself to remain still.

Best not give him more reason to be angry.

"And what time was that?" he asked sternly. A thousand thoughts ran through his mind as he stared at her trembling form. He longed to comfort her, to ease her fears, yet he knew he couldn't. Not now. Not when she needed him to stand firm. He knew being Queen as something which wore on her. The authority of her position tore her already shredded soul asunder, forcing her deeper into her healing than she should be.

But that was no excuse. Having a position of political authority or not, he could and would not allow her to disregard her health.

When she didn't answer, he rapped his knuckles on the heavy wood between them. The Hero waited until his sovereign met his eyes before repeating the question.

Realizing she would be unable to avoid his inquisition, she swallowed. "Six."

"Six…a.m.?" At her nod, he growled softly. "Close the doors," he called to the Sheikah posted in
the corridor. His tone was infused with cold anger, his voice a knife to their ears. His command was one they followed without hesitation, far too aware of what lay ahead.

"My Queen?" one of the Sheikah Guards asked as the doors began to shut. He stepped forward and stared at Link with penetrating eyes.

They did not, and had never, approved of this - any of it.

"Leave," she told him as she lowered her gaze once more. "All of you...leave." Her voice trembled as she struggled to fight the submission Ganondorf had forced her into. She swallowed harshly as white-hot needles pinched her spine. Fear boiled in her veins and caused her heart to skip several beats as she stared at her desk through a veil of tears.

The Guards shared a single unreadable look before leaving the room without a word. Some things, no matter how despicable, had to commence to help the young woman.

It was, unfortunately, her choice.

Zelda didn't look up as Impa slipped into the room, carrying a tray of food. With pursed lips, she pressed her foot to the door until the latch caught with a nearly silent click. "What's wrong, sesha?" she questioned as she sat the tray beside the door. Worry filled her as she looked between her Charge and pseudo-son. The tension which poured off Link combined with the fear that escaped Zelda in waves set her teeth on edge.

Link extended an arm, stopping her from rounding the desk. With an apologetic glance at the Sage of Shadows, he shook his head. "Don't." Turning back to the Hylian woman before him, he firmed his expression once more. "Tell your Maderone when you last ate," he instructed.

He kept his eyes on the bowed head, his fists clenching tighter with each silent second that passed.

His voice was hard and unyielding to her ringing ears. Zelda all but whispered as she continued to stare at the parchment-littered desk under her trembling hands. "Six o'clock."

Filled with questions yet understanding now was not the time to ask, Impa said nothing as worry stirred in her heart. Swallowing her words, she waited for Link to speak.

And speak he did. A voice normally filled with mischievous happiness was now flooded with authority. Eyes which normally shone with joy narrowed in displeasure as he kept his gaze on Zelda's hunched form. "Raise your head." When she complied, he rapped his knuckles once more. "What have I told you?"

"I'm to take care of myself," she mumbled as she twisted her hands once more. Nervous energy became an icy fire in her veins. Where annoyance had previously fueled them, this energy was now run by droplets of fear.

His words were clipped and filled with rage; surely she was to be punished.

Nausea filled her at the thought of punishment. How had disobeying his orders seemed insignificant earlier in the day?

"Correct." Hating himself for what he had to do, of how he had to correct what had been done to her, he forced himself to continue. "And have you?"

"No," Zelda whispered. She rubbed her arms gently, the urge to open the healing wounds nearly too great to fight. The potions helped repair the damage, but...
Ghostly fingers inched over her skin and sent shivers down her spine. If only she could bleed, even if it was just a lit—

"Stop that!" Link ordered without pause. "Have I told you to hurt yourself?"

"No, M—Sir," she corrected quickly. "You haven't." She grabbed the arms of her chair to follow his order. Her muscles jumped as she fought the compulsion born within her long ago.

Hearing the word "sir" spill from Zelda's lips sent alarm bells ringing in Impa's mind. She narrowed her eyes and stared at the back of Link's head. This clearly wasn't a "slip", the times in which she lost touch with the present. "Link," she growled softly. "You have five seconds. Speak. Now."

Rage burned in her eyes as crimson iron filled her mouth. Her bitten tongue pressed against her cheek as she narrowed her eyes further. Who was he to dare speak to Zelda, the Queen of Hyrule and leader of the Sages, in such a manner? What gave him the right to command her and clearly act in a manner that terrified her Charge?

He raised a finger in a silent message to wait, uncaring that he was doing little to appease her anger. Zelda's health came before Impa's rage, just as it always would. "Since you've nearly disobeyed me, you will replace your gloves. After this, you will eat the meal your Maderone has brought you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir," the trembling woman whispered. She continued to look down as the blond man retrieved the tray and placed it before her. He remained beside the desk until she lifted the covers off the dishes, gloves in place. She knew without a doubt that her punishment was light and did not protest as she saw the variety of foods before her.

With barely a glance at Impa, he made his way to the opposite end of the office. His aching heart thundered beneath his ribs, threatening to break free as he swallowed his emotions.

Rage would do nothing, for Ganondorf was dead.

Guilt was not an option, as it would only feed Zelda's psychosis.

Even grief would gain him no positive response from his sister.

She did not need his disapproval, nor his self-hatred.

She needed his love and support.

At least, that's what he kept in mind as he heard Impa approach.

"Five seconds are up," she told him with a quiet snarl, her curled hands twitching as she fought the urge to strangle him. "Give me an explanation or Shad will be mourning." Her red eyes darkened with disgust as her wrath grew.

Staring out the windows at the sunlit market below, he spoke just as softly. "You know what he did to her. When she slips, she asks for 'Master'. Well, he's dead. And sometimes she is still...in the mindset of having or needing a 'Master', even if she isn't in a slip. It's not all the time. But when she's like this, overwhelmed and ignoring herself, she does.

"Zelda doesn't understand taking care of herself yet. She understands maintaining her body and keeping up appearances...but truly taking care of herself is something she has to relearn. She'd eat the bare minimum and nothing else if allowed. Anything else seems selfish or she thinks herself unworthy of 'extra' food. He indirectly trained her to do this...so a direct order to take care of
herself, along with a definition of what that means, and telling her to eat will come first in her mind. He never told her not to eat, but if I understand what's happened over the years, he made her feel unworthy of anything but necessities. Well...a direct command to eat properly basically 'over-rides' his indirect one."

Heavy silence fell between them as his words hung in the air. Impa's hands clenched and unclenched as she imagined the horrors her Charge, her love, had endured to get to the fragmented state of mind she was currently in.

"Does this happen often?" she asked quietly through gritted teeth. Like glaciers in Lake Hylia during the winter, awareness slowly made its way into her mind. Logic told her that Link had done what he had to help Zelda, not to harm her. A glance at the other Hylian told the Sheikah her Charge was eating, albeit, with clear hesitation. With a trembling sigh, she ran a hand over her eyes.

"Often enough. Not daily, but usually once a week...sometimes once every couple of weeks. It's rare to go more than two and a half weeks without her needing an order to function properly."

"And after she...obeys?" The Maderone choked on the last word, unable to see the independent Queen she had always known taking orders from anyone. Closing her eyes, she realized the woman she had always known was more than likely a mask; the true Zelda is the one she had seen in the past month.

"Yes," he murmured as he watched Zelda pick at her food. "Sometimes she questions an order, which is always good, and only once has she disobeyed... She later told me it was because someone could get hurt. I don't give her orders that could hurt her, Impa," he added as she narrowed her eyes once more. "Not intentionally anyway. If she's...in a slip, then I'll bring her out of it in any way I can if it keeps her safe. Otherwise, I just make sure she takes care of herself."

Zelda watched the subtle movement of Impa's shirt muscles tightened with her restraint. Swallowing, she looked between Link, who was facing her, and Impa, who was turned away. She knew they were discussing her and knew it was about what had just happened.

Her throat tightened as she blinked back tears.

How had the day gone so badly?

Sorrowful, she pushed her food around the plate with her fork. "Link," she called as she lifted her head slightly. "I'm done."

Without a word, he crossed the room and looked between her empty plate and the disturbed tray. "Very well."

"Are you mad at me?" she whispered as she transferred the dirty plate and utensils to the tray.

Impa watched silently as Link shook his head. Conflict warred within her. While she didn't approve this method of aiding her Charge, she knew suggesting it stop would be detrimental.

Taking several deep breaths, she reminded herself that Link had been helping Zelda for many years and had more knowledge than she when it came to Ganondorf's abuse. She didn't have to approve or even like how he helped his sister as long as it didn't cause her harm.

"I'm not mad," the Sheikah heard him say. She swallowed as something stirred within her stomach and heart. A vile taste coated her tongue as he continued to speak. What was this feeling? "What angered me was your deliberate ignorance of your body's needs." She barely listened to his words.
The feeling stirred once more as he laid a hand on the Hylian woman's cheek.

Her heart nearly leapt into her throat as Zelda nuzzled Link's calloused hand.

Blushing, Zelda looked at Impa. "I'm sorry, I...it's a habit." Taking several deep breaths, she allowed herself a moment to adjust to what had happened. Contentment filled her as she made the transition from what Ganondorf had made her - a slave - to what they wanted her to be - a person. As per usual, her eyes slid closed as she worked her way through the ensuing emotions.

Link watched Impa and frowned. Was that...jealousy in her eyes? Sighing softly, he ran a hand through his hair, feeling his own headache begin.

He could deal with evil, sadistic sorcerers trying to destroy the country while torturing his sister.

He could cope with trying to find the Sages while being chased by said evil sorcerer.

Heck, even helping his sister through the aftereffects of her torture was something he could do.

What he couldn't even think about handling was Impa's jealously.

Especially because what she seemed to be jealous of was not something either of them wanted for Zelda.

Impa ignored Link's frown and watched Zelda sink deeper into thought. She wasn't jealous...she didn't get jealous. And even if she did, she wasn't. She reminded herself that there was no reason to be jealous...if what she was feeling was jealousy, which it wasn't.

Impa's denial wormed its way into Zelda's mind, creating ripples in her emotions. Opening an eye, she smiled to herself. "You're jealous, Impa. Just because you think you're not doesn't mean you're not."

"I'm not," Impa replied with a sniff. "I have nothing to be jealous of."

Zelda looked at Link, who raised an eyebrow and rolled his eyes, which caused her to snort. She shook her head. "Love...you're jealous. I don't know what you're jealous of, but you're jealous of something. And considering that you're trying to drill holes in Link's back with your eyes, I'm guessing that it's him."

"I'm not jealous."

"Mhm. Right. How's your stomach feeling?"

Caught off guard, the Sheikah blinked her red eyes in confusion. "Well, I suppose."

Lifting a mug of tea, Zelda raised an eyebrow. "Want some?"

Impa shook her head as her stomach churned. Without thought, she placed a hand over it. "No thank you."

"Queasy are you?"

Narrowed her eyes once more, the older woman looked between the two friends. "I am not jealous."

Sharing a smile, Zelda and Link nodded to themselves. Without another word, the subject was dropped, though not forgotten.
Chapter Fourteen

Friendly Banter

Despite Impa's annoyance and unease with what she had witnessed barely ten minutes previously, the trio fell into a comfortable discussion. The Guard reentered the room with Evat Mikal following soon after. Having been summoned by a posted soldier, the Advisor quickly delved into the previous issue which had been bothering his monarch.

The answer filled the room with howls of laughter and brought a sheepish blush to Zelda's cheeks. She had obsessed over the political bodies for hours for the simple fact that she needed a distraction. After a three week sabbatical for her health, the return to her country had brought her little except rumors and paperwork. Her immediate focus on improving Hyrule had left little time for herself.

She had obsessed over something that had no reason to be analyzed. Not because she had done something wrong, not because the political groups had give up too easily...but because she was unable to think of anything but her work.

Her fiery cheeks burned hotter as her laughter joined the joyous howls of her friends. Sometimes even the Queen had to laugh at herself. Especially when her actions were as foolish as these.

"My Lady," Mikal said as he gasped for air, "I do believe you have just made my day."

"Why's that?" Zelda asked between giggles.

Impa choked on her drink as Link muttered under his breath. Mock-glaring at the Hero, she kicked his ankle, earning a howl of pain. "Whimp."

Pouting like the overgrown child he was, Link rubbed his ankle. Sniffing, he turned to Zelda. "You made his day because you just proved you're an idiot...like the rest of us."

"Link!" Zelda cried as she felt laughter bubble within her once more. "You're not supposed to insult me!"

Snorting, the young man rolled his eyes. "Why, because you're the Queen? Pft. You're my sister...I can insult you all I want."

Much as Link had moments before, Zelda pouted and turned to Impa. "He can't insult me, can he, sesha?"

"Ask someone who's not bias!" Link said with a groan as Impa raised an eyebrow.

The Sheikah looked between the younger warriors, pretending to think. She turned her attention to Mikal. "I don't know...do you think Link is allowed to insult Zelda?"

Their acceptance made his eyes shine and neck flush as he hummed, considering the question. "I think he is. He does have free speech, after all."

Link clapped happily as Zelda mock-moaned. "It's settled! Zelda's an idiot!"
"I am not!" Stomping her foot, the Queen rose from her chair and scurried over to Impa. With wide eyes and an exaggerated pout, she whined her question. "I'm not an idiot, am I?"

Smirking, Impa laced her fingers through Zelda's and gently tugged the brunette to sit on her lap. Wrapping an arm loosely around the Hylian, she kissed her forehead. "We all have moments of foolish stupidity. But no, you aren't an idiot."

Both men held their breaths as the watched the women, waiting. Would she...yes. She was smiling. Link and Mikal shared a sigh of relief and glanced at each other. One disaster averted.

Mentally roll their eyes, Zelda snuggled against Impa. A giggle floated through the bond as the men began bickering over something or another. "And Link called me an idiot. One of these days they'll realize that we actually talk."

"No they won't." Pressing another kiss to Zelda's forehead, Impa held her tighter as joy and love bubbled in her heart.

"I mean...how stupid do they think we are?"

"Apparently very, if they believe I would be presumptuous enough to pull you unto my lap without permission."

Rubbing her cheek against the other woman's chest, she pressed an ear to her breast. The steady beat of a strong heart send gentle waves of peace through her.

Mikal let his words fade to silence as he saw the heartwarming scene before him. Gesturing to Link, he tilted his head towards the women.

Zelda lay curled in Impa's arms, her ear pressed over her heart. Her eyes were closed her golden-brown locks fell over her cheeks like a curtain. Impa's cheek rested on Zelda's head, her arms wrapped protectively around her love. Her red eyes, normally alert and filled with knowledge, were closed. Both women breathed slowly, their chests rising and falling as one.

Link bit his lip and blinked back tears as he looked upon the love and trust both Sages shared. Wishing Shad were with him, he reached for an empty scroll and Zelda's pen to make a quick sketch of the lovers.

"It's rude to stare," Zelda said as Link touched the pen to the parchment. She peeked at both men from under her hair and swallowed a giggle as they blushed darkly.

Rubbing at the ink now soaking his tunic, Link muttered to himself about women, traps and fools. He glanced at Mikal with disbelief, unable to comprehend how they had known. When Mikal shrugged, the young Hero felt his blush deepen.

"How did you know?" he finally asked as Zelda pushed her hair to the side.

Glancing at Impa, Zelda smiled softly. Red eyes met green and both allowed their smiles to fade to smirks.

"We're women," Impa said simply.

Without question, Link knew those two words explained everything. How it explained everything, he didn't know. He just attributed it to the fact that Impa and Zelda had almost always won during a spar, would always best him in a battle of wits and knew more about almost any subject he could speak of.
Sometimes it was better to just accept what they said and not think about it too hard.
Chapter Fifteen

Point of No Return

It was decided, after much deliberation and long bouts of laughter, that a trip to the countryside was needed. When Malon arrived at the castle and informed them all there was an impromptu festival spreading through the land, Zelda knew this was one argument she wouldn't win.

It wasn't that she didn't want to go. She did. Link's enthusiasm for anything child-like led Shad and Malon to follow him around the castle, the trio yelling encouragements at the top of their lungs.

With a smile, Zelda shook her head. Her friends were fools at times, but they were family.

No, it wasn't that she was reluctant to leave the isolation of the castle; in fact, everything within her demanded some sort of exercise after three weeks of sedate walks and bed-rest. She ran gentle fingers over the healing wounds on her arms. Though no longer the color of pale pink roses, delicate tissue under the discolored lines was still reforming.

Believe it or not, her hesitation was born from Impa's quick acceptance. The Sheikah had grinned and agreed with the others when it was announced they all would attend the festival the next day. Zelda knew her Guardian (her mate, Goddess bless her) better than she knew herself.

Impa didn't accept anything quickly or with a smile, especially not when she hadn't had time to investigate the situation.

With a sigh, the Queen leaned against her headboard and watched her mate all but scamper between their connected rooms and her own wardrobe. A smile graced her lips as her worrisome thoughts were pushed to the side; watching Impa fret over something as ridiculous as festival attire was hilarious to the Hylian.

Hearing Zelda's quiet chuckles, Impa paused in her rushing to laugh at herself. She knew her behavior was unusual, but after the weeks of turmoil they'd had, she couldn't begrudge herself the opportunity to remember simpler times. Times when Zelda's head barely reached above her knee and when picking clothes for the young Princess had been a game for them both.

Shaking her head to clear the memories, the Sheikah felt warmth blossom in her chest. Her Princess was now Queen, and though their lives weren't perfect or care-free, there was much happiness to be found.

It was this thought was caused her to look through Zelda's wardrobe and the costumes she had hidden in her own room. While Malon had been light on the details, the Guardian knew the festival would be one of masquerade. Though the festival was impromptu, the farm woman had let it slip that the foundation for revelry had been whispered about for several months.

"Impa, c'mon!" Zelda called as she entered the wardrobe. "It doesn't take that long." With a pout, she saw the other woman's hands were empty. "What've you been doing?"

"Thinking," Impa replied quickly. She turned away from the costumes. Her eyes cast upon the
rumpled gown of the Time Sage. Tussled ringlets of dark gold silk fell upon the forest green dress, hiding a long, tan neck from view. Long sleeve ended at her hands, concealing the the raised lines of pain. Swallowing, the Sheikah looked between the square-cut bodice, fitted waist and floor length skirt.

Beautiful, she thought to herself.

Sometimes...sometimes when her mind was quiet and she thought of the past, she would mistake Zelda for her mother. Much like her mother, Zelda detested finery with a passion and used any excuse she could to wear the simplest outfits she owned. The only jewelry the young Queen wore was a gold girdle of links given to her by Darunia as a token of thanks.

"What are you staring at?" Zelda asked with a smile. She watched Impa shake her head to clear the fog of the past. Biting her lip to keep the smile from growing, she took a step forward. Eyes alight with impish delight, she allowed her smile to form. "Not lil' ole me I hope?"

The sight of her mate's light gray-green eyes glowing with amusement caused Impa to close the space between them. She reached forward, watching the other woman's body language. Holding her breath for a moment, she sigh in relief when Zelda leaned forward, accepting her. Wrapping an arm around the velvet-encased waist, she gently pressed their bodies together. "Tis a pity to disappoint you, my Lady, but you are in fact the one who has caught my attention."

Tilting her head back, Zelda lifted herself unto her toes and brushed her lips over Impa's, giggling when the older woman blinked in shock. "Cat got your tongue?" Spinning away, she all but floated from the cloth-filled room.

Smiling to herself, Zelda touched her tingling lips,a blush burning her cheeks. Unable to believe her own daring, she leaned against the wall and stared at the open doors. Had she really just kissed Impa?

Yes...yes, she had. And as incredible as it was, she couldn't help but giggle as she remembered the shock on Impa's face.

Shock was not the word Impa would use to describe her immobilized state, but it would do for now. Much like the Hylian in the other room, she pressed her fingers to her lips. The feel of Zelda's lips moving against hers as she whispered...the feather light touch which sent electricity down her spine and stole the air from her lungs...

Din save her if Zelda kiss her again.

She may die from lack of breath. Her heart skipped several beats at the thought of Zelda's lips on hers once more.

But what a pleasant way to die...

Sharing Zelda's smile, she strode from the room and met shining green eyes. She hid nothing from the younger woman as the bond flared with worry. "I'm not upset, my love. Just...shocked."

"Me too," Zelda murmured as her blush deepened. Without a thought, she moved from the wall and laced her fingers through Impa's. "So...a costume?" Costume?, wondered, how can I be thinking about costumes right now?

The befuddled expression on her Queen's face caused the Guardian to chuckle. "I think I may have figured out a costume for you to wear."
"That's good," came Zelda's lazy reply. "What is it?" Blinking, she met Impa's eyes. "m I high?"

Biting back a laugh, Impa loosely wrapped her arms around Zelda and kissed the top of her head. "No. Just in love." She resisted the urge to comment that the other woman might be slightly high on adrenaline and dopamine. Rolling her eyes at herself, the Shadow Sage wondered when her thoughts had changed from disbelief to scientific.

Must be the influence of the dopamine...

"I kissed you." I kissed her, I kissed her, I really really kissed her!

Mm, yes...I remember. "Yes you did."

"Did you like it?" I did. It was nice. Mmm...fuzzies.

Very much so. "I did."

"Can I do it again?" Please?

As if there's any other answer. "If you wish, you may."

"Do you want me too?" I hope you do...I think. Don't I? Maybe...I'm confused.

Well...shit. "I wouldn't be...against sharing another kiss with you."

What kind of answer is that?, they both thought. Shaking her head, Zelda blushed. "Sorry. I...spaced out for a moment."

Impa smiled and pressed another kiss to Zelda's head, feeling her own cheeks warm with embarrassment. Where had those thoughts come from?

With barely a moment's pause after making the decision, Zelda brushed her lips over Impa's once more. She lingered for a few seconds, feeling the rough, chapped lips scrape against hers. Her breath caught in her throat as she repeated the gesture, adding a little more pressure before pulling away.

Swallowing, she met the red eyes while her heart pounded in her chest. "Was that...ok?"

"It was perfect." Impa tightened her arms around the beryl eyed woman and sighed. Neither spoke another word as peace flowed through the bond. Basking in their love and euphoria, the stood in the summer sunlight streaming through the balcony doors.

For at least one moment, nothing could touch their hearts except each other.

Chapter End Notes

Well..there you have it. The long awaited kiss.

Just to clarify, Impa and Zelda were thinking seperately...they weren't talking. The fact that they seemed to be having two conversations was a coincidence.
Songs:
Paradise by Kaci
Tu Amor by Kaci (modified-not literal)
So Cold by Breaking Benjamin (hope)
There and Back Again by Daughtry
Long Shot by Kelly Clarkson
Chapter Sixteen

Crash Course in Reality

Though only a few hours had passed since the kisses, the sun was close to setting earlier than expected. The blue sky was painted with gentle strokes of pink, orange and red as a cooling breeze flew through the stone corridors. Servants, messengers and legal-men alike were absent from the halls, all having their own business to attend to before supper.

The Queen of Hyrule skipping through the castle, her green gown fluttering around her ankles. The gold belt around her waist bounced uncomfortably against her hips yet she paid it no mind. Clutched tightly in her folded arms was one of Link's tunics. How it had gotten into her laundry was something she didn't even want to think about.

In fact, it was pretty hard to think about anything except the soft, hesitant kisses she had given the older woman.

Her lips tingled at the memory as a blush spread over her cheeks once more. She raised her fist to knock on Link's door, her focus lost in the past few hours.

Unnoticed, the heavy wooden door opened with little sound. "Ow! Zelda!" Link yelped as her fist rapped against his head.

A startled gasp leapt from her throat as she dropped her hand. Swallowing her shame, she looked at the red marks on his forehead. Biting her lip, she lowered her eyes. "Sorry Link. I...wasn't paying attention," she whispered softly.

What was happening to her?

"I know," he told her with a smile. Rubbing his head, he stepped back into the room. "I was about look for you."

When his sister entered the door with nary a word, he knew something was wasn't quite right. This was not the same woman who avoided entering his chambers until she was certain it was only the two of them present. It certainly wasn't the same woman who insisted he close the bedroom door, which was standing wide open. Frowning, he shut the hall door and checked to make sure it was unlocked.

If something bad had happened, there was no reason to scare her more. Whatever was bothering her was clearly serious.

"Zelda..." he murmured worried. He watched her with narrowed eyes as she stared without sight at the bookshelf. "Is something wrong?"

The admission fell from her lips without pause or consideration. "I kissed Impa." She swung around to face him, her eyes wide with shock. "I kissed Impa."

Fighting a smile, he took the tunic from her white-knuckled grasp and led her to the couch. The sitting room, half the size of her own, was modestly furnished. Surrounding a table was two chairs and the couch, each facing the fire. Off to the side was a writing desk with a tapestry hanging from the wall above it.
It was this intimate setting which helped Zelda regain her composure. She watched him as he sat beside her, his hand still on her elbow. "I kissed her," she whispered as she met his eyes. "Why aren't you saying anything?!"

"I don't know what to say," he admitted with a small smile. Leaning back, he ran a hand through her hair. "Zelda...please calm down. Is this why you came to see me?"

"Wh-no. Your tunic...I wanted to give it back. I kissed her."

Realizing her shock was giving way to distress, he sat up and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. When she laid her head on his chest, he hugged her a bit tighter. "Easy sister...easy," he murmured. "It's ok. No reason to panic Zel, I promise. What to Impa say when you kissed her?"

"Which time?"

Swallowing a laugh and biting his lip once more, he cleared his throat. "Whichever time you want to tell me about."

"She said...she wasn't against kissing me again. So I kissed her again. Does that mean she didn't like it?"

"No," he said calmly as he ran a hand through his hair. Thanking Nayru his lover had attended the festival with Malon, he hugged her tighter. He knew this was something they needed to talk about without distraction. "What exactly did she say?"

"That she wasn't against sharing another kiss with me. Why would she say that? I thought she liked it...why not just say so?"

"Zelda, stop obsessing and take a moment to think. If you kissed her more than once, I'm pretty sure she didn't hate it."

Moaning in frustration, she buried her face in his chest. "I don't understand."

It was hard for him remember their true ages at times, given their rather...usual lives. While she was entrenched in a world of politics and high society, he was traveling the country to wake the Sages. As she fought against the monster they warred with day in and day out, he battled the generals of the dark sorcerer's army. Neither had time to interact with their peers and mature as other teenagers had.

Link had time to develop a friendship with Shad which lead to their current relationship. Even though he hadn't had time to interact socially with his friends and acquaintances scattered throughout the land, he had been able to develop friendships. Zelda never had that option; her interactions with the Hyruleans had always been colored by her status as Princess, despite her friendly nature. Only those she considered family knew her, not the Queen they all but revered. Their lives, while intermingled, were stark contrasts of each other.

As he hugged her, he knew his sister was overwhelmed and confused by her feelings. He had had the opportunity to meet people and see what love was; she hadn't, not truly. And after Ganondorf's abuse, he knew her initial excitement at any physical interaction with Impa would be followed by confusion and fear. Despite what she had been through, she was ignorant and innocent in every aspect of a true, healthy romantic relationship.

Sighing softly, he kept running his hand through her hair. "What don't you understand?"

"Why say that if she...like my kisses?"
"Probably so you wouldn't feel pressured," she heard him say. She listened to his heart thud under her ear and took comfort in its steady beat. The feel of his hand in her hair was odd, especially after Impa had spent several hours doing the same, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

"I don't...I don't feel pressured."

Biting his tongue, Link said nothing for a moment. Now was the time to think before he spoke, not the other way around. He smiled and slapped her hand as she tried to tickle him. "Stop that or I won't explain."

Pouting, she sat up and played with her sleeves, her eyes on her hands. Why had she told him?

"Zelda," he said softly as he place a finger under her chin and lifted her head. "Stop...please. I'm just...trying to figure out how to explain this."

"Explain what?" asked a voice from behind them.

[-]

Impa wandered through the castle. She knew Zelda had gone to take Link his tunic. It was nearly time for supper, and neither of them had shown.

What was keeping them?

Smiling to herself, she pressed her fingertips to her lips. Zelda had kissed her. Oh bless the Golden Goddesses, Zelda had kissed her. Humming to herself, she stopped to look out the windows. The sky was orange with the barest hints of blue as the sun began to set. A masterpiece watercolor, the transition between day and night stirred something within her.

The rising and the setting of the sun was slow, taking place over several hours rather than several minutes. Even during the summer, when the sun was at its zenith, time had to pass before the sky would begin to change colors. It was a sequence of events, all of which had to happen in order. Sometimes it happened slowly...sometimes quickly.

Touching her lips once more, she nodded to herself. Yes, sometimes things had to happen slowly. Like the setting sun and rising moon, some events would take place in their own time, regardless of outside influences. She knew without a doubt she could influence this situation...but she wouldn't.

She would let Zelda rise and fall like the sun, let her set the pace for their dawn and dusk. The amount of trust she had been given today was something she wouldn't take lightly. Though hesitant, Zelda had opened her shell just a bit more and exposed her heart.

Her fingers ran over the smooth glass of the high windows. The heat of the translucent panes couldn't compare to warmth radiating from her heart. Love and joy made her all but float. While the kisses had been pleasant, her happiness came from the fact that, no matter how small, she knew Zelda was taking a step towards healing.

Although...they were really nice kisses. Not filled with passion, not demanding or even assertive like those from her ex (and occasional flings she refused to admit to anyone but herself) had been. They were fueled by love rather than lust. She knew by the glimmer in Zelda's eyes she'd been worried...had expected something more.

Shaking her head, the Sheikah pressed her forehead against the window. How could she explain to her love, who, despite the torture she'd been through, was a virgin? How could she show her mate, other than with time, that rape wasn't sex? After everything she'd been through, would it even be
possible for her to know something other than what Ganondorf had taught her?

But for now...how was she going to not act on the impulse to initiate a kiss? The other questions would take a lot of time. This one was immediate. Swallowing, she closed her eyes and groaned. She'd waited more years than she cared to think about to tell Zelda she loved her...surely that meant something about her self-control.

Taking a deep breath, she felt a shudder run down her spine as ice filled her veins. The only person she would be controlling was herself. Even if it meant never starting a kiss, or never having Zelda's lips on hers again, that wouldn't change. Her Charge came first, regardless of what other titles she held.

Standing straight, she ran a hand through her hair to smooth it. Calmer than when she'd begun her search, she walked away from the window only to pause. Tilting her head, she listening. "Explain what?" she heard Shad utter. Sighing at her own idiocy for not realizing Zelda would want to talk to Link, she turned down the corridor and stood behind the archaeologist.

Link's voice was muffled, which told her he was in the room. Shaking her head, she stopped to watch Shad. She bit back a smile as she saw the expression on his face. Equal parts confusion, love, amusement and sadness battled in his eyes and twitched his lips. She knew he had only the barest of facts regarding her love's past.

Stepping directly behind the younger man, she peeked into the room.

The back of the couch obscured the majority of their bodies from view. Zelda's hair was mused and one side of her face was red; probably from being pressed against Link, she assumed correctly. Her eyes were wide and confusion marred her face. Link's fingers rested under her chin, clearly holding her head up. He looked pensive as he kept his arm around her shoulder. She knew the scene before her was innocent, however condemning it might appear.

Allowing her smile to blossom, she cleared her throat. "Is something wrong Shad?"

Zelda's eyes leapt from Shad's face to Impa's shadowed frame. Swallowing, she lowered her gaze. She heard Shad apologize for blocking the door and say there was nothing wrong before quickly walking away. It wasn't until her name was spoken ever so softly, first by Link and then by Impa, that she lifted her head.

Her breath caught as she met Zelda's gaze. Impa felt her throat close at the insecurities swimming within her steel and emerald orbs. "Zelda..."

Ignoring the fact that Impa was in his sitting room without permission, since he wasn't petty enough to make Zelda feel worse by pointing that out, Link stood so the garnet eyed Sage could have his seat. Taking one of the armchairs, he watched them as he spoke. "Zelda...why don't you ask Impa what you asked me?"

When Zelda didn't speak, Impa ran a hand through her golden locks. "Please, sesha...let me help you," she whispered. Lifting the bowed head, she met her startled eyes.

"D-didn't you...like my kissing you?" Her words barely stirred the air as they fell from her trembling lips. Nearly as quiet as her words, her breath caught in her throat. The joy she'd felt just ten minutes before crumbled within her when silence met her question.

The hesitation wasn't deliberate. In fact, everything within her demanded she answer immediately. But shock stole her thoughts and held her tongue. The sound of Link quietly closing the open doors
broke the imposed silence and she shook her head. "Zelda...why do you think I didn't like your kisses?" Cupping the other woman's tear-streaked cheek, she pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"You s-said you...wouldn't be...against another kiss," she mumbled. She met Impa's eyes worriedly.

"Oh keta...seshas..." Carefully, she gathered the confused woman into her arms and hugged her. "My love, I enjoyed your kisses very much. I was trying to be...careful."

Sniffing, Zelda blinked and wiped her eyes. "Why?"

"Because I don't want to scare you."

"Why would I get scared?"

An uncomfortable silence reined before Link coughed. Both women turned to him, eyebrows raised as he blushed. "Well...I freaked out when I first kissed Shad."

Zelda gaped. "Really?" Her worry and tears forgotten, she leaned towards her brother with wide eyes. Breathless, she waited.

From the tips of his ears to well beneath his shirt, Link's bronze skin became flush with embarrassment. He cleared his throat and stared at the wall, refusing to meet their inquisitive eyes. "It was a couple months after I got out the hospital. For the surgery and rehab, remember? Anyway...me and Shad had become good friends. We talked about almost everything in the hospital except the war; there were so many people talking about it already."

"Anyway," he added with a cough as they rolled their eyes. "When I got released and started looking for the Sages again, we ran into each other a lot. He helped me...specially with the Oocci and 'The City in the Sky'. I know Zel, I know...don't mock anyone. Sorry. He helped me a lot. So one day we decided to meet. Ya know, outside of the quest and stuff. Impa, stop laughing at me!"

"We went to the desert for our first date. It was fun. I showed him the temple, kept Nabooru from teasing him too much." Blushing, he glared at his sister as she mock-whispered. "Yes, I stared at his ass. It's a nice ass. Not like—Zelda, you're spending too much time around Impa!"

Impa raised an eyebrow once more. "Why are you bring me into this?"

As Zelda leaned against her mate, Link grumbled. "Because...I can. So, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, we went to the desert. He got sunburned...I got KO'ed by a ChuChu...all sorts of fun. Nabooru still laughs when I ask if it's safe to walk through Gerudo market. We rode a carpet to leave since it was so dark. I could barely navigate the desert during the night when it's just me. Doing it with Shad would've been impossible. Plus Navi was dead asleep, she couldn't have helped. You would've had to dig up our roasted carcasses. Ow! Zel-da! Don't hit!"

Rubbing his arm, he mock-glared at his sister. "And then you wonder why I try to sit on the other side of the room while telling you a story. Are you going to let me finish? Thank you. When we got back to Castle Town, the moon was starting to rise. You'd think the market was deserted, but it wasn't...it wasn't packed, but it wasn't empty either. We stopped at a, what do you call them...bistro. It was only us, an elderly couple and the owner, not even a waiter. He ordered slice of cheesecake with water nuts from Lake Hylia."

Unconsciously licking his lips, Link stared off into space as he remembered the taste of perfectly balanced sweet cheese and bitter nuts. The feel of velvet-soft crust laden with butter lowered his eyelids as the memory slid before him. Without notice, his voice dropped an octave and became husky with emotion he dared not name. Not in front of his half-forgotten guests. His fingers
twitched as the ghost of Shad's silky hair played over his skin.

"He swirled a glass of wine from the Lost Woods, aged nearly a century and the color of the moon." His lips twitched as the wine tickled his sensitive nerves. All a memory, he knew. The barest hint of a breeze through the open door, the smell of pastry and sweet meats mingling with the leather and dusty scent of Shad's skin. He knew these things lived in his mind...but for now, lost in the past as he told his story, they were as real as when they first happened. "We didn't talk much...what was there to say? After spending the day in the desert, we didn't mind the silence. It was...relaxing.

"He shared the cheesecake with me, but mostly I watched him eat. It was...he..." Swallowing, he closed his eyes for a moment and willed himself to move forward in tale. Some things were too private, too intimate for others to know. A small smile graced his lips as he watched his and Shad's younger counterparts argue briefly. "After a while, he agreed to let me walk him home. There were still random attacks of Wolfos and ReDeads...I didn't want him to get hurt. He lived in the Market with his father at the time. It wasn't a far walk from the castle.

"He invited me in to meet his dad, but I knew he was probably asleep. It was almost midnight, the moon was high in the sky. He brushed his hand over mine, turning it so his fingers met my palm. His fingers were softer then, they weren't battle scared yet. I met his eye, his beautiful brown eyes and whispered his name. Quieter than a whisper, I barely breathed. I ran a hand through his hair and...and I kissed him. It was...magical. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me back. I felt like I was on fire.

"And when I pulled away, I freaked," he admitted softly. Turning to his guests once more, he met his sister's eyes. His words were like a summer's cloud, clear but quick to fade without the slightest warning. "I was so scared. He was one of my best friends. He was...well, a man. It was wrong, right? I wasn't supposed to kiss other men.

"Oh Goddess Zel, I was so confused. I started crying, afraid he was going to hate me. Afraid he was going to think I...would call me..." Swallowing, he closed his eyes as pain tore through his heart for a moment. Shuddering, he remembered how the warm wind hadn't countered the chill radiating from his flesh. "I ran. I ran faster than I've ever run. And I fell. I was lost, running blind. I fell near a tavern and just cried. He found me a couple minutes later. I begged him not to hate me, to just walk away. But...he didn't. He sat next to me, in the dirty alley, and hugged me. He told me it wasn't wrong to be attracted to another male, that I was more than allowed to kiss him.

"He smiled and told me he liked our kiss." Smiling ever so slightly, he met sought her wide-eyed gaze once more. "I knew same-sex marriages are legal in Hyrule. Who wouldn't? But...it never really sunk in, ya know? But he told me, explained it to me, that it was more than ok. That he didn't hate me and actually loved me. That he'd been wanting to kiss me for a long time but was too afraid." Falling silence, he closed his eyes yet again and leaned his head back.

"And then what?" Zelda asked after several minutes of heavy silence.

He spoke as softly as before, only this time with a smile. "And then...and then he helped me off the ground and I walked him back home. I asked him out for lunch. He kissed me, and I went home." Leaning against Impa once more, Zelda watched her brother as he became lost in memories of his lover. She smiled as he relaxed further into his chair, dozing. Tilting her head back, she met the ruby eyes of her mate. Without words, verbal or mental, they stood and left the room, shutting the door softly behind them. Hands clasped, they made their way towards the kitchen as dinner was probably over given their long delay.
It wasn't until they nearly reached the vast cooking room that Zelda spoke. "I wonder if there's cheesecake."

Unable to contain herself, Impa laughed as she loosely wrapped an arm around the younger woman's waist. Trust Zelda to remember a mention of cheesecake out of everything else she had heard in the past hour.

Smiling, Zelda leaned her head against Impa's shoulder as they walked into the kitchen. She could do this. It wouldn't be easy...but she could and would be able to have a romantic relationship.

Although, it would be easier to have such a relationship if cheesecake was involved. Sugar solved everything.
Chapter Seventeen

Merry Masquerade

A contrast to the previous years, the smoke which wafted through the land surrounding the enclosed castle marketplace smelt of roasting meat and untainted wood. The sight of banners waving against the clear blue sky brought smiles to many as the markings of festivity replaced memories of war. The feel of soft grass under bare feet coaxed squeals of joy from child and adult alike; it was time to run free.

Across the land, the summer sun peeked from behind clouds as white as the first snow. Gentle breeze cooled the merry citizens as they shopped, played and laughed themselves silly. Vendors scattered throughout the various towns and Providences with competitions dotted between them. Jousting, wrestling, fencing, fire-play, horse races, water tournaments and many more methods of testing one's strength were littered across the land. Men, women and children of all races gathered together for the revelry.

The cooling breezes which traveled through the land carried laughs as well as comfort. It ruffled the leaves and loose clothing, bringing further laughs from the citizens. This time of celebration was one where all were who they weren't. Some wore the sturdy yet ripped clothing of farmers while others wore expensive ball gowns of high society. Prominent figures in the country mingled with their peers without fear of being recognized save by those who knew them best.

Brown tresses so dark they were almost black framed a deeply tanned face. Striking blue eyes, nearly translucent they were so bright, peeked from behind thick lashes. Elegant fingers tipped with painted nails ran through the braids, pulling free several leaves carried on the wind. A smile graced the tan faced, stopping the heart of its owner's companion.

Brushing her thumb over the pink lips, golden eyes met blue with a breathless whisper. A name, barely carried in the air between them. Auburn shoulder-length curls lifted as the breeze swirled around them. Skin the color of desert sand danced over the tanned hand, calloused fingers brushing over a petal-soft palm.

Seeing the streaks of red create flames in her partner's eyes, Zelda smiled softly. She brought the battle scarred hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles. "Think they know it's us?"

Impa smiled softly and repeated the gesture, stepping closer to wrap an arm around her lover's linen encased waist. "No. We left early enough that even Link and Shad didn't see us."

Closing her eyes, the young Queen allowed her mind to drift back to early morning. Impa had woken her just past dawn to begin the work necessary for their costumes. Dyes for their hair and skin along with colored discs for their eyes. Her long, straight hair was made into tiny braids once dyed, further separating her from normal appearance. Impa's usual bun was forgone and her natural waves were curled into spirals.

While the dyes hadn't taken more than an hour to apply, the styling of their hair, make up and nails had taken twice as long. Missing breakfast, they had somehow managed to dress themselves
without disturbing their previous work. The sight of Impa's toned, bronze body nearly caused the Hylian faint from lack of breath. Swallowing, she kept her eyes closed as her heart sped.

The muscled arm which was wrapped around her led to firm breasts and a flat, defined stomach, both of which were uncovered while dressing. Tight thighs smoothed into strong calves. Gasping silently, she felt her cheeks flush as she recalled the modified Sheikah emblem which adorned her lovers' back, the Guardian symbol strategically placed within it. The sword trailed down her spine, ending at the small of her back, emphasizing her rear. Though many women would look odd with a muscled backside, Zelda thought it suited Impa perfectly. *Even if I did see it though cloth,* she thought to herself.

"What are you thinking about?" Impa asked quietly when Zelda didn't speak for several minutes. The steady hum of the bond gave her no reason to worry, but the silence was unnerving. When the Time Sage didn't respond, she lifted her head.

And hooded her eyes at what she saw. Whispering a silent "oh", she ran her thumb over Zelda's plump lips once more. "Don't blush sesha," she whispered quietly. "There's no reason to be embarrassed."

"Yes there is," Zelda mumbled as she lowered her eyes. "I'm not 'posed to..."

"Nonsense. You can think about whatever you want, wherever you want, for as long or short as you want." Running a hand through the small braids, Impa pressed her cheek to Zelda's. "You've done nothing wrong."

"You're not...mad?"

"About what?"

"That I'm thinking about...you..."

Smiling, she lifted the tanned head so their eyes met. "No," she whispered as she closed the bit of space between them. "I'm...pleased...that you're comfortable enough to think about such things. About me."

"But it's your body," came the confused reply.

"It is. And if I had minded you looking, which I don't, I would've left the room. You've seen me naked since before you could walk. Just because our relationship has changed doesn't mean everything changes. No, don't bow your head. Talk to my, my love...please. Why the tears?"

As the same calloused thumb which had traced her lips brushed away her tears, Zelda felt the words fall from her lips. "I left. It...it wasn't fair."

"Zelda," Impa said firmly as she hugged the distraught woman. "There is no fair or unfair. You've done nothing wrong, nor are you 'bad' for not being comfortable. In fact, it makes me very happy that you left...it shows me you're thinking about yourself."

"But don't you like seeing—" Breaking off, she closed her eyes. She had swore today would be free of tears!

Shock caused the words to rent the quiet air. "Do I—" Closing her eyes, Impa took a deep breath. "Please don't do this...don't search for a reason to hurt yourself. I love you. I know that's not what you want to hear. But...the answer isn't that simple. I'll make you a deal. Give me a while to think about it, and I'll answer before we go to sleep, all right?"
Nodding, the brunette sniffed. Wiping her eyes once more, she smiled shakily. "You've been talking to Link, haven't you?"

Gasping, the redhead feigned shock. "You don't think I can talk to you without needing his help?"

Snorting, Zelda wrapped an arm around Impa's waist. She smiled when the gesture was returned. The feel of the Sheikah's hand on her stomach, her fingers barely brushing her hip, gave her the comfort she desperately needed. "No, I don't," she replied as they made their way towards Kakariko Village.

"Why not," Impa whined softly.

"Because," Zelda replied simply. "I know how Link thinks." Grinning sheepishly, she ducked her head for a moment. "And I can hear you when you're both in the same room as me."

Laughing, she pressed a kiss to the other woman's temple. Some things would never change.

[-]

The walk to Kakariko Village took over two hours due to multiple local vendors, competitions and other revelry drawing their attention. And though she wouldn't admit it, the sight of Zelda's silhouette against the linen cast by the summer sun distracted her more than once. Since her mate had worn only the linen shirt (refusing anything suggestive of a corset) with a loose vest underneath to hide her breasts, her profile was barely visible.

Barely...but still visible in full sun light if you were standing only inches from her and the breeze hadn't set the shirt fluttering.

After the third time she'd stopped walking, Zelda wrapped an hand around her arm and told her to keep up or go back home.

With the braids, linen shirt and a pair of Link's breeches he'd sworn were too small and having never been worn, Zelda was completely unrecognizable. Just as Impa, with her curls, golden eyes, tunic and Gerudo pants, was perfectly disguised. There was some argument when Impa tried to convince Zelda to wear an under-bust corset; she'd quickly dropped the matter when Zelda threw the largest petticoat she owned in her face.

"What are you laughing at?" As she spoke, Zelda lightly bumped her hip against Impa, earning fingers tickling her ribs.

"Just remembering this morning," Impa replied with a wide smile.

"Which part? The part where you dropped a sack full of dyes on my bed, the part where you tried to dress me to look like a bar maid, the part where I stole the blush and smeared it in your hair...gotta be more specific Imps."

"Well, El'a, I was thinking about the entire morning."

"Uh-huh...right."

"I was!" she cried with mock indignation. "What do you think I was thinking about?"

Taping her chin as the halted their steps, Zelda met Impa's eyes. She stared until she saw the red streaks which showed the imperfection of the golden discs. "I think you were thinking about trying to convince me to wear a corset...which I won't. I wear enough of them thank-you-very-much."
The Goddess' breath rustled of leaves and grass as Impa remained silent. Without words, she merely smiled and ceded defeat. Her Charge, her mate, knew her well. "Maybe I was," she said after a pause. Her smile become a grin. "What of it?"

"Not much," Zelda replied haughtily as she threw her braids over her shoulder. Just as she had years before, her fingers skimed the tall grass. Without notice, she grabbed a handful. "Just...this." Shoving the plants down Impa's shirt, she ran towards the Village, laughing merrily.

Some things would never change.

"I will get you back for this!" Impa shouted as she followed the other woman.

She too laughed as history repeated itself, this time with a happy ending.

[-]

Music filled the air, melding with laughter and children's screams of joy. As the last of the wild flowers fell from beneath Impa's tunic, they walked the worn path through the mountain side. Kakariko Village came into view in sections. First the houses and shops, followed by the pathways leading up Death Mountain and finally the spring.

The scent of cooking food mingled with laughter. Rather than weighing the mountain-base air, it became lighter than the summer breeze. The sea of colorful costumes which met their hidden eyes brought identical smiles to their lips. Children and parents alike ran around in clothes they probably didn't wear every day. In fact, knowing the town as well as they did, both women knew the mothers would never wear full ball gowns while chasing toddlers, nor would the fathers dress themselves in silk shirts fit for the former King.

"It's beautiful," Zelda whispered. The sight of so many care-free people brought tears to her eyes. This is why they fought such a grueling war. For freedom.

"It is," Impa replied just as quietly. With notice by her companion, her eyes slid from the townspeople to her mate. Despite the dyes, braids and clothes, she saw the Hylian who had captured her heart. The beauty which radiated from her could never be hidden.

Feeling her eyes, Zelda smiled. Moving with ease, she spun so she stood before the Sheikah. Taking her hand, she walked quickly, nearly floating with the lightness she felt. "C'mon," she urged as she all but skipped backwards. Her smile shone from her colored eyes as she nearly dragged the older woman towards the celebration. "I'm hungry."

"We ate before we left!" Impa said with a laugh.

Pouting, Zelda continued to pull her up the path. "I know, but I'm hungry again. All the walking...really hungry."

Eyes sparkling with happiness at her love's lightheartedness, Impa allowed her smile to widen. When Zelda turned and ran into the crowds, she followed behind, always keeping the bouncing braids within her sight.

They made their way through the jovial gathering with equally high spirits. Zelda's joyful laughter mixed with Impa's amused yet loving chuckles as they all but danced through the thick lines of people.

For once, the constraining crowds didn't bother the Queen as she made her way through the sea of bodies. The air, filled with aroma of smoke and food, masked the scent of sweat and flesh. The dull
roar of overlapping voices made it impossible for her joy-laced mind to latch onto a single person. For one day, she could be among her countrymen, acting as their peer, without the ghosts threatening to consume her.

Reveling in her freedom, she giggled as her dance-like steps came to a halt. Panting softly, she turned to face her love with sparkling eyes. Grabbing Impa's hand, she walked towards the nearest vendor. "Food," she whined as she stared into the gold-covered red eyes. "Hungry."

"We'll eat sesha," Impa said with a laugh. Lacing her fingers through the warm digits of the Hylian, she brought the strong hand to her lips and laid a kiss upon her faintly scarred knuckles. "I promise."

Her smile widened as a soft blush colored her cheeks. After pressing her own lips to Impa's cheek, she spun around to face the vendor. Her hand clasped tightly with Impa's, she brought the Sheikah's arm around her waist and read the sign.

"Hmm...fruit." Smacking her pink lips together, Zelda leaned against Impa, tilting her head back to meet the fiery eyes of her mate. "Can we have fruit?"

"A wise choice, madam," the vendor said. He cleared his throat when neither responded to his words. "Madams?"

Looking away from the ice colored pools, Impa turned her gaze to the man behind the cart. Wrapping her arms around her love, she scanned the sign and display. "Fruit isn't substance, my love."

Pouting, the slender Hylian returned her gaze to the food. "So we'll get cold meats at another place. I want fruit," she stated with a small whine.

The vendor watched the robust female sigh with mock-exasperation before pulling out her purse. He swallowed and looked down as the sun emerged from behind the clouds, shining through their tops. His wife would kill him, he knew, if he dared disgrace himself by insulting his patrons with his eyes. Besides...he had learned as a young boy in a village filled with outsiders how to spot a warrior.

And warriors always had weapons.

Ignoring the man's nervous attitude, Impa waited for Zelda to select her fruit and place it in a reed basket before paying for their purchases. Plucking a green grape from the bowl held securely in her lover's hand, she rolled the small fruit between her fingers before placing it in her mouth.

"Is it good?" Zelda asked as she attempted to find a miniature pear hidden in the basket without looking down.

"Very. Juicy, but not overly sweet."

"Sounds delicious."

Smiling, the Guardian trailed behind her Charge as they wove their way through the ever thickening crowds. When they neared the inn, Impa knew she would be held to Zelda's promise: cold meat elsewhere for fruit from the vendor. Smiling, she stole a few more grapes. "I have a feeling it'll be too full to enter. Why don't we see if there's an outdoor extension 'round back."

Hugging the basket close to her chest while smiling at the children racing around her, Zelda waited for Impa to take the lead before following the older woman to the back of the inn. Sure enough, in
the alley behind the shops and houses, was a long line of vendors. Spotting the inn's booth, she scurries around the crowd, grabbed her mate's wrist and dragged her towards the tented stand. "You said fruit wasn't a meal...so it's your turn to shop."

Chuckling, the Sage of Shadows quickly bought an assortment of cold meats, cheese and bread, returning to her love's side within minutes. Pretending to ignore the mock-muttering of her younger companion, she wrapped an arm around the linen-encased waist. Pressing a kiss to the braided head, met the crystalline eyes. "Let's find somewhere to eat."

Nodding in agreement at Impa's words, Zelda returned the one arm embrace, holding the fruit basket with her free hand. Smiling, the Sage of Time fell into well practiced step with her mate.

Making their way around the outer ring of the festival, they spoke little and laughed a lot while searching for someplace to eat. Settling near the entrance to the graveyard, they leaned against the gates and set the baskets of food between them.

Fruit so ripe it nearly wept before the skin was broken coupled with rich, tender cold meats, hearty cheeses and soft, warm bread all but brought tears to their eyes. The simplicity of their meal took them to easier times, and as they watched adults act like the children they ran behind, both let hope for the future bloom within them. As they spoke quietly of the sights before them, eating fare neither could get unless one snuck to the kitchens, they leaned against on another.

"Just think," Impa said quietly after Zelda expressed her enjoyment of the day so far, "it's not even noon yet."

With a smile, Zelda laughed softly, knowing the older woman was right.

[-]

"Zelda?"

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"Acrobatics."

Garnet streaked gold eyes followed a lithe body through the air as it move between the agility obstacle course.

"Why?"

"Because the people behind me said I couldn't beat them."

"And you didn't ask if I wanted to join?"

"You were busy."

"Not busy enough to ignore you, which your pissed off tone seems to imply."

Ending the course in half the allotted time, and thereby shaming the circus performers who'd taunted her, the currently blue eyed Queen met her Maderone's eyes. Ignoring the athletes' incessant apologies as they dropped to the ground, she stared at the older woman for nearly a minute. Finally tearing her gaze away, she stomped towards the main area of town.

"Zelda!"
"What?!

"Why are you angry at me?"

"Because you were making moon eyes at the inn owner's son!"

[-]

Once Impa's shock wore off, she scrambled behind the furious Hylian, desperate to catch up with her. After much explanation, sharing of memories and time to calm down, Zelda apologized for her rash judgment.

"You don't have to be jealous of everyone I talk to," Impa said quietly as she browsed a stall filled with jewelry.

"I'm not. Only of the people who ogle you. Besides, you're one to talk," Zelda pointed out as she held a bracelet up to the sunlight only to lay it back down.

"What does that mean?"

"It means, my dearest love, that whenever a person so much as turns their head in my direction, you become as red as a ruppie and threaten to tear their eyes out with a look."

As the merchant backed away from the cart, glancing uneasily between his newest patrons, Impa merely shrugged. "You're mine. I don't like them looking at you."

"But you get upset that I felt the same!"

"No, you got angry because I didn't understand why you were ignoring me. I was upset because you walked away from me instead of talking."

"Says the woman who threatened to turn my brother into a eunuch."

"He looked at you."

"He's my brother!"

Handing the frightened merchant several green ruppies, Impa turned stalked away from the stall, a pair of earrings in her hand. "I don't care. You're mine."

Rolling her eyes, Zelda muttered as she fell into step. "If you're this bad, I hate to see what happens when we're married."

She never noticed Impa's eyes become wide, nor her lips move silently as she mouthed thoughts unsuitable for anyone's ears...things pertaining to a painful death of anyone who dared even breathe the same air as her (possibility) future wife.

Zelda smiled to herself in triumph as Impa wrapped a possessive arm around her waist. An arm which wasn't removed for some time.

[-]

"Impa? Remember how you told me Eldora and Kelen were...close?"

"Yes," came the semi-automatic reply.
Both woman read the grave markers of both Kakariko villagers and various Hyrule royalty.

"Didn't that violate cosmic law?"

"Did it—no."

"But the second law—"

"Refers to direct descends."

Blinking, the Sage of Time wondered how many people knew that exact specifications.

"Only a few outside of the family, the Sages and those who guard them," was the response to the silent question.

[-]

The day passed in a blur of laughter, scents and sights. After eating their fill once more, they made they way through the town and up the repaired passage towards the Goron village. The Goron wrestling matches and rolling races brought tears of joy to their eyes and howls of amusement from their throats. The sight of the children playing games of innocence caused them to clasp their hands together, cheeks aching from their wide smiles.

"What should we do now?" Zelda asked. She looked over the town from her perch on the cliff edge, ever mindful of her precarious balance. As she swung her legs, she leaned back and tilted her head to look at the auburn beauty behind her.

"You should move away from the cliff. Why do you always do this?"

"What? Enjoy the view of a village full of people enjoying peace?"

"No, try to give me a heart attack."

"I'm doing no such thing!"

"Of course not," Impa drawled while leaning against the opposing cliff-side. "Sitting on the edge of a potentially crumbling mountain path is not dangerous at all."

"Then come get me," came the childish reply in a taunting voice. Sticking her tongue out at the older warrior, Zelda turned to face the town again. Ignoring the stinging in her cheeks from where her braids slapped against her face from her quick movement, she grumbled to herself about over-protective Sheikahs.

Nary a sound was made as Impa closed the space between them and couched. Barely pausing to breath, she wrapped her arms around the linen-encased torso and stood, cradling the younger woman to her chest. "Please stay away from the cliff-side," she whispered as she lowered the startled woman to her feet.

"All right...I will," Zelda said softly as she pressed a hand over Impa's thudding heart. The feel of the afternoon sun bearing down upon them was nothing compared to the heat which spilled from Impa's chest. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I was worried, that's all." Swallowing, she raised a calloused hand to brush red-brown curls from her face. "You have horrible balance," she added after a moment.

"Impa! I do not!" was the only response she received.
"Maybe not horrible...but certainly not the best."

Rolling her eyes, Zelda shook her head and pretended to pout. "You're supposed to compliment me, not tell me I'm clumsy."

"I thought I just did." Impa bit her cheek to contain a laugh. "Oh sesh, I do love you."

"I love you too. Now, let's go find something interesting to do."

"What, you mean scaring me half to death isn't interesting?"

"Nope...only if you're three-quarters scared."

[-]

"A race? This is interesting?"

"Yes."

"But...a horse race."

"Your point being?"

"We race all the time. With plenty of people."

"With our own horses. Besides...it's a festival!"

"Why not watch others race?"

"Puh-lease? I promise it'll be fun."

The sight of wide, round, shining eyes and a pouting lip earned a sigh and two entries into the horse race.

[-]

"I told you it would be fun."

"No comment."

"We tied!"

"Yes, we did."

"Why are you so...moody?"

"A horse race...bare back."

"And?"

"Up and down Goron pass."

"Your point?"

"...why do I even bother?"

"Because you love me."
"That I do."

Twilight painted the village with a veil of colors. The sun had begun to set as they slowly made their way towards the path which left Kakariko. Their arms wrapped each others waists once more, they spoke little as their minds brushed with each step they took.

"-to be amazing!"

"Gerudo fire show? Yeah right."

"No, honest!"

Zelda's eyes met Impa's and they nodded in silent agreement. Without hesitation, they turned and quickly walked towards the preteen lad and a man who appeared to be in his twenties. Zelda smiled at the boy as she pulled away from Impa. "Where did you hear about this show?"

Turning towards the disguised Queen, the lad smiled and rocked on his heels. His hands flew through the air as he spoke. "My ma heard it from a vendor who just came from Eldin. There's gonna be a fire show in Faron in less than an hour! It's 'posed to have Gerudos and Gorons. My brother," he said with a glance towards the older man, "doesn't think I'm telling the truth but I am." Fishing in his pockets, he pulled out a crumpled flyer and thrust it forward. "See?"

Smoothing the paper, Zelda held it towards a nearby torch. Sure enough, the time, date and location of a fire show "worthy of Din" sat below a picture of a Gerudo priestess and several Goron. Fire danced around the two beings. Humming, she showed the poster to Impa, who looked it over with a nod before returning it to the boy. "I think it's real. Are you going?"

Her smooth, soft voice caused the brooding man to turn towards her. His eyes swept over her form, ignoring her companion. She sounded familiar, but he couldn't place her. He knew he'd remember those eyes and braids if he'd seen them before. "No, we're not," he told her before the lad could speak.

"Bu—"

"No buts."

"Mama said we could."

Rubbing his face, he sighed. Knowing his mother, she more than likely had told his youngest sibling they would see the show. "Then go talk to her." Tilting his head, he murmured a quiet "good evening" before following the running boy.

Shaking her head, Impa watched Zelda follow the boys with her eyes until they vanished into the swarm of bodies. Smiling to herself, she ran a hand through the braids. "How does it feel...not to be recognized?"

"Wonderful," Zelda sighed softly as she leaned into the soothing touch. Glancing towards the pathway now light by lamps, she nuzzled the hand which slid down to her cheek. "Let's go to the field."

Wrapping her arm around the other woman, Impa pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Let's," she replied quietly as they once more walked towards the path.
Families, couples and individuals alike gathered in the field. Sitting on blankets, in trees, on rocks and wherever else, each person had their eyes turned towards the field between the castle and the Province.

Lazy chatter flew through the field as the two Sages looked for a place to sit. The pouches of ruppies and gold hidden within their shirts were considerably lighter than they had been when the day had begun. And yet as traveling vendors wound through the crowd, selling food and trinkets of all sorts, they didn't regret it. "Do you want a blanket?" Zelda asked as she spied a sales man several hundred feet away.

Tracing the pendulum earrings brushing her throat, Impa looked between the braided-bearing brunette and the seller. "No," she said after a pause. "The grass is fine. Just as it's always been." Leaning against a tree, she patted the ground beside her. "Sit with me sesha, please."

Smiling in relief at not having to carry a thick throw back to the castle, Zelda sat beside the gold-eyed Sheikah. Resting her head on the tunic covered shoulder, she sighed happily when a strong arm wrapped around her. "Do your eyes itch?" she asked without thought.

"Yes," Impa replied ruefully. "They have for a while."

"Mine too." Barely pausing to decide, the Hylian poured a bit of water from the skin beside them over her fingers. Satisfied most of the dust was removed, she carefully pulled the stiff colored lenses from her eyes. "What should I do with them?" she questioned while blinking rapidly to water her dry eyes.

Gurgling, the Sheikah closed her eyes and tried to calm her racing thoughts. What had Zelda been thinking? "One of these days...you're going to give me a heart attack."

"I do that on a daily basis," replied the younger woman with a cheeky smile. "Why do you look like I've done something horrifying?"

"Because," came the tired reply, "You just removed lenses from your eyes which could have ripped and released dye. Dye, which I told you this morning, could have—"

"Ok, I get it, I get it!" Zelda said as she threw the lenses to the ground before tossing her hands in the air. "'Bad me' for wanting to take them out. They itched. You said so. I made sure they didn't rip. Just puh-lease, don't lecture me!" she whined.

Rolling her eyes, Impa ran a hand through the dark braids and bit back a smile. "I won't lecture you. I just don't like you risking your well being because you're too impatient to ask for help."

Pouting, Zelda looked behind the gold to stare at the red orbs of her beloved. "You just don't want to admit I was right."

"And what were you right about?" Teasingly, Impa gently tugged on a braid.

"Why, that removing irritant disguise was of the utmost importance, of course," Zelda replied with an arrogant sniff.

Shaking her head and chuckling, Impa give in. After rising her fingers, she removed the lenses from her own eyes and nearly wept in relief. "Remind me not to use those again."

"Don't use them again."
Before a response could be formed, piercing whistles sliced through the air. Silence reigned as all eyes turned in the direction of the castle. So far back, neither woman heard most of the speaker's words, yet the meaning was clear: the show would start within moments. Settling into their individual places once more, they remained silent as they watched the darkening sky.

Fireworks painted the nearly black canvas with loud crashes. Squeals of shock and glee quickly filled the field as children and elders alike marveled in the dance of colors. For half an hour, they watched pictures come to light as if by magic.

The moment the last spark extinguished and near total darkness eclipsed them, bursts of fire appeared throughout the clearing. Gerudo and Gorons spun fire between them, creating an intricate web of red-orange flames high above the spectators heads. Gerudo fire dancers wielded blades of colored flames, their bodies a blur as they moved their way through the crowd.

For hours, the show went on. Fires of all color entertained the Hyruleans. Aerobatics, sparring, fire breathing and all other manner of skills were displayed before the awed people. Great monsters were crafted and slain with magical flames. The Goddesses burned into the air, their forms made of golden heat.

It wasn't until midnight that the show ended amongst cheers and whistles. When families gathered sleeping children, Zelda and Impa wrapped their arms around each other. Moving slowly, they make the long trek back to the castle.

"Are you cold?" Zelda asked as Impa shivered when the summer wind wrapped around them.

"Just ready for a shower."

"Race ya." Without waiting for a reply, she began running across the clearing.

They raced for half a mile before exhaustion sent them to the ground, laughter spilling from them as they gasped for breath. Giggling madly, they helped each other up and continued on at a more sedate, but realistic pace.

[-]

Once their skin was red from scrubbing the dyes away, they sat curled before the fire in the first chamber. Few words were spoken as they watched the flames, lost in their own thoughts. Impa's hand ran through Zelda's damp hair while Zelda traced various symbols on the back of Impa's free hand. Snuggled below a throw, they allowed the fire to lull them into a state of half sleep.

Smiling to herself, Impa pressed a kiss to Zelda's head and chuckled when she received a questioning look. "Td almost forgotten the promise I made you this morning."

Blinking in confusion, Zelda tilted her head back to meet her eyes. "What promise?"

"To explain if I enjoy seeing you naked."

With a soft blush, the tired Queen averted her gaze. "You don't have to."

"I want to," murmured the content Guardian. "Do you want me to?" When the younger woman nodded, she resumed stroking her hair. "I told you this morning it wasn't an easy answer. But...at the most basic level it comes back to wanting to protect you. Looking at you, nude, is something I...enjoy. This is true. But," she added as a cold shiver ran through the bond despite Zelda's unnatural stillness, "I enjoy having you happy, more. I love you, sesha."
Sighing softly, she turned her gaze to the shadows dancing on the ceiling. "I desire you, your entire being. Your body is only one part of who you are. Important, without a doubt, but only a part. What I want more is for you to feel safe, to feel loved and unthreatened. When I think of… physical intimacy, which doesn't necessarily mean sexual intimacy, I'd—"

"Wait," Zelda said softly. Without looking away from the fire, she laced her fingers through Impa's. "I think I might understand. On a logical level I mean." Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly and swallowed. "You are attracted to me, physically, but you're more attracted to what it means when I feel… comfortable being close to you, naked or not."

"Yes," was the whispered reply. The red eyed Sheikah leaned forward and meet the green eyes of her Hylian beloved. "That is exactly what I mean."

With a pause barely lasting a heart-beat, Zelda shook her head. Rolling her eyes and laughing ruefully, she met Impa's eyes with a loving yet teasing smile. "Why didn't you say that to begin with?"

Groaning, Impa gave the ceiling a long-suffering look. Sometimes…sometimes she wondered how she'd survived this long with Zelda and a Triforce with an attitude.

"Because you love me," Zelda replied cheekily.

"Smart ass."

"I know."

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Defy You by The Offspring
Chapter Eighteen

Humble Hearts (I)

Days turned into weeks as the temperature grew hotter. With each rising and setting of the sun, the season progressed to its zenith. While the country continued to trade stories of their week of festivities, time continued to move forward.

The demands of being Queen began wearing on Zelda once more. Without reprieve, she slowly began to wither under the pressure. At the urging of Impa, with Mikal and several Healers supporting her, the young Queen deciding to relax for the weekend. How could she run the country and help its people if she didn't maintain her health, they asked her? She ceded after being reminded that running herself ragged would do nothing but put her in the hospital once more.

It was this decision which led her to sleep in. Normally waking around dawn, she now rested until after breakfast. It wasn't until the clock struck half-ten that her eyes fluttered. With a moan, she rolled towards the edge of the large bed and buried her head under the pillow. "Sl'p," she mumbled as she heard Impa walk quietly from her own chambers.

"You can go back to sleep if you want," came the reply which was much too awake for Zelda's taste.

Moaning again, the groggy woman fought consciousness. "You g'bac ta s'ep t'."

Shaking her head, Impa checked to make sure the curtains were closed before walking towards the sitting room. "I can't go back to sleep," she replied quietly with a fond glance at the lump that was her Charge.

"W'y?"

With a sigh, she looked at the scroll held in her clenched hand. Taking a shuddering breath, she made her decision. "I'm meeting my grandmother for lunch."

[-]

Less than ten minutes later, Zelda trailed behind Impa, determined to get answers. After squeaking in shock and nearly falling off the bed in her haste, the Hylian had rushed to dress. So dazed, she barely noticed as she followed the Sheikah from their rooms and into the sunlit corridor.

"Grandmother?" she repeated for the third time.

"What, you thought I was hatched?" Spoken with amusement yet laced with offense, the quiet reply hung between them for a moment.

"No. It's just...you don't talk about your past a lot."

Pausing, Impa looked over her shoulder. "Because, for the most part, my past is irrelevant."

It took near forty-five seconds to realize Zelda was still standing in the middle of the hall, mouth agape.
"Can I go with you?"

"If you want."

"...do you want me to?"

"I didn't say that."

"You never told me before."

"I was trying to keep her safe."

"From...?"

"The war."

"The war's been over for over two years."

"There were—are—still plenty of people who would want to hurt her."

"To hurt you."

"Yes."

A pregnant silence fell between them, their footsteps the only answer to thoughts unspoken.

They entered the kitchen without another word between them. Both ate slowly, lost in their own thoughts. This day, the food tasted bland despite its richness. Their hearts were too heavy, their minds too clouded by emotion and chaos to worry over the simpleness of taste. When they eyes met, they looked away.

Impa swallowed her cold tea as she stared at the cooling coals in the open rotisserie. Hurt and worry filled her. Was it truly such a shock that she had family? Yes, she'd told Zelda many times over the years that she was her family...her world. This was true. Had she done too good a job in protecting her grandmother?

With a quiet sigh, she put her head in her hands. This was not how she'd pictured the day beginning. In fact, she had tried to never picture this day specifically. The day when Zelda asked to meet her grandmother.

On the same day her grandmother requested to meet Zelda.

The Goddesses had a twisted sense of humor. Partially ironic...but mostly twisted.

With a sardonic smile, she shook her head and opened her eyes. She'd known it was bound to happen eventually. The fact that Zelda had lasted fifteen years since her last questioning of her family was amazing. Her inquisitive nature all but demanded the young Queen find answers to every question she had. Yet the amazement didn't hide the truth: the two people she'd tried to keep apart for nearly twenty years wanted to meet each other. Face-to-face. Today.

With a groan, she put her head in her hands once more.
Zelda watched the older Guardian with hooded eyes. She pushed vegetables around her plate without thought. She knew her shock had been extreme. The insinuations which filled her previous questions made her wince. Her intention had never been to harm; but then again, wasn't the road to Hell paved with good intentions? With a nearly silent sigh, she laid her fork on the plate and stared at her untouched food.

Had she ever given the impression...no, she didn't think she did. She hadn't asked Impa about her family since she was a child. The last time she had...the sight of her tears...she couldn't bring herself to cause the older woman that much pain again just to satisfy her curiosity. Or at all. Rubbing her face, she muttered under her breath before looking across the table again.

"Impa?"

The quiet question, a single word which drifted softly between them, a name filled with insecurity and remorse, caused their eyes to meet.

"Yes Zelda."

"I'm sorry."

A whisper hardly breathed brought the smallest of smiles to red eyes, though it barely reached frowning lips. "I am too."

Silence fell one more, much less strained yet containing reminiscent of tension. Giving up all pretense of eating, they cleaned their dishes and left the kitchen.

"Do you truly want to come with me?" Impa asked softly as they traveled the long, sunlit halls.

Pausing, Zelda waited until Impa also stopped before meeting her eyes. She spoke just as softly as she clasped their hands. "Yes, I do."

"Then you shall." Looking over the clothes the Queen had chosen less than hour before, she frowned. "Go change into something more...durable. Suited for riding. I'll prepare the horses." She brushed her lips over the other woman's knuckles before releasing their hands. "Go."

Backing away, Zelda waited until she saw Impa start walking before turning around to jog back to their chambers. Something told her she wasn't completely forgiven just yet.

[-]

As Zelda showered and changed, Impa quickly made her way through the castle via the servant's passages. Uninterrupted, she entered the stables in half the time it would take if she'd used the main corridors.

"Miss Impa?"

Turning to the stable-boy standing in the tackle room doorway, she smiled softly. "Yes Ben?"

The boy, no older than thirteen, ran a hand through his already messy hair, his light brown eyes cloudy from his half-sleep state. "Need m'ta get somethin'?"

Shaking her head, she felt her smile grow. He reminded her of a young Link, something which amused both Ben and Link to no end. "No, thank you. I can handle it."

Wiping the rest of his nap-induced-grogginess from his eyes, he yawned softly and began his
"Yes, we are," she told him while chuckling. The son of a widower footman who worked in the castle, Ben had taken to the horses due to his older brother's care of the animals. When he had been a child barely reaching her knee, he couldn't pronounce "Guardian" or "Maderone" and had simply called her "Miss Impa". Clearly it was a habit he had yet to (and might never) outgrow.

Not that she minded. It was endearing, truth be told.

"'s Link goin'?"

Chuckling again at his less than subtle admiration of the Hero, she shook her head as she finished brushing her white mare. "No, he's not. I have no idea where he is."

"Oh," was the only response she got. A comfortable lull filled the barn as he hummed Epona's Song to the horses while he worked. She continued to smile while saddling both her and Zelda' horses.

From the side door, Zelda held her arms crossed over her chest as she watched. She smiled softly as she watched Ben care for the horses. Her smile grew as she noticed the boy slipping them all treats when he thought Impa wasn't looking.

Her quiet chuckle caused them both to snap their heads towards her. Ducking her head, she felt guilt poison the happiness which had filled her. "Sorry."

Ben said nothing as he looked between the older women he considered friends despite their social standings being far above his own. "Why?" he asked. "Didn't do nothin' wrong..." he added as he furrowed his brows, ignorant of the fact that he'd just forgotten his father's many lessons on how to address the Queen.

The innocence of one who hadn't yet entered the grueling world of adulthood brought another smile to Zelda's lips. She turned to Impa. "I don't know. Did I?"

The question, unasked but not unknown, fluttered between them like a hummingbird. When Impa shook her head, she sighed quietly in relief.

Oblivious to the exchange, Ben shrugged and went back to work, talking to both the women and the horses as he cleaned the stalls. He waved goodbye and bade them a "fun and safe trip" as they lead their mares from the massive stable.

Their boots shifted the gravel beneath them as they walked towards a delivery bridge which led to Eldin Province. They spoke little as both became lost in their own thoughts. It wasn't until they were in the vast field and seated atop the horses that they turned to each other. With a shared smile, they faced forward again as Impa spurred her mare forward, galloping north.

[-]

It wasn't until they neared the rocky path that Zelda realized where they were heading. The Hidden Village, also known as "Old Kakriko", was up ahead. "You hid her in plain sight!" she exclaimed as they continued to race towards the high rock ridges.

"Yes," was Impa's quiet response. She slowed her horse to a canter and waited for Zelda to do the same before facing her. "There was no where else I could hide her."

They slide from their mounts and walked through the tunnel towards the secluded dwelling. As
they stirred dust, Impa looked around the nearly deserted town, her eyes moving from the faded sign to the narrow street. The end of the war had seen the village cleaned and updated, yet it still had few residents. Her grandmother, an old bomb maker and his son who cared for the semi-feral cats along with a traveling merchant who had decided to settle.

Zelda's eyes fell upon buildings which had once been shambles and took in the sight of order. She wondered if the boarded windows hid stores and occupied homes or merely empty structures. Clenching the lead tighter, she felt a shiver run down her spine.

Poe energy.

"They're harmless," Impa murmured as they neared a apartments at the end of the lane. "They guard the town rather than cause mischief."

"Why?"

"No one knows."

"Why not?"

Smiling softly, the Sheikah ran a hand through the Hylian's unbound hair. "Because they disappear before anyone can ask."

"Oh... What about Dampé?"

"Link told you about him? I'm surprised; I thought he'd keep silent."

Grinning, Zelda bumped her hip against Impa's as the stopped walking for a moment. "Why? Don't think I can keep a secret?"

Returning the grin, the older woman shook her head as a cool wind blew through the deserted down, carrying the sound of wolves long gone. "More along the lines of ascension usually being something one keeps silent. It's rarely spoken of by those who witness it."

"Oh." Without realizing it, they had resumed walking and were standing before their destination.

Impa took several deep breaths and looked at her Charge. "Are you sure?" she asked quietly.

Lacing their fingers, Zelda nodded. "I want to meet her. She's your family."

Swallowing hard, the Sage of Shadows took a deep breath. Her stomach churned as her throat tightened. With a shaking hand, she knocked softly on the door. As arm lowered, her thoughts raced.

The Time Sage squeezed her other hand. She didn't need the bond to know the other woman was nervous. "It'll be ok," she whispered. She ran her thumb over white knuckles in a soothing gesture.

Seconds became hours as they stared at the door. The nearly silent click of a turned lock was a cannon blast to their ears. Ever so slowly, the door opened.
Zelda barely kept her jaw from dropping in shock.

Standing before her was a woman with dark gray hair and red eyes. Her nose was smaller than Impa's, but given the generation between them, differences were to be expected.

The drastic height difference was not one she'd expected.

Well...Link did tell her...

"Impa," came the admonishing words which halted Zelda's thoughts, "I told you to tie your horse before you knock."

"Apologies, grandmother." Releasing Zelda hand, Impa took the horses' reins and led them across the street. The young Queen watched her tie them to a post behind an abandoned building and shook her head. Fresh shock and confusion filled her. She had rarely seen Impa bow her head so deeply when previously chastised.

"Come in, child," Impaz beckoned as she walked away from the door. "There's no need to stand out in the street."

Following the older woman into the house, the Hylian looked around and was pleasantly surprised. The house, while small, was clearly lived in. It was a home.

Unlike the outward appearance, which she suspected was more for secrecy's sake than anything, the inside was well maintained. The wooden walls were covered tastefully in paintings and tapestries. Furniture gave the room an intimate feel without being crowded. Sconces and oil lamps provided light that wasn't blinding. The majority of the stone floor was covered in a rug which she could only assume was Sheikah-made due to the symbolism.

The scent of herbs filled the air and caused her to look at the rafters. Plants of all sorts hung from the beams. Nary a cobweb was between them, a testament to the cleanliness of the house. As her eyes slide down the walls, she noticed details she had previously missed. Above each tapestry was a weapon, each somehow connected to the weaving below. Half cast in shadows was a shield which rested above the fireplace mantle. Questions about stories she'd never known filled her mind as she took in the history which decorated the room.

Watching the young woman, Impaz smiled to herself as she made her way into one of several closed doors. She heard the front door close and knew her granddaughter had finished her task. Moving slowly, she set glasses and a pitcher of juice on a tray while trained ears listened to quiet voices. She heard enough to know they were speaking yet couldn't make out their words.

Impa looked around the sitting room before laying a hand on Zelda's shoulder. Quiet chaos ran through the bond. Emotions bounced between them, growing and changing with each passing moment.

"Do you see her often?" Zelda asked quietly.

"No," came the soft, mournful reply. "A few times a year. We write more than I visit." Impa sighed softly and ran a hand through her hair, freeing it from its loose bun. For just a moment, her
throat tightened with sorrow at the words she'd just spoken.

Green eyes met red. "Maybe now that can change?"

"Maybe."

Impa brushed her lips over Zelda's forehead before placing a hand on the small of her back. She pressed softly and nodded towards the couch. "Why don't we sit."

"Is that allowed?" the younger woman asked. She shuffled her feet and glanced between her lover and the open door behind her.

Smiling, the older Sheikah nodded. "Yes, it is." She shook her head in amusement.

Impaz carried the tray towards the center of the room. As she spoke, she chuckled softly when Zelda jumped. "She's right." Smiling at the warriors before her, she gestured to the seats around her. "Sit, please. You are the guest." Her smile widened. "You are also my Queen."

A retort caught in Zelda's throat as she saw the sparkle in Impaz's eyes. Returning the smile with a tentative up-turn of her lips, she cautiously made her way to the seating area. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Silence fell as the trio sat. Glasses of chilled juice were given to the visitors as they tried to settle into the cushions. Several minutes passed with nary a word as the younger women traded anxious glances.

Impa brushed her fingers over Zelda's hand only for Zelda to touch Impa's wrist moments later. They shifted as if unable to get comfortable, barely looking at the wise woman before them.

And wise she was.

Impaz watched her granddaughter and her mate fidget. Their reassurance of the other was done in a way she could only suspect was meant for her not to know. She smiled to herself. Each time she looked at them, the fumbled with their drinks and empty hands twitched. Once, Zelda's knee hit the table with a loud "thump", causing the Hylian to mumble an apology as she rubbed the joint. It wasn't until Impa nearly dropped the pitcher that the elder Sheikah chuckled again.

Wide eyes snapped to the aging women.

Why was she laughing?

Unasked, the question hung between the trio.

"Why so nervous?"

"We're not nervous," was the immediate, echoed response.

Impaz hummed and refilled her glass, watching the lovers through hooded eyes.

"Grandmother...is something wrong?" Impa asked softly.

"Wrong? No. Whatever gave you that impression?" Startled, she met the garnet orbs. They were lighter than her own ruby, which were nearly violet with their darkness.

"You sounded...urgent in your letter."
"I merely wanted to see you is all."

"So nothing is wrong?"

"No."

Zelda lowered her gaze to her hands before looking around the room again. Her eyes landed on what appeared to be a globe sitting in a tucked away bookcase. Without noticing that the Sheikahs had fallen silent, she made her way to the sphere as if in a trance. Her fingers hovered over the faded marked orb as if it trace the paths of those who’d been before her.

"It was a gift from my brother." murmured Impaz in her slightly husky voice. She smiled softly as the young woman jumped and drew her hand back. "It won't bite. Go ahead, bring it into the light."

Doing as told, Zelda cradled the metallic base as if it were made of spun glass. Setting it on the table, she spun it slowly. "The names are old. The lands..."

"It isn't a current globe, Zelda. This was made before the time of the Great Flood that happened far to the east."

Sucking in a breath, the brunette ran her fingers over the brown drawings of land, tracing the continents which were now underwater. Nearly on the other side of the Earth, where there was once masses many times the size of Hyrule, there was now only islands.

Turning the globe, Impaz tapped what was once a country of mountains and rolling forest that stretched between pole and equator. "This is where the Sheikah are said to originate from. The Goddesses are said to have created them and the Hylians at the same time. Our legends, the stories of the Sheikah, say both races were led to each other by the Triad. They were counter-parts, you see, both needing the other to survive as long as they did."

A pause, heavy with ancient knowledge, weighed between them. Zelda whispered, her eyes never leaving the round map as her mind conjured images of such a meeting. "Will you tell me?"

"Yes. Not today, however. The history of our tribe is a long one, one you must learn over time. One," Impaz added with a questioning voice, "I'm surprised Impa did not tell you."

Impa lifted her eyes from her glass. Her face was a mask of undefinable emotions, her eyes pools of memories. "She must learn the history of her own people, her own country, before learning others."

Zelda remained silent as the two women, one in her prime of body and the other in her peak of mind, met eyes. A challenge, unspoken and filled with history, sparked between them. The young Queen averted her gaze. She didn't need the Triforce of Wisdom to know what was happened as something between family.

An argument, one which had begun with the first Sheikah Guardian and Hylian Charge, was waged without words. And yet this archaic fight was nothing compared to the battle which they fought as individuals. As family, separate generations and vastly different lives. One, who grew up in a time of relative peace, said full disclosure to the other half of one's soul. The other, whose skills were built during an uprising and honed in war, said some things should remain unspoken.

Neither realized they were both right. There was a time and place for withholding information; there was also a time and place for sharing it.

No two situations were alike.
So what was the other pretending they were?

They stared for several minutes before Impa muttered and turned away.

With a sigh, Impaz turned to Zelda. When the Hylian met her gaze, she smiled softly. "Please, forgive us. Our race is secretive by nature, we must be...yet it always creates discord."

Nodding, Zelda glanced at Impa before looking at her glass. "I understand." She shifted, calling upon her diplomatic training to remain polite.

"There is something you want to ask, child. So ask. You're doing no one a favor by remaining silent."

"Why've I never met you before. Or heard about you?" The words tumbled from her lips like boulders down a mountain before she could stop them. Anger gave way to shock as she realized just what she'd said. The sound of Impa's sharp inhale, the feel of her turning away, send a knife of guilt through her heart. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Zelda," Impaz said softly, quickly cutting her off. "You have the understand, the Sheikah race has guarded the Royal Family for centuries. There have only been a few times in history when Maderones have not come from our people. As a whole, we're targeted. Those who threaten Hyrule think that because we protect the leaders of this country that we are the most...irreplaceable. You know this isn't true...no person is replaceable.

"However, in the last war, Ganondorf would have done anything to win. He ravaged every village, tribe and race he could find, killing as many as he could. There were so few Sheikah left as it was. The majority of us were guarding you and your father. With so few of us, Kakriko Village wasn't our home anymore.

"I told Link the truth. This place, the 'Old Kakarico', was the original village of my people. I was named after the person who build it, Nimpazeli. From my name came Impa's. I am the last original resident and have been since Impa and the others left for training. I was waiting to give the book to a messenger of the Sky City." Her tone remained soft as she spoke, looking between the two women.

"With my daughter and son-in-law, Impa's parents, dead, I raised her. When she left, I knew I had to stay. I'm an old woman, Zelda...I wouldn't have survived in Kakriko. So few people accept Sheikah as it is, and being so physically different from the rest of my tribe...no, I wouldn't have lasted as long as I have. Those that guard you now, my grandchild included, are the only Sheikah who remain."

She met the Queen's shocked eyes with a steady gaze. A smile graced her wise face and she patted the young woman's hand. "If I know Impa as well as I think I do, she never spoke of me to keep me safe. No one could know about the Hidden Village, not even you. None of us anticipated Link finding out. If it had have been anyone else, they wouldn't have found me.

"We, you and I, would have never been able to meet until many many years past the war's end...never this soon to be sure. You are too important to risk. Not only to the monarchy, but to your family...to Impa. Every time I hear from her, either through a letter or during a visit, she speaks of you. She is highly protective of you, far more than duty calls for...she loves you child."

"I know she does," was the whispered reply.

"Do you?" Impaz asked just as quietly.
"Grandmother, please—"

Impaz shook her head and raised a hand to silence Impa. "Do you, Zelda?"

Zelda shifted uneasily. What was she asking? What did she want to know? The young Sage couldn't meet the eyes of her elder. This woman, who barely knew her but was so close to her mate, was asking something too personal for words...too intimate to be spoken of between strangers. Confusion curled within her. She had known this woman for roughly any hour, possibly less, and she was asking a question her own mate wouldn't.

"Why?" she whispered, unaware she had spoken until Impaz answered.

"If you unaware of her love, then how can you be aware of your own?"

"You don't know me."

Impa watched her grandmother blink in shock. Humor and happiness swirling in her. Her grandmother was pushing boundaries she had no place nearing. As over-protective as she was, Impa knew the question was one of love for her rather than anger at Zelda. And yet...that did little to stop her enjoyment as her mate reminded her grandmother of their respective places. While she would normally, like most people, take offense to being treated as an abstract...

This time, she only found it heartwarming. And a bit ironic.

Zelda slowly raised her head, indignation bubbling in her throat like hysterical laughter. "I thank you for letting me into your home and treating me with the kindness you have. However...I don't know you. You may be Impa's grandmother, but you are a stranger to me. You are asking me question you have no business asking. Do you want to protect her? Yes. I understand that. But you have no right to question my love for her...or her's for me. We're c-consenting adults and the state of our emotions and relationship is no business of yours unless we wish to tell you." Her conviction was strong despite her fumble. Her voice held no anger as she met the ruby eyes of her hostess, though it was clear by the set of her jaw she was angry.

Impaz blinked several times before chuckling. A wide smile graced her lips as she leant forward to pat Zelda's clenched fists. "You're quite right. Forgive me, please."

In the back of her mind, Zelda wondered if the older woman had lost her mind.

As Impa ran a hand over her face, she was surprised she hadn't lost hers in the last almost-minute.

[-]

Time passed in a blur. As the young couple became more relaxed, Impaz's conviction grew stronger. The young woman she had never met, the young woman who was her sovereign and chosen liaison of the Goddesses...was not the same woman Impa had described to her many times over. Not entirely.

She kept these thoughts to herself as she led the Sages from the house and into the street. She told them of the stores which had once been and may be once more. The story of the bomb maker and his son filled the time it took her to show them the hidden tunnels and watchtowers. The ex-traveling merchant met them near the end of the tour and made a show of fawning for Impaz's affection.

Zelda's giggles mixed with Impa's chuckled as Impaz threatening to "rearrange that face of his with that damned walking stick." In good humor, he grumbled and returned to his home in mock-retreat.
Impaz shooed her visitors from the house once they'd finished their walk. She would make dinner and they would leave her to it. She pointed to the front door with her heavy wooden spoon and reminded Impa that waiting for dinner did not mean sneaking into the old mines to play hide and seek.

The hostess laughed to herself as she heard Zelda pestering her granddaughter for "that story" as they left the house. When the front door closed, she shook her head and returned to the kitchen.

She worked without thought as her mind drifted. No, she told herself, Zelda wasn't the same woman her granddaughter had spoken of for years. She was much too reserved and unsure of herself. Not that she wasn't confident, since confidence radiated from her, but...

It lacked something. Some strength. Some conviction.

The young Queen, who clearly detested the smallest amount of social etiquette, was...

Frowning, she stared blindly at the bowl of dough in her hands. What was she? What was bothering her so much that she was willing to call her grandchild a liar?

Shaking her head, she stepped from her stood and entered the cellar. As she searched for the perishables she needed, her ground her teeth. She was a Sheikah, damn it all, and had not lived the life and learned the lessons she did only to throw it all away for idle worry.

Except...

She was a Sheikah, and she had learned the lessons she had. While she had never been chosen to be a Guard, and had been trained more for the magical side of her tribe's defense than the physical...she was still a Living Shadow. She was still a member of the tribe which protected the Royal Family, and still held the knowledge, mind and instincts of her people.

As she returned to the kitchen and washed her finds, the words began to enter her mind with furious speed.


Broken.

She had seen it before, but only once had she known the cause of such soulful eyes. Like cast iron, so strong, yet so brittle.

Her fingers cracked, aching from the pressure she used to curl them around the knife once more. She sliced the vegetables without notice, the shining metal digging into the thick wood under it. With each thunk from the knife-strike, she felt anger brew within her.

Something had happened to the woman she had only met. And while she would never fault her granddaughter, a Maderone, from keeping private knowledge of her Charge from her...

She knew she had been deceived.

Impa hadn't agreed to their meeting on this day, hadn't led her Charge and shesha-nole to her because Zelda had asked.
"The fool of a coward," she whispered to herself. "Bringing her here won't change the past...whatever it is. You know this. So why?"

The answer came softly. A whisper, the barest of admissions which was filled with sorrow so great it tore a sob from her choked throat.

"Because she needs something I can't give her...something I was hoping you can."
Humble Hearts (III)

Zelda sat atop the watchtower, marveling at the small town below...entranced by how different it appeared from the land outside it. Like a child receiving a gift, her eyes remained wide as she took in every detail. How long had the village been here? Why here? Had the Sheikah always lived here alone? When did that change?

She felt the bond stir and turned to Impa, who stared without sight at what had once been her home. "Impa?"

Shaking her head, Impa drew herself from her thoughts. She pulled away from the familial link, closing her mind from her grandmother. "Yes?"

"Is...is something wrong?"

"No. I'm just...thinking. I haven't been up here since I was younger than you. It reminds me of my training...my childhood."

Zelda laced her fingers through Impa's and ran her thumb over the back of her hand. "Your skin is dry."

Smiling, Impa shook her head again. "An odd thing to observe."

"Not really. Just random." With a sigh, Zelda rested her head on Impa's shoulder. "Will you tell me about your childhood?"

"What do you want to know?" came the quiet response. Impa returned her gaze to the village, feeling much like a hawk searching for its prey. Memories swirled with her chaotic thoughts as figments of people long dead ran around the empty village.

"Whatever you want to tell me." The Hylian stared at the town once more. So different where their childhood homes. Where she had grown up in a castle, and on the run when Ganon had seized the castle...Ganondorf...

A shiver ran through her.

The Sheikah wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer. When the Sage of Time curled against the warmth of her Guardian, they both allowed their minds to drift to better thoughts.

"When I was young, we used to play in the mines," Impa said quietly. She pointed to an area hidden behind the shops, at the far end of the village. "The other children and I...we used to play all sorts of games there. One of our favorites was to pretend we were sneaking into someplace." Her lips twisted into an ironic smile. "We were children, full of imagination...never had a single clue that our games would be truth one day.

"Girls and boys...we played together. When we were older, we teased each other. But at the end of the day, we were all Sheikah...all tribe...didn't matter if we were male or female, old or young, just that we family. We were our own people, people no one understood...or wanted too. We were born of shadows, were called Living Shadows. So we lived in them. Played in them...they were our
home."

Her words trailed as a gust of harsh mountain wind swirled around them. They squinted against the summer's knives of air, only sighing in relief when it was over. The evening sun shone brightly, making them squirm from the uncomfortable heat. Without a word, they quickly left the tower in search of shade as Impa continued her story.

"My parents died when I was young...barely a toddler. Impaz was the only family I ever knew. She was a village elder. Despite her...physical differences from our race, she was always strong. She could fight—we all could, unless disabled—but was better at magics." She turned her gaze towards the sky. Its clear blue canvas was free of clouds, a mockery to her memories. "She taught me much of what I know...of what I use to act as the Sage of Shadows. If I didn't learn it from her, then what she taught me was the base of what I later learned. Her lessons...they saved me many times. Some fights are physical, but some are magical...spiritual...mental... I always said her lessons are why I made it through training. She doesn't agree with me on that."

Her lips twisted into a small, half-amused, half-annoyed smile as she turned to her mate. "Then again...who agrees all the time?" Brushing a strand of hair from her face, she looked at the boarded village with eyes seeing only the past.

"If I ever forget everything she ever told me, there is one thing she made sure that will never leave me: to have respect. Everyone is a person. We all deserve respect, no matter our race...or deeds. Even beings who side with evil deserve a measure of respect. Who knows their life stories, or the reasons behind their decision. Even if I hate someone for what they've done, I would respect them enough not to cruelly prolong their death."

Zelda said nothing as she froze. Why was she telling her this?

Impa continued to stare at her old home as if she'd never seen it before, ignoring the unasked question.

"I wish I could change that part of me...but I know I can't. It's like my love for you...it'll never go away." Sighing, she closed her eyes. "My childhood is something that most people wouldn't understand, Zelda. In some ways, I was carefree...barely following the few rules I was given. In others, like you, I was never given a chance to forget what I would one day become. A Guard, at the least. But we all know the mark I wear on my arm would make me more than a Guard...because I already was.

"But...there were good things. Things I tried to give you. The freedom of being able to do what I wanted, when I wanted, where I wanted. To drop all work and go play...to stay up late without fear of what would happen from lack of sleep. Those things though...they came with a price. I did what I wanted, but if I dropped my work to go play, then I would have double later. I was taught that life isn't easy, and you can't ignore it without repercussion. I suppose over the years it's made my heart hard...

"I'd have to say though, my childhood was a good one. I wasn't mistreated or ignored. The Sheikah aren't like other races, we have our own ways of doing things that most of the races find...unorthodox at best. Trial and error. Guidance without being stifling. Balance is the word I'm looking for. There was always a balance. Fun and work, freedom and restriction...it all serves a purpose."

She met Zelda's eyes without hesitation. "I know that's not what you wanted to hear, but it's what I think of. I could tell you story after story...but the message would be the same."
Green eyes held red as confusion and disappointment swirled within a mind full of unease. "I don't...understand," Zelda whispered.

"You asked me to tell you about my childhood, and expected me to tell you stories about what I used to do. I could do that...but in the end, all you would have is the same message: my life is one of balance. We - I - don't do things by halves, my love. I will tell you stories, if you wish. But you won't get only fond memories. What I just told you...it was a balance between fond and not-so-happy memories."

Shaking her head, Zelda looked at the cracked ground under her feet. Confusion gave way to frustration at herself. She still didn't understand. What did this have to do with anything? Why was Impa trying to convince her that she didn't want to know? Because she was...Zelda knew this was manipulation, albeit, in a strange way. But why?

"Because..." was the whispered reply. "You want to know about my grandmother, about my people...and before you can know that, you have to know more about me."

The young Queen closed her eyes and breathed slowly as the world around her spun. Why did it suddenly feel as if everything she had ever known was about to, once again, be torn apart?

[-]

Impaz sat at the table. Resting for a moment, she ran a hand over her face. Earlier, she had teased the youngest of her guests while trying to gauge her understanding of herself and her mate. She hadn't known her question, while both serious and jesting, would have made her angry.

What had gone wrong?

As she tilted her head back, she wondered how she had misjudged the situation so. How she had failed to see the insecurities long before she struck them. Though she barely knew her, she loved the young warrior like a child—just as she loved Link, Shad and Illia like children. How could she not, when at so young an age, they had to be so old?

How could she not, when they needed a mother's unconditional love just as much as she needed to give it?

It had been many years since Impa had left home, since her daughter and son-in-law had died. She knew she was lonely.

But...

A mother's heart didn't love out of loneliness. It loved...because it did. Because it recognized someone as a child and loved that person as if she or he had been born from its body.

So how did she balance her love for the child born of her daughter's body...with the growing love for the mate of her daughter's daughter?

With a chuckle, she smiled to herself. She stood and began the final preparations for their meal. "Impaz ole girl, you need to leave the house more," she told herself. "You're much too analytical."

Despite her analysis of the day's events, she didn't realize she'd answered her own question.

[-]

Impa raised Zelda's head, her heart hurting for the pain she had inadvertently caused. "I love you
Zelda. As my Charge, as my friend, as my mate, as my family. You are my world, sesha, the reason I exist. But you have to remember...I am not a Hylian. I will never be one."

Wisdom, both her own and that of the Triforce, failed her as tears burned at the back of her eyes. "I don't---" Biting her tongue, Zelda pulled away. "Why are you doing this?"

"You asked my grandmother why you never met her. Why I never spoke of her. While her answer is true...it isn't the whole story. Yes, I wanted to keep you both safe. You more-so...and she knows that. But you don't know..." With a sigh, she ran a hand through her hair as the other woman turned away. "I was born a Sheikah, Zelda, just as you were born Hylian. While our races don't matter to us and whatever relationship we may have, the fact is that our cultures are different. Our culture is just as much of our person as our physical traits.

"If I had let you meet my grandmother earlier...between the war and the strain between us...it would've been not only a disrespect to her, but also to you."

Zelda said nothing. She kept her back to Impa, listening. She hugged herself, waiting.

"To the Sheikah, not only is taking you—my Charge—out of the place where I thought you were safe disrespectful...but it is also a display of arrogance. It is saying I am so strong, so powerful, that I would expose you to the world in the middle of a war just to satisfy my own desire for you to meet my grandmother. Who, by the way, would have cast me out of her sight possibly for the rest of her life. If that wasn't bad enough, to have brought you were with any sort of strain between us...not only would I have been arrogant, I would have been a fool who was seen as..."

She swallowed, trying to find the words she needed and knowing there were no others but those she already had.

"In my culture, to have brought you were while our trust in each other was shaky would have been saying I enjoy your emotional pain and want to show off."

Zelda flinched, hugging herself tighter. She continued to listen as Impa's mind brushed hers, offering knowledge of her culture through the bond. She let it flow into her mind, not sure she wanted to know anymore.

Impa lowered her voice. "I never told you anything of my people for many reasons. One, I wanted you to learn everything you needed to learn about Hyrule as a whole and each individual race other than my own first. Second, the war would have complicated any knowledge I could give you. Especially with..." She took a shuddering breath as words unspoken hung between them. "And third...I wanted to protect you. Some knowledge, once given, can never be forgotten. My culture is similar to yours...and in some ways, it is very different."

"You trained me as a Sheikah. Said I was all but one in blood."

"And you are."

"But I know nothing..." Zelda whispered, voice heavy with misery and misunderstanding.

"It takes a lifetime and more to learn about one's own culture, my l...keta," she amended when the younger woman tensed to hide another flinch.

"Does she know? Ab-about—"

"No. I would never tell something like that. It is your story to tell, not mine."
For a moment, silence reined. When Zelda spoke, her voice betrayed her sudden confident posture. Her words waved and were laced with the fragility that only comes from walking the razor's edge.

"What was the other reason you let me come today? Besides that we both asked?"

Indecision tore through her heart and dried her mouth. Impa swallowed and spoke mentally, unable to find her physical voice. "Because it was time."

"For what?"

"For you to meet...both of you."

Once more, silence fell. This time, Zelda didn't need to ask. The new knowledge settled into her mind. You are the only ruler of my heart, of my being. Impa had told her that...had said that they day they admitted their love. The memory, drawn up like a bucket from the well, seemed to merge with the new knowledge. Turning to face the older woman, she met her eyes.

"Because...of our relationship...because it changed..."

"Yes."

"Because...to your tribe..." She trailed off.

"It's a sign of shame, and in our case blasphemy, to keep her from you once you both have asked to meet."

This time, neither of them broke the silence.

[-]

After setting the table, Impaz looked at her work and smiled in satisfaction. Simple but delicious. It was nice to cook for more than herself.

Hopefully she would be able to do it more often.

With a chuckle to herself at the path of her thoughts, she quickly left the house and looked down the road. Whistling, she waited until the younger woman saw her before speaking. "Come eat girls." Her hoarse voice carried on the wind, her amusement keeping her tone light enough to have the desired effect.

She didn't have to hear Impa's groan at being called a "girl" or Zelda's giggles to know they heard her.

[-]

With those three words, the tension which had built during their conversation melted away. The change was nearly instant and accepted without hesitation.

They laced their hands and quickly made their way towards Impaz's home. They didn't need to speak as their minds brushed. The bond pulsed with apologies and forgiveness. Like all things, it would take time to work through the issues which would stem from their cultural differences.

And yet...they'd worked through them for years, even if Zelda had never known.

Plus, they'd fought and won a war. Cultural differences really couldn't compare.
Impa brought Zelda's hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles. When they stopped outside the closed door, she met the emerald orbs of her lover. She turned the elegant hand in her own and placed a kiss to her palm, and then another to her wrist. As her lips brushed the long, self-inflicted scar, she saw Zelda's eyes close.

"Don't...please...no shame. You're alive."

"Because of you."

"No...because of yourself. We both know if you didn't want to be here, you would have found a way." Squeezing the hand in hers, she pressed a kiss to Zelda's forehead.

Their stomachs grumbled in unison.

Laughing, the entered the home without another word on the subject.
Dinner passed with laughter and carefree smiles. Unlike the earlier fiasco, the only sounds of clanking dishes and drumming legs happened intentionally. Zelda and Impa shared loving glances as their hands brushed. Impaz watched with a knowing smile, never commenting as their glances became longer and led to moments of silence.

Dessert led the trio to the sitting room, where they traded stories of their daily lives. Impaz nodded and smiled happily as she heard of Link's latest trouble making...and laughed as Impa interjected about "poor Shad". Zelda literally clung to her seat as Impaz told them about recently exploring the partially collapsed mines (despite her granddaughter's muttering).

It was nearly dusk by the time the duo prepared to leave. As Impa retrieved the horses, Impaz stood beside Zelda in the doorway. She murmured quietly before the younger woman could speak. "While I know my granddaughter has the best of intentions...there are times she can be a bit...obsessive."

Zelda turned towards the older woman with a blank face. Waiting. Listening.

Impaz sighed softly, staring out the door at her only living descendent. "While I agree that we probably wouldn't have met so soon under other circumstances...we have. She will try to protect both of us...and eventually might get a bit paranoid. Don't let her take you down that path, child. I love her dearly. But...only you can teach her there is more to life than being a Guardian, more than being a warrior."

She turned her wise eyes towards the searching orbs of her possible future daughter-in-law. "Show her, please, for me, that even though there's danger there can still be fun."

"I'm trying," Zelda whispered. She glanced at Impa, who was checking the saddles of their mounts.

"I know. I just had to ask you." The older Sheikah returned her gaze to the Hylian. "Write to me, if you want. The letter man will find me. And if he doesn't...that pesky talking owl of Link's will."

Blinking, the young Queen turned towards the other woman again. Shock stole her words as she swallowed. Humbled, she bowed her head for a moment. "I...thank you."

"Please," Impaz said quietly as Impa neared them, "Do write. Any time...for anything." When their eyes met, she nodded without breaking the connection. Without words, she reassured the younger woman and grasped her hands. "It is in her blood to protect you...to protect her family, her tribe. But don't let it consume her. Don't let it consume you. You are both more than the titles you hold, dear child. Remember that, please."

The words "thank you" barely fell from Zelda's numb lips. She pulled her cool hands from the warm grasp of her elder and stepped into the street.

Impaz watched the younger Sages with hooded eyes. The shock the Queen had shown tore at her heart. She sighed softly as she saw the couple mount their horses, wave, and head for the town entrance.

The door shut with a soft click the moment they were out of sight. Sadness, joy, anger and confusion rolled within her. Her heart ached for the children of her body and heart.
To see her granddaughter so reserved, so different than the young woman who had left her care...

To see her monarch so insecure, so unsure of the most innocent of offerings and request...

What had become of the younger generations?

Closing her eyes, she sighed again and leaded against the door. She clenched her jaw as anger ripped through the haze of confusion and pain. It was all the usurper's fault. Damn him to the *Lightest* of the Goddess' realms.

Just as quickly had her wrath had come, it left. A void sat within her, a smoldering crater of emptiness.

Opening her eyes, she walked to the couch with unfocused eyes and sat. Her hands ran over the still warm cushion and a smile fluttered over her lips. A gentle breeze cooled the crater as a rough chuckle fell from her throat.

Yes, damn him. Damn him for what he'd done, and may he suffer for all eternity.

And may his suffering return thrice over in happiness to his victims. Nay, his *survivors*.

Broken or not, scared or not... The young woman who had just left with her granddaughter was a survivor, even if she didn't know it.

*Aye,* she thought to herself with a nod, *a survivor and warrior needing time to rest.* And rest she would.

With another chuckle, the wise Sheikah stood and made her way to the kitchen to clean. Zelda may not have been born of her flesh (and thank Farore for that!) but she was surely a child of her heart.

Just as stubborn, just as cunning, and as surely as the summer day was hot, just as quick-witted.

She almost pitied Impa. She had underestimated her mate. Zelda may be lost, may be confused and in constant pain...may not even know her own name, if the half-hidden mad glint in her eyes was any indication.

But she wasn't going down without a fight.

Whistling a Sheikah tune to herself, she smirked as she submerged her hands in the soapy dish water. Her granddaughter was in for one helluva battle if she thought Zelda would tolerate her obsessive coddling for long.

[-]

[-]

**AN:** You can blame my muses and friends for the ending. Actually, my friends more than the muses. I've based Impaz off a few of them...and boy are they all in a "I pity *her* if she doesn't stop doing that" mood. Smirking included.

**Songs:**

You Found Me by Kelly Clarkson (interpreted)

Miss Independent by Kelly Clarkson (interpreted)
Chapter Nineteen

Turning Points

The days continued to grow hotter as the months blended into one another. It wasn't until the leaves began to hint at the coming change that cool winds began to blow. When the first brown-edge leaf graced the vibrant green grass inside the castle walls, a soft breeze rustled it along with a tightly clutched letter.

Alone to her thoughts, Zelda stared at the parchment until tears filled her unfocused eyes. Blinking, she shook her head. She knew this day would come. But...so soon? Had it really been months since she'd last spoken with either woman? Her cunning, and sometimes frightful, sister Queen of the shadowed realm was to marry. The annoying, if often right, spirit-fea that had been her brother's companion for most of his teenage years was going to be a wife.


Within the month.

Dear Goddesses, how long had it been since she'd spoken to them?!

Her feet dangled in the water as she looked around her private garden. Her eyes landed on the window she'd clung to the day Link had interrupted her training. It seemed like yesterday the fea had chosen to accompany her brother on his journey.

Had it really been years since the Twilight Queen had asked for alliance?

Where had time gone?

Shaking her head in shock, she looked at the letter again. The words didn't change, no matter how long she stared at them. Two of her friends were getting married in a matter of weeks. Two of her female friends, one of whom was also a Queen...

She chuckled to herself, realizing where her thoughts were going. She was happy for her friends. Their marriage had nothing to do with her situation.

Placing the letter in her pocket before it fell in the slow current, she closed her eyes. It really wasn't that unexpected if she thought about it. They had been together for years, and it was clear as the water below her that they were in love. She'd heard them talking about marriage, had heard them both mentioned they wanted to marry.

But...so soon?

Running a hand through her loose curls, she stared at the cool water and allowed her thoughts to drift.

[---]

Within his chambers, Link leaned into the hand that ran through his hair. He sighed softly as he felt Shad's chin rest on his head.
“Are you going to go?”

“Of course.”

Blue eyes met brown. Confidence and insecurity clashed, pulling a coo of sadness and reassurance from chapped lips.

“Shad...would you rather not go?”

Shrugging, the archeologist tried to appear nonchalant. “It's up to you. I mean, I don't know them.”

“You too do know Midna and Navi!”

“Not as well as you,” came the mumbled reply.

The knighted Hero shook his head in disbelief. “I ran around the country with them for years. But that doesn't mean they don't love you like family. Seesh Shad, Navi kept pestering me about you while you were still in in-patient.”

Shad ducked his head sheepishly. “It just...I dunno, feels...odd.”

“Why?” Link pushed himself up to sit on the couch beside his lover. “C'mon, talk to me...please?”

“It's still odd, I guess. To be considered...their friend.” He stared at the letter clutched in his boyfriend's hand.

Looking between the embossed parchment and his companion, Link felt like smacking himself. He kept his voice low, not wanting to sound accusatory. “Shad...by them...do you mean Midna and Zelda?”

The barest of nods made the Kokiri-born warrior want to rip his hair out. Sometimes...just sometimes...he really did wonder how he stayed sane. Between Zelda's psychosis (not her fault), Impa's constant switching between possessive/freedom-ness (her fault), Shad's silence about any-and everything he felt/thought/wondered/experienced or otherwise sensed in any way shape or form (his fault), and random people thinking they could take over the country...well, it wore on a person!

“Why?”

Shad shrugged again, not lifting his eyes from the elegant writing as his mind flew into the past. “I just...it still feels weird is all.”

“They consider you family.”

“Because of you.” Smiling sadly, he raised his head. He met the troubled eyes of the man who'd saved him from himself. “Because I'm with you. Don't get me wrong...they're good women, wouldn't snub anyone unless they were evil or arrogant idiots. But if I'd never met you, if I hadn't gotten in a relationship with you...I never would have become their friends. You know it. I know it. They know it.”

“I got lucky, being friends with Zelda.”

“I know. But you two were kids...it was different.”

Standing, Link shook his head. He threw the letter to the table as he made his way to a side cabinet. Without looking at the other man, he opened the fragile doors and poured himself a drink.
“Lin—”

“Don’t! It’s early, I know. But...don't...please.” He pressed his head against one of the shelves and closed his eyes. His ears rung as his head pounded in time with his heart. His fingers tightened around the thick crystal, his knuckles turning white from the pressure. He sipped the air, feeling the burn of alcohol silence the wolf. Chaos brewed within him.

His lover was questioning his status in their family, and had been for a long while...without saying a word. The Hero shook his head without lifting it, relishing the feel of the wood digging into his skull. If that wasn't bad enough, his sister was growing anxious and more confused by the second. He could feel her nearing the edge again. The nagging, the tugging from their bond, the snickering, inaudible voice in the back of his mind told him that.

Two different directions. Both needed him, but he couldn't really do anything for either.

He swallowed a sob and chased it with another finger of the harsh liquor. It may be too early in the day for drinking, but even the Goddesses couldn't fault him...could they? Sometimes...sometimes, something had to give. Sometimes, there had to be a bit of numbness to be able to think clearly.

Shad stared without blinking. He knew. He knew without ever having been told. He knew...and there was nothing he could do for the man he called his beloved. Not this time. This time, it was a fight he had to do alone.

Closing his eyes, the brunette took a deep breath. “I...I think I'll go for a walk.” Without looking at the blonde man, he all but fled their rooms. He darted into a room without thought and leaned against the door.

“Shad?”

Looking up, the young man met the eyes of his lover's adoptive father.

“Mikal...” Swallowing, he continued to hold his gaze as tears blurred his vision. “I'm worried about Link.”

[---]

Hours bled into days almost without notice. As Link apologized to Shad and attempted to make amends for his abrupt change in behavior over the past few weeks, Zelda composed and discarded multiple letters to Impaz.

How did you tell a woman you knew from one in-person visit and several letters your innermost thoughts?

With a shuddering sigh, she dropped the quill and ran a hand through her hair. Groaning, she rubbed her face.

It shouldn't be this hard to write a letter, damn it all!

Sighing again, she lifted her head and looked at the desk. Her eyes caught the wedding invitation. Running her fingers over the embossed letters, she stared blindly at the gilded words. In weeks, two of her friends were getting married.

Her head snapped up as she registered the sound of the creaking door handle. Who was—

Another sigh left her lips, this time filled with relief. She smiled softly.
Impa.

The Sheikah slipped into the room and closed the door nearly as silently as it had opened. She turned slowly, unwilling to break the stillness which seemed to engulf the room. Her eyes met troubled emerald pools without pause.

“How are you, sesha?” she asked quietly. Slow, measured steps closed the distance between them. She rounded the gleaming desk and leaned against it.

“Ok. Kinda...lost, I guess.”

Running her fingers over the smooth, reddening cheek of the Hylian, Impa gave her a small smile. “Anything I can help with?”

“No really,” Zelda murmured as she placed her fingers atop the hand caressing her cheek. She nuzzled the rough palm. “I missed you.”

“You saw me just this morning.”

“That was hours ago.”

Their eyes met once more. For just a moment, something unnamed blazed between them, taunting them with what could be.

If only....

Just a little closer, and...

Breaking the connection, Impa pressed a kiss to Zelda's forehead. Her stomach clenched as she pushed the thought from her mind. If only was why she'd spent the morning by herself. If only was not a notion she wanted to consider—one she couldn't consider.

And even though she didn't want to, Zelda did. Oh, how she wished she did want to think about it. But if only and just a little closer is what led to trouble.

Turning her face upwards, she quickly brushed her lips over her Guardian's.

See, no thought necessary and it still worked out.

Impa blinked. Once, twice, a third time. Well....that...was unexpected.

“But not unwelcome?” Zelda asked quietly. Nerves made her bite her lip

Realizing her thoughts had slipped through the bond, the Shadow Sage shook her head. “Not unwelcome. Very welcome in fact. I just wasn't expecting it.”

The leader of the Sages sagged every so slightly in relief. She grinned sheepishly to herself. “You did tell me you wouldn't mind sharing kisses with me.”

Impa bit her lip as a shiver ran through her veins. She'd remembered those words. It seemed like a lifetime ago, the first kiss Zelda gave her. Had it truly been a few months?

“How about you go out with me?”

Much as Impa had moments before, Zelda blinked several times. Now who was acting before thinking? “Ex...excuse me?” She flushed as her voice squeaked.
The words had tumbled free before she'd even fully considered them. Taking a deep breath, she met the wide eyes of her Charge and beloved. “Will you go out with me? On a date?”

“A... date?”

They stared at one another, both wondering if they were missing something.

Deciding to abide by her earlier decision, Zelda nodded before the shock wore off. Ignoring the fluttering in her stomach, she nodded again. “Yes. I will.”

As they continued to hold the others’ gaze, they smiled ruefully. Maybe this “no thinking” thing was a good idea after all.

[---]

Elsewhere in the castle, Shad handed Mikal a sealed scroll. With a heavy heart, he left the scroll in the hands of the man he considered a second father.

Neither spoke as their eyes met. The countdown had begun.
Chapter Twenty

Sunset Melodies (I)

It wasn't until Din was honored for lowering the temperature that the day came. Within a fortnight, the green trees were red, brown and yellow as fall made itself known. The last harvest was prepared for sale or storage. Stores were checked and heavy linens pulled from bedroom chests.

The day was to begin like any other, as far as she knew. Yet when Zelda woke well after dawn, she knew it would not. Though she rarely slept late, the few times she did, Impa woke her to begin the day. But a thorough search of their chambers revealed the Sheikah had dressed and left. The cold sheets and candles told the Hylian her Guardian had woken hours before.

So why had she let her oversleep?

Shaking her head, she wrapped her dressing gown tighter around her and made her way to the bathroom. As the warm water washed soap from her sluggish limbs, the young Queen continued to ponder the difference in their routine. While she dressed, her pondering became thoughts of worry. Had something happened during the night?

A quick search of the library, her office, their garden, the warrior barracks and the kitchen failed to reveal her mate. Sighing, she grabbed a long-cold muffin from a basket in the cooking room and nibbled as she made her way towards her office once more. Could Impa have informed the Guard?

With barely a look at one another, they told her they did know where her mate was. She knew by their expressions they would not tell her, no matter how often she asked. Another sigh, this time of aggravation, fell from her lips as sat at her desk. Where was she?

The bond remained stubbornly silent as she turned to it for answer.

Slumping in her chair, she stared at the half-eaten muffin with a scowl.

Chuckling to herself, Impa shook her head as she continued preparations. She knew Zelda was angry with her. But this time, she would have to wait for answers. Some surprises took time.

Stopping her work, she looked around and smiled with satisfaction. Yes, this would do nicely. Turning to her companions, she whispered so the patrons around them wouldn't hear.

There could be no chance of word getting back to Zelda.

Each annoying tic-tock of the damned clock above the mantle told Zelda the day would continue to pass slowly. She was going to kill Impa when she saw her.

Throwing the ledger down, she growled to herself. Unable to focus, she abandoned her work as the lunch hour struck. Storming from the office, she made her way towards the small dining room she, Link, Impa, now Shad and previously her father had shared for years. The sound of quiet steps behind her made her spin.
"I can take care of myself!" Her voice rose and took on a shrill tone as she stared into the ruby colored eyes of her Guard.

"You can, my Lady," one of the men murmured. "We know this. However, protocol—"

"Damn protocol, gentleman. If I can survive a war with the usurper, I can protect myself in my own home for a few hours." Spinning, she continued towards her destination without another word.

She ground her teeth as they continued to follow her.

[-]

Lunch passed as quickly as the day had slowly. Link watched with hooded eyes as the Guard escorted his sister to wherever she was going. Her foul mood had kept their meal silent. She gave him a look of pure rage as she asked if he knew where "the Maderone" was. When he shook his head, he swore her eyes flashed.

Shad watched his lover's fingers tighten around his goblet as he fell deeper into thought. While the Queen's mood was something to worry over, it was not his focus. Fingering the latest letter in his pocket, he dismissed himself and made his way towards their suite.

He had planning to finish.

[-]

It wasn't until nearly five that Zelda entered her chambers once more. Her anger had long since given way to sadness. It wasn't like Impa to go all day without talking to her—she hadn't even left a note.

Sniffing, she rubbed her eyes to banish the gathering tears. Crying would help nothing. Muttering to herself, she opened the bedroom door without a thought.

A heavenly smell filled her nose and warmed her veins as she sniffed again.

She gasped softly as her eyes scanned the room. Candles, flowers and fruit where scattered everywhere. Paths of petals led to both her dressing room and the bathroom.

Her legs barely held her as she stumbled forward. Her large bed was perfectly made, something she had refused to do in her horrid mood this morning, and covered with a sea of soft flowers. Sitting at the edge of the bed was a note held in place by her favorite candies. With shaking fingers, she slid the note free.

Fresh tears fell down her cheeks as understanding dawned. Holding the note to her chest, she closed her eyes and giggled. What a fool she'd been.

My love,

Two weeks ago today, you agreed to let me take you on a date. If you still agree, I wish to do so tonight. In the dressing room, you will find a new outfit for this night. In the bath, you'll find a tub waiting. Take as long as you wish to prepare.

I will be waiting in the hall and no closer for your appearance.

All my love,

Impa
PS: Please try not to eat all the sweets. You don't want to spoil your appetite.

Chuckling, she kissed the note before laying it back on the bed. It didn't take long to gather the fruit in a basket to store in the kitchen cooler, nor to hide the sweets for later. Though Impa would never admit it, she had a horrible habit of stealing her treats instead of finding her own.

Following the rainbow of petals to her dressing room, she felt the last of her annoyance fall away. Much like her bedroom, the dressing room was covered in candles and petals, the mirror reflecting each perfect one. Never pausing, she knelt beside the central stool and untied the twine. Pushing the string away, she pulled the lid from the box.

Her hands shook as she lifted the first layer. A shirt softer than any silk and the color of pale, sun-kissed gold hung from her fingers. Threads of tan, brown, light gray and muted dark green gave it the appearance of the desert at dawn. The long sleeves fluttered as she held them up to the light.

Choked with emotion, she laid the shirt beside the box. Her heart pounded with love and exhilaration as she removed the second layer. She had to blink back fresh tears. Impa knew her so well.

Chuckling, she remembered the Sheikah's comment many years ago about the "multiple, impractical petticoats" she wore.

Maybe this wasn't only an attempt to match her tastes. Whatever the reason, her mate was a goddess.

Breeches of soft hide and color of bark felt light in her hands. She laid them over her arm and ran her fingers over the pants, marveling at their design. She knew without trying them on they would fit perfectly. Tight enough to stay in place and not hinder movement, but loose enough not to feel exposing or restrictive.

Smiling to herself, she gently placed the top on the pants and turned back to the box. All that was left was a simple two sentences begging her to leave her circlet at home.

If Impa had to ask, maybe she didn't knew her that well. Turning the parchment over, she chuckled again.

I do so. I'm asking because I know you hate wearing it.

Then again, maybe she did.

[-]

Nearly a luxurious bath scented with something that reminded her of a late spring breeze with undertones of winter wind, what felt like a million brush and hot-comb strokes, and few moments to figure out what undergarments to wear with the new clothes later, she was dressed. A glance at a sundial by the balcony doors told her almost an hour had passed since her entrance. Running a hand through her straight locks, she glanced around the room. The candles had burned themselves out, leaving only the sconces left.

Frowning, she glanced at her feet. Even if the boots were rarely used, they were not new. While being the epitome of fashion was not normally something she cared for, this was an exception. Impa had went through the trouble of getting this special outfit made. Surely she couldn't wear—

What was that?
Moving towards her cloak that hung near the door, she grinned. She'd never felt the bond thrum from Impa's nearness. But near she had been, and sitting under the cloak she'd bought just last week was a brand new pair of boots. Merely a few shades darker than the pants, she knew they would all but blend in with the rich Hyrule earth.

Within minutes she had laced the boots and clasped the cloak. Taking one last look over herself, she pulled the sleeves down self-consciously to cover her scars. Refusing to dwell on them, she lifted her head and left the bedchamber. The corridor connecting the inner chambers and sitting room was silent, the only sound her boots hitting the floor. The sitting room was empty save for the furniture.

Taking a deep breath, she laid her hand on the handle leading into the corridor. Swallowing her sudden nerves, she closed her eyes for a minute. Her thoughts and emotion were as chaotic as a sea storm, sending her spiral of confusion. Shaking her head, she pushed it away. She would not allow anything to ruin this night.

She stepped into the hall as the last words of that determined vow rang in her mind. Her breath caught in her throat as she spotted the woman who had organized everything.

Impa's gentle curls were pulled back into a loose braid, rather than her normal bun. Her shirt was half-sleeves in a flattering mixture of dawn's colors. Her breeches were the same cut as Zelda's, though they were black rather than brown. Her black boots climbed partway up her legs, something the Hylian had expected.

"You look beautiful," Impa whispered. She smiled softly as Zelda's startled eyes jumped up to meet hers. Taking the smaller hand in her own, she brushed her lips over soft knuckles, taking in the scents of her bath.

Blushing, Zelda ducked her head. "Thank you."

Lifting her head with a single finger, the older woman shook her own. "No shame, my love."

"I'm not ashamed...I'm embarrassed." Peeking through her lashes, she met the crinkling red eyes of her mate.

"Why?"

"...I don't know."

She lifted her head and their eyes continued to meet. The world fell away as their minds touched and wrapped around each other. Colors beyond the earthly plane and feelings more than any mortal could comprehend surrounded them. Warmth radiated from their hearts, coiling around their singular soul in a protective embrace.

Just as quickly, the spell was broken. The bond faded, returning them to the Here and Now, to a place within Time and rather than outside. They never broke the connection as their chests heaved for breaths. Their hearts pounded in beat, struggling to keep pace with their rapid breaths. Their connection remained even as their chests heaved, pounding hearts struggling to keep pace with rapid breaths.

"Wow," was all Zelda said.

Impa merely nodded.
Sunset Melodies (II)

Sound and sight melded together into one blur of distorted sensation. It wasn't until the world rocked that everything began to clear. Glancing around, she saw rolling hills and trees along the horizon. Green slowly gave way to darkening blue as the sun crept ever closer to that distant cosmic line.

A young voice slowly registered, the excited chatter loud despite the other sounds. What was that? Looking around once more, she noticed she was sitting in something mobile. Blinking, she turned her focus forward. A buggy? Turning towards the warm body beside her, she silently asked her companion for clarification.

"It's faster to take a buggy rather than walk or ride to our destination." Impa rubbed head. Her mind swam as she tried to focus through the haze of emotion and energy which had engulfed them. Zelda must be as confused if she could not remember leaving the castle.

"Where are we going?"

"Nice try."

The young voice grew louder, speaking before Zelda could. She leaned forward to hear better, knowing she wouldn't be able to see around the drive. "Is that...Ben?"

Impa grinned and plucked a leaf from her love's wind-tousled hair. "Yes. He was adamant about coming."

An incoherent voice rose above the boy's, a feat considering the clattering hooves, neighing horses and clobbering buggy. Chastised, Ben fell silent and stared ahead.

Running a hand through her hair, Zelda muttered to herself as she combed through the knots and returned it to some sense of decency. Her straight locks were fuller than they had before, but no longer looked as if a bird had nested in them. Wrapping her cloak tighter around her, she snuggled against Impa. "How much further?"

"Not long."

The Sheikah watched her Hylian love as she turned her gaze towards the landscape. Without thought, her hand ran through her hair, combing the locks. She pressed a kiss to the golden head, praying she would enjoy the evening.

[-]

True to Impa's words, they arrived within a quarter-hour. Before either woman could set foot upon the stone, or the driver could dismount, Ben was holding the door open. The three adults chuckled as each left their seat.

Zelda smiled as she watched Ben began chatting with a middle-aged man standing to the side of the threshold.

The owner bowed low as the couple approached. He rose slowly, standing tall just as they were within speaking distance. "Good evening, Your Royal Highness, Maderone Impa. Welcome to
Four Seasons Restaurant.” He turned and led them into the open door.

Zelda looked around, recognizing the general area but never having seen the establishment. "How long has this been here?” she whispered as she gripped Impa's arm tighter.

"Years. It's a place one finds by word of mouth; they do not formally advertise," Impa whispered in return.

They removed their cloaks without another word as the owner led them passed the foyer. A near silent gasp fell from the young Queen's lips as she looked around. Though simply done, the restaurant gave the appearance of high-end dining. The light ash walls were sparingly accented with foreign water-color art and metallic-hued sponge designs. Candle sconces and small chandeliers lit the sectioned room, giving each area a feel of privacy. Their steps were muffled by a thick runner the darker colors of the metallic hues.

Her awe rose as the sand stone floor gave way to a curtain screen. A faint blush colored her cheeks as her attention turned to their host. He continued to speak as if she had been listening all along.

"It is a great honor to serve you this eve, my Lady." He bowed once more as Ben, previously unnoticed, opened the screen with grace few his age would possess.

Much like the main room, the private dining area was decorated in foreign themes. Though this room, unlike the other, was contained to one theme: a stream. The floor and walls were painted to appear as if the room itself were age old rock and silt carved into shape by crystalline waters. A rough rectangular central table was already set, leaf-colored cushions resting around it.

"I will begin within the next ten minutes," finished the quiet-spoken owner as he bowed once more. "Would you care for drinks or shall you wait?"

"We'll wait," Zelda nearly whispered as she continued to look around the room. Impa nodded to the amused and awestruck man. It wasn't until the folding screen was closed once more that she turned her attention fully to her mate.

"Zelda?" Worry laced her voice as her Charge said nothing, only stared at the small space. Had this truly been a good idea?

"This...this is what you've been doing all day?"

"Partially."

The slow answer sunk into her foggy mind. The blond woman turned to her silver-haired companion and pressed their cheeks together. "Thank you. It's lovely."

Impa loosely wrapped her arms around Zelda's waist. "You're welcome." She waited a moment before pulling away. "Do you want to sit?" Years of habit held true, for just as the words left her, her arm rose in offering. When Zelda's hand rested upon her forearm once more, she laid her own hand atop it and led them to the table. Only once her Lady was seated did she too sit.

Several moments passed in silence. Try as she might, Zelda quickly became aware the cushions were not made for sitting. She shifted several times, banging some part of her leg on the table with each movement, before removing her boots and kneeling. Shyly, she appeared through her lashes at her dining partner.

As she always had, Impa sat in what many would consider an awkward state. With her legs bent in a way she could easily stand and fight, the cushions were more than comfortable for the tall...
woman. She lifted Zelda's hand in her own and kissed her knuckles. "Are you comfortable?"

*Two sides of the same coin*, the kneeling woman thought ruefully. "Yes." Deciding not to broach the reason for her nerves, she glanced around the room once more before turning to the tables. "Are there menus?"

"They'll be brought with the drinks."

"And how do we order drinks?"

The Sheikah cast a side-long glance at the angular body at the edge of the screen door. "He offered to act as a 'messenger' for our stay here."

"His words?"

"His words."

Lips twitching with amusement, the Hylian shook her head. Ben reminded her of Link at times. Always willing to help out, even if you never considered asking him. Even if you didn't want his help.

A simple request and within minutes their drinks had arrived. Idle banter passed between them as they browsed the menus. It took longer for Impa to convince Zelda a small prawn salad was not a suitable meal than to actually order the food. Once their menus were taken, and they saw Ben's shadow had not returned from the kitchen, their light conversation became more personal.

Topics of discussion ranged from the possible theme of Midna and Navi's wedding to which season was more beautiful. They barely noticed when their meals were placed before them, nor as they ate automatically.

An hour passed in a flurry of words, emotion, and plates. It wasn't until the last of their shared desert was swallowed that they fell silent. Stomachs and hearts full, they locked gazes as the world fell away. Though not as intense as it had been earlier, the bond flared to life once more.

Colors danced around them. Some called them auras, others tricks of light and many still had no name for the sight. Yet as their vision became unfocused, the sight of the other's body became a blur. Waves of every color imaginable, from the purest white to the darkest black, swam before them.

From the doorway, Ben peeked around the screen. He stared in confusion as their hands traced the air around one another. What were they doing? The young horseman barely stifled a yelp as his ears were twisted and his head dragged back. As he stumbled to follow the person pulling him, he caught a glimpse of the man's costly suit. With a swallow, he realized the owner had caught him.

Heedless of the quiet commotion, their eyes closed as one as they embraced. Ever so slowly, sound and scent returned. The heaviness of the hug further grounded them as the taste of sugar and spice coated their tongues. Opening their eyes once more, they smiled at each other. Their senses had grounded them to reality, but nothing could end their connection.

Her movement was instinctual; in fact, she hadn't realized she had moved until their breath mingled. With a confidence she never knew she had, Zelda leaned forward. Her lips brushed Impa's, once, twice, three times, before she sought her ruby eyes.

Something stirred within her. It fell from her heart in burning lines, like rain down a window. The heat pooled in her stomach and ran through her limbs, singeing her already sensitive nerves. Impa
swallowed, her throat closing as she tried to speak. She repeated the gesture, understanding it for what it was.

No errant thoughts to grace her mind, no sound save for their pounding hearts and ragged breaths to fill her ears. Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips between brushes. She pressed her face to the older woman's neck, their hearts all but touching.

She buried her nose in the golden locks. A shiver ran down her spine as the delicate nose traced her jugular without notice. The barest sweeping of lips over the thin skin tore a silent gasp from her lungs.

Their minds brushed, a tentative question asked. No, no, nothing was wrong, they assured each other without words. Nothing was wrong...and everything was so very right.
Sunset Melodies (III)

They left the restaurant in a haze. It wasn't out of rudeness they all but ignored the owner. Rather, it was the inability to focus on anything but each other. No time was wasted counting money as Impa had made all payments earlier in the day, much to his and their delight. He watched the besotted couple leave with a rueful smile.

Love was grand. Young love evermore so.

It wasn't until they were in the carriage once more and the cool fall air leeched warmth from their flushed cheeks that focus returned. With few words, the Sheikah directed their driver and his chastised assistant to continue the journey. He complied happily, enjoying the scenery as much as his companions.

The pay wasn't bad either.

Hands clasped, Zelda snuggled against Impa, their cloaks wrapped tightly around them to ward off further chill. In contrast to their dinner, the ride to their next stop was in silence. It wasn't until they reached the edge of what appeared to be the forest that the carriage stopped.

"Where are we?"

"Around Lanayru Province." The driver's simple reply reminded both women of their audience. Before he could dismount, both women were out of the carriage. Looking around, he turned back to the couple.

Impa raised a hand before he could speak. "We shall be fine. We'll return to this spot when we're ready to depart."

Understanding he wouldn't change the Sheikah's mind, nor be allowed to convince his fellow Hylian of their folly, he merely nodded. He slid from the horse and led it towards a small pool, careful of the dozing boy atop the saddle.

Silenced by shock and weariness, Zelda said nothing as Impa slipped a hand into hers. She let the older warrior lead her into the trees. As the trunks drew thicker and the view behind them dimmer, she felt her apprehension grow. "Impa?"

Her mate's silence was understandable, yet she knew her own was unnerving. She ran her thumb over the knuckles resting near her own. "We're almost there, sesha, I promise. Trust me...please?"

The emerald-eyed Sage nodded and whispered, the gentle forest breeze barely catching her answer. "Yes."

Red eyes closed for a moment before opening. Having never noticed their pause, she began walking once more. As predicted, they arrived within minutes.

It was worth the fragile trust. The sight before her truly was worth it. A small pool, barely the size of a wash tub, sat inside a clearing. The area could be no larger than four meters. The setting sun filtered through the high branches, painting the already magical area with ethereal light. Yet what gave this secret watering hole a touch of majesty was what danced above the pool itself.
Hundreds of starlight fea, half the size of Navi in her spirit form, weaved through the beams of light like fireflies. They matched the evening sky, intricate patterns set to a song only they could hear cutting ever so smoothly through the air.

Every grateful to Sara for telling her of this place, Impa smiled as she wrapped an arm around Zelda's waist. When the young woman leaned into her, she felt her smile grow. Pleasure flooded the bond as her love watched the tiny beings with baited breath.

Instinctively, she moved closer. It wasn't until she was near enough to step in the water that she feared, not of them, but that she would scare them off. Yet the delicate fea remained in place. Their dance slowed until they came to a full stop. Something vanished from the clearing the second they became still, as if the forest itself lost some of its being.

"I'm sorry." Zelda pressed a hand to her choked throat and took a stumbling step back. What had she done? Tears sprung in her eyes as she stared with unfocused eyes at the hundred of rain-drop size bodies.

Impa said nothing though her heart ached for the woman before her. Sara had said nothing about proximity to the fea, only that they danced here. She could have warned her, at the very least. As she began cursing the eternal child within her mind, she realized the fea were moving.

They were as hesitant as the woman before them. In what appeared to be a narrow stream of light, they closed the distance between them and her. What felt like hours passed before they coiled around her, engulfing her in a blanket of living light.

Zelda's head snapped from side to side as she spun, trying to figure out what was going on. Several of the fea landed on her hands. With each touch, a spark of golden white energy rose from her skin. Delighted, the tiny beings began to dance once more. Their movements were erratic, timed to the beat of her pounding heart as they tried to pull more of her energy to the surface.

The Sheikah took a step back without thought. Where her heart had ached with her mate's pain moment's before it now swelled with pride and pleasure. The young monarch was blessed.

Noticing her retreat, the living stars seemed to turn towards her. A cluster of them, no larger than her hand, flew to her. She stared at them with shock. They landed upon her hands just as they had her love. She saw them jump as the purple energy flickered around them. They hesitated before landing again, unsure of the magic that was so different from their own. But as the gentle shadow essence washed over them, they realized it was the balance to the light behind them.

Impa tilted her head, bemused as the miniscule fea began zooming around her only to dash back to Zelda. It wasn't until her lover laughed that she looked at her.

"I think they want you to join me," Zelda said. She spun around, calm, thick waves of golden sparkles escaping her hands. The shining energy faded to white as it fell to the ground, the feas seemed to try and grab it before that happened. She held out a hand, eyes crinkled with merriment.

"Please, join me." The words, spoken with such peace and joy, were music to her ears. She had no time to respond as her feet moved her forward. Once more her hand clasped Zelda's. She met the glowing green eyes of the woman who was her world.

The rustling trees became music as she embraced the one who had saved her. Yes, Link had kept her as safe from the despot and herself as best as he could, and Goddesses bless him for it. But it was Impa who brought her back, who kept her alive when all she wanted to do was sleep for eternity.
Much like the fea had earlier, they danced to music only they could hear. The gentle bodies floated around them, glowing with the purity of Nature as they wove through the celestial energy that was their bond. They reveled in the love and mourned the pain of the women who had sought them. They'd come to the secret place not to heal themselves or others, nor for money or other gain...but for the simple pleasure of showing their love.

As they danced, the Goddesses watched. They observed the entire world and their golden land at once. As they found peace in the love of two of their daughters, they also found pain from several of their sons. Yet even the Goddesses themselves acknowledged free will and thus reminded themselves they could only speak, but never intervene.

And standing before them in a clearing where only Sara and her forest kin had been for centuries was an example of free will. The two women had had become precious to them, just as all their children were, had freely chosen life and love over death and pain. It had not been an easy choice, and their road would be a difficult one, but just as their Shadow avatar said...no one said life was easy.

[-]

It wasn't until the sun fully set that they began the walk back to the carriage. Their hands were tightly clasped, eyes alert as the fea led them towards the edge of the trees.

"Impa...who is our driver? I don't think I've seen him before."

"You wouldn't have. He tends to keep to himself, rarely likes being around people. Geof works in the stable. He's one of the ones who taught Ben what he knows. He's been gone lately, buying and selling horses," she added as an after-thought.

Zelda hummed to herself in understand. As the neared the tree line, the fea swirled around them only to retreat. They thanked the tiny beings, knowing they were heard even as the glowing bodies vanished from sight.

The barest hint of the flickering lantern guided them the rest of the way. A piercing, mournful howl filled the air just as they were ready to take the last few steps to leave the forest. Shrill as it was chilling, the pain struck the very cores of their souls. It wasn't a sound of physical pain, but of emotional agony.

Geof yelled at Ben to stay within the carriage as he ran towards the trees. The axe which had been strapped to his back all evening was now clutched tightly within his hand. "M'lady, are you well?" he gasped breathlessly as he came to a halt before the startled women.

Irritation ran through her despite the situation yet Zelda held her tongue. This was not the time to point out that her title of Queen did not make her more important than anyone else. It was an argument she had often with Impa and the rest of their family, one she often lost as they all disagreed with her.

"We're fine." The sharp response, delivered curtly from Impa's thinned lips. She glanced around and then growled. "Zelda, where are you going?"

Ignoring the frightened man and annoyed woman behind her, Zelda lifted the hem of her cloak as she walked through the trees. She moved slowly, letting her boots drag as another cry rent the air. The painful sound called to her as few other cries had. It touched her, reminding her of when similar agony had wrenched itself from her throat.
"Zelda!" Impa hissed as she followed. "Get back here! You don't even have a weapon!"

"I'll be safe, my love," came the distracted reply. "Stay there."

A third cry, this time a low pitched whine of mourning, met her ears. Light from the crescent moon barely showed her way. Without a sound, a gentle glow radiated from her outstretched hand. She knelt beside a tree and moved the underbrush aside. Her sad gasp was followed by a similar whine to that which she had just heard.

Huddled inside the roots of a large tree was a pup. It nuzzled the starved, bloody body of what could only be its mother. The female Wolfo's eyes were glazed with pain, though its golden orbs had yet to whiten with death. The ball of light hovering above dimmed as it too mourned with the pup.

"Oh...you poor thing." Ignoring Impa's mental warning, she lifted the pup. So young and in such pain, it was too heartbroken to even snap at her. As she cradled it close, she saw it was a mutt. The Wolfo traits were clear and so were the signs of a farm dog.

The pup stared at her, tears pouring down its cheeks. She had seen many animals mourn in her life, had seen many shed tears of physical and emotional pain. Yet none of them clawed at her heart as much as the puppy in her arms. As she glanced it over in the dim light, she noticed the bite on its leg and missing skin on its tail. Another glance at the mother showed her wounds were made by a forest dweller, not a Hyrulean.

Despite her trust in Zelda's fighting skills, worry ruled her. Impa quickly made her towards the glowing ball, ever silent. Her breath caught as she took in the scene. Her mate was cuddling a blood-soaked puppy, kneeling in a puddle of the crimson liquid. She knew without looking the mother was dead. "Zelda..."

She turned her eyes upward. Emerald met ruby as hot trails of empathy burned down cool cheeks. "Impa, we can't leave it here," she whispered. She swallowed and stood, wrapping her cloak around the pup. "It'll die...the scavengers will be here for the mother soon. Please don't ask me to condemn it to that sort of fate...please."

Impa felt her protest slowly trickle away. How could she deny her mate such a request, especially when it could do her no harm? She glanced between her love, the pup, the shadowed Wolfo and then the forest itself. When another heartbroken whisper of "please" broke the silence, she nodded.

"Let's go before they get here. You're covered in blood, I'd rather not take the chance."

Allowing the other woman to wrap a tight arm around her waist, Zelda kept a protective hold around the mutt. It snuggled against her chest, continuing to whine as it took in the scent of its mother which coated her hands. She scratched its neck gently, knowing it would take time for the pup to grieve and recover. "It's injured," she murmured as they neared Goef.

"We'll see to it in the carriage, love. But we must leave."

Geof let out a strangled gasp as he saw the blood decorating Zelda's clothes. He began to sputter as her cloak parted with her haste, revealing the pup. "My Queen, you mustn't have to do such a task. Let me, I implore you." He extended his free hand, eyes on the creature clutched to her breast.

She instinctively took a step back as his hand neared her. Surely this man did not think— She shook her head as his words sunk in. Her brow furrowed and then she scowled. "You will not hurt this pup, sir! Mount your horse so we may leave this place at once."
While her worry grew, Impa took a pride in her majesty's scolding of the man. Though she had reservation, she could find no reason to take the pup from the younger woman. As she helped the muttering monarch into the carriage, she shook her head at their driver. He was foolish to think she would hand over that mutt.

Geof muttered to himself but did as ordered. As Ben slept in the seat opposite them, the horse quickly made its way down the road and away from the nearing scavengers.

The ride to the castle was jarring yet quicker than they had imagined. Ben slept the whole way, exhausted from helping 'Miss Impa' with the preparations and the evening itself. As Geof carried him to his room, Zelda followed Impa to the castle's veterinarian.

Wide awake due to a mare's labor, he was undisturbed by their sudden appearance. Well accustomed to Zelda's bloody presence at all hours of the night years past, though he wouldn't speak of such things to another soul, he didn't blink as he caught sight of her. He took the pup with few words and looked it over. Within ten minutes he proclaimed it healthy in spite of its injuries. A quick cleaning and stitching of both wounds assured both women the pup would physically be well.

"I've heard of Wolfo mutts before, madam, yet I have never before had the chance to see one. I can only assume from his bone structure that he will develop much like his domesticated parent. Other than heart break and the wounds, the only thing wrong with him is being underfed." He gazed into the pup's mournful eyes. "I've seen Wolves that act more like sheep dogs than wild animals. If he didn't attack you when you found him, I doubt he'll be much trouble as he grows older."

Zelda took the pup before its head was laid back on the table. Something stirred within Impa as she watched the other woman cradle the pup, nuzzling its neck. As it weakly licked her cheek, the bubble of warmth swelled within her stomach and flooded her heart. And she'd wanted to take this pup, to leave it behind? Unthinkable.

The veterinarian smiled to himself as he washed his hands. If that pup recovered from losing its mother, it would be well taken care of. Possibly even spoiled, if he knew anything about his sovereign. As he dried his hands, he looked around the exam room. Unlocking one of the cabinets, he handed a tube of paste of the besotted Sheikah.

"He'll need this for nutrients. He appears old enough to eat solid food, but give him a saucer of warm goat milk with his food for a few days. If he doesn't drink the milk, or accept the paste, or if he becomes sick, bring him back."

With a smile of gratitude, Impa accepted the pliable tube. As she spoke, she never looked away from the cooing woman before them. "You know, I thought I was done raising children when Link came of age and met Shad."

The vet chuckled. "Trust me, children will always be infants to their parents. And I doubt you'll have as much trouble with that pup as you did with the boy."

Zelda looked up from the pup as it fell into an exhausted sleep. Seeing their smiles, she raised a brow. "Do I want to ask?"

"Not really," Impa replied as she opened an arm. "Let's go into the castle before you get sick."

"Thank you," Zelda called to the man as she was ushered from his office. He chuckled once more.
as the door shut behind him. Something told him that puppy had come at just the right time. Although which woman would dote on it more would only be revealed as years wore on.

"Big pussy cat, that Guardian," he said to himself with a fond smile. With a shake of his head and yet another chuckle, he cleaned the exam table before returning to the mare.

[-]

An hour passed before Zelda was dressed for bed. She sat before the fire, the mutt in her lap. Impa's arms were curled around her waist. Their nightly ritual had begun.

"Are you mad that I want to keep him?"

Impa pulled her focus from the flames, and with them, her thoughts. She looked down at the lithe woman in her arms before turning to the pup. "No. I have some reservations, but you made the right choice."

Zelda twisted her head to her eyes, searching for answers she wasn't sure she wanted to hear. "What reservations? You don't think I can take care of a dog?"

The Sheikah shook her head, hearing the implication loud and clear. "It's not that. I'm more worried about what would happen if the pup doesn't make it...either in the next few days, or in the next few years."

Pushing her damp locks behind her ear, the Hylian stared at the ruby eyes of her love, her protector. She cooed suddenly in understanding. "You're worried about what might happen to me if something happens to the dog."

"Yes."

Zelda nuzzled Impa's cheek. "Don't be, please. Nothing's going to happen to the pup."

"You can't know that."

"No, I can't. But I can hope it won't."

A comfortable silence fell as their energy began to wane. It wasn't until the first threads of sleep began weighing her lids that Zelda heard Impa speak.

"He's not sleeping in my bed."

The peels of bell-like laughter woke the pup from his sleep. He opened an eye to stare at the female who no longer smelled like his mother. Grumbling, he realized the annoying noise was coming from her. Nudging her hand, he burrowed under it until his ears were covered and tried to go back to sleep.

Just because she fed him didn't mean she wasn't crazy. Momma always said watch out for the loud two-leggers. Wouldn't she be pleased to know he lived in this odd-smelling rock place, far from the forest, with one of them.

May the great wolf save him from their silly ideas. Until then, he would get some sleep. He had to explore tomorrow.
Chapter Twenty-One

Of Beasts and Men

Dawn came too quickly for both the Sheikah Maderone and her Hylian Charge. Despite their usual early reunite, both were more than willing to sleep for a few extra minutes. Even the harsh fall wind which rattled their windows and balcony doors didn't rouse them for long.

Groaning, Zelda pulled the covers over her head. She clutched a pillow and burrowed further into the warmth of her sheets. It took several minutes, but something caught her attention. Well, it wasn't her consciousness that noticed the change. In fact, it took those several minutes for her brain to register what her body already had.

The smell.

Throwing the pillow away from her, she shrieked, realizing what the odor was. As she leapt from the bed, the shrill scream tore from her lips again.

Impa's door slammed against the wall. She looked around the chamber, searching for the cause of the scream. Her fingers tightened around her short sword as she saw nothing. It wasn't until she saw Zelda's expression of disgust that she began to relax.

"What happened?"

Lifting her foot, Zelda stared at it. Now she remembered. While Impa burst into laughter, and ignoring the scowl which was directed at her in result, she carefully wiped her foot on the towel she'd discarded the night before. Laying it over the mess, and her soiled pillow atop that, she began looking around the room.

Snickering, Impa returned to her own room to replace the weapon. Out of all the things she had worried of the night before, *this* was not one of them. Pulling on her dressing gown, she re-entered Zelda's room and leaned against the wall. "I don't think he'll come out. Not with the way you were screaming."

"Either shut up or help me look," Zelda told the other woman. A growl from under the bed drew her attention. Kneeling, she peeked under the bed-skirt.

The pup stared back at her, frightened and angry. He couldn't get outside, what did she expect him to do? It wasn't his fault the two-legger locked him in this funny smelling place. And then she screamed! He had to go and didn't understand what the problem was. Momma understood.

Momma...

She watched his ears flatten,growls giving way to whimpers. She cooed and crawled under the bed. "C'm 'ere sweety." She gently pulled him forward until she could hold him properly.

Impa watched the flannel covered bottom wave in the air with interest. She wasn't staring at the bottom, you see, but making sure Zelda didn't get stuck. It was known to happen. As much as she loved her mate, there were times she acted before thinking...like going under her bed to retrieve
something. Although she usually didn’t wiggle so much.

Triumphant, Zelda sat on the edge of the bed, focus entirely on the pup. She tried to calm him only to sigh when he became listless. "Well... I guess we'll have to get you trained or at least house you somewhere you can do your business."

Clearing her throat, Impa glanced at the pup. Carefully sliding her previous thought to the back of her mind (not hiding mind you, only rearranging the order), she voiced the obvious. "Why not stop by the veterinarian before breakfast? With the foal the night before, he should be awake."

With a nod, Zelda handed the still unnamed pup to her lover. "Hold him for a second?"

Impa held the pup away from her. They stared at one another. "Why?"

"So I can clean up the mess!" came the shouted reply from the bathroom. Zelda scowled once more as she saw the distance between her mate and the pup. "Impa, hold him right!"

Grudgingly, she held the pup as she'd seen her mate do. He was cute... In the daylight, his young coat showed he had all the markings of a forest Wolfo, something uncommon with Wolfo mutts.

The pup stared back. This new two-legger was odd. She smelled funnier than the other one who was loud. But at least she wasn't loud. He reached up and licked her chin before nodding to himself. She tasted ok. Not like that odd male the night before. He tasted sort of like dinner, the four-leggers with big eyes and skinny legs that momma liked. No, this weird two-legger that wasn't loud didn't taste like that. But she reminded him of home, kinda. He didn't think she liked the stone place either. No trees. She tasted like someone who liked trees. There was just something about her that said she liked trees.

Once the floor was clean, and thankfully would not stain, Impa handed the pup back to its owner and went to dress for the day. Zelda did the same, only letting the pup out of her sight long enough to use the facilities. As she dressed, he sniffed her clothes. She laughed as he tugged on her riding gown, growling as he tried to tear into it. Lifting him, she tapped his nose gently. "That's not a toy."

He sneezed and stared at the two-legger with bright fur. She really was crazy. But she fed him... unlike the other one who didn't yell. But if she hit him again, he'd bite her. That tickled you know!

Nuzzling the pup, she met Impa in the sitting room. As they entered the corridor, she heard the Sheikah sigh. "What? What's wrong?"

"Zelda... he can walk."

"I know that."

"Then let him walk."

"He might get lost!"

They stopped in the middle of the empty hall, hearing the castle start to stir as early-morning duties began.

Impa shook her head. "His leg isn't hurt that bad, and you know as well as I that he needs exercise. Let him walk. See if he follows or leads. If he runs off, we can catch him."

"But..." Zelda glanced between her mate and the pup who was looking around anxiously. She
sighed softly and set him gently on the floor. With an eye on him, she started walking.

Freedom! He was free, they were going to let him go and where were they going?! Sure, he could find his way out of this rock place, he could smell the trees from here, but it would be a lot faster if they took him. When he realized growling, and then whimpering, wouldn't bring them back, he huffed. Stupid two-leggers. How dare they leave him here! With another huff, he hobbled after them. His leg hurt, but at least he could use it. Not like last night when the loud two-legger wouldn't let him go...and then he couldn't get off the smooshy thing that felt like moss and leaves.

Impa smirked yet again as he pup followed, weaving from one side of the hall to the other as he took in every scent and sight. "See...I told you."

Zelda refused to dignify such a comment with a response.

[-]

Just as Impa had said, the veterinarian was awake and checking on the foal when they entered the stables. He chuckled to himself as he saw Zelda carry the pup in while ignoring Impa's muttering. From the sound of it, the pup had been allowed to walk at some point this morning...

"What can I do for you this morning, my Lady, ma'am?"

Zelda quickly explained the situation and after he laughed, much to the pup's annoyance, he told her to take him out every hour or so during the day. "Only until he realizes what going out means. If you take him out to do his business first, then play, he'll realize what it means. You said you had a balcony...I'm assuming leaving the door open wouldn't work? I thought so. Well, you'll have to set something up for during the night. A box of dirt and leaves should do the trick. Wolfo mutts are smarter than most give them credit for. He'll learn to wake you if he has to go at night."

He looked at both women with a thoughtful expression. "Has he eaten?"

Zelda nodded. "He drank the milk, some meat and paste last night."

"Nothing today?" He furrowed his brow. "You didn't offer him food before coming down?"

Impa bit her lip so as not to laugh at the dumbfounded and embarrassed expression on Zelda's face. As the veterinarian began lecturing her—yes, her, the Queen—on proper pet care, she took the pup and set him on the ground.

Grateful to the home-smelling two-legger, he didn't bother to wait around. If he had, he would've seen the food-smelling two-legger turn his lecture to her. Not that he cared. Nose to the ground, he squeezed through the crack between the door and wall. Wincing as his side and leg throbbed, he sat and looked around. Well, it wasn't home, but at least it was outside that rock place. Something told him that he couldn't go home. Even if he did get away, home was too far and momma was...was...was with the great wolf.

When the specialist finished his long winded lecture, leaving both women shamefaced and bright red, he turned his attention to the pup. Or rather, where it had been. Without a word to either women, he stuck his head out the door and looked around. Sure enough, under a nearby tree was the pup. Where he'd found that bone was beyond the vet, but he wasn't questioning it. With instructions to let the pup walk as much as he pleased, he sent the women on their way. The pup followed.

But only because they took his bone. That was his find, and he was not happy the two-leggers took his meal! Just because they fed him before didn't mean he'd put up with stealing his bone. It was a
They ate in the dining room as usual. One of the windows was cracked with a step stool before it. The pup lay on the stool, chewing happily on the returned bone. He ignored the two-leggers and growled at the fuzzy, smelly stuff wrapped around his chest. His leg hurt, why did they have to make it hard to breathe too? Every time he tried to pull it off, bandages the loud two-legger called them, he got another tap on the nose. He finally settled for glaring at it. It stunk too, made his nose and lungs burn. Besides, he couldn't lick the wound! How was it supposed to heal if he couldn't lick it?!

Breakfast passed with ease. It was early enough in the day the Guard would leave them be and few servants were awake in this part of the castle yet. They spoke freely of the night before, both of where they'd went and the bond's...displays the night before.

The morning flew by just as the early meal had. As Zelda reviewed yet more law proposals, disputes between neighbors, letters from foreign allies and the work she'd abandoned the day before, the pup laid in a path of fall sunshine, content to rest for the moment. Impa left them with a shake of her head and a chuckle, much to her mate's annoyance.

"You could help!" she'd called to the retreating woman.

"But then you'd whine I was doing everything wrong!" came the accurate reply. Laced with a fresh chuckle, the words were met with a growl and mutter from the Hylian as she stared at her cluttered desk.

While Zelda worked her way through mountains of parchment with a lifetime of practice, Impa roamed. There was no other word for her aimless walking. There wasn't even a purpose for her roaming save the need to move.

With a sigh, and knowing Zelda would never forgive her for doing nothing all day, she made her way towards the barracks. There were always new soldiers to train. Maybe if she was lucky, one of them would be arrogant...that was always fun.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone remembers, Impa smells like earth to Zelda. Earth, rocks, trees, that sort of thing. The pup smells the same and also interprets it to mean she (Impa) likes the forest instead of the castle. Which is true...but that's another chapter.
The Prices We Pay

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Prices We Pay

Within a shared parlor, ignorant of the whatever else was happening in the vast stone structure around him, Shad sat in contemplation. A sigh fell from numb lips as he closed his eyes.

Seconds felt like hours as he sat in silence, in darkness of his own creation. As his eyes opened, he glanced around the sanctuary which had become his prison. A prison he helped create, for if he had not stepped in years previously, they would not be fighting the demons which now tore at them. Or at the very least, his lover would not be.

For perhaps the thousandth time, his head turned toward the door. Raw terror seized him, knowing that Link could find him at any moment, but even when all remained quiet and the handle unturned, paranoia continued to twist within him. Despite his innocence in any wrong doing, for he had yet to act, he did not want the Hylian warrior's suspicion to be roused. The price of past decisions weighed heavily on his mind. His spirit withered under the knowledge of what he had done, what he had caused. He couldn't afford, in any form, the consequences of what Link's reaction might be. His faltering courage nearly fled entirely as the reality of what was to come wormed its way into his mind. It was already costing him all of the willpower that he had in his bookish frame to even think the aspects of this plan, and all of the strength that he had in his body to carry it out.

His gaze drifted from the suite entrance to the chamber that lay before him before sliding over the adjoining doors. Clean enough now. Shad couldn't help but give a soft, reminiscent chuckle at the thought of the usual state of their rooms. Being clean and orderly had never been one of his lover's strongest suits. Zelda, thank the goddesses, was able to inspire a habit within him at times to maintain cleanliness; however, regrettably, Link was never able to hold the habit of his sister for very long, and once-clean rooms would shortly fall into disarray once more. Even his clothes and weapons returned home marred with the evidences of war.

He didn't think that he'd ever get used to the mess and disarray. But that was Link, and Shad loved him so.

With the lightest of touches, he placed his fingertips to his forehead and gave a sigh that nearly drained him of what little strength that he had. He knew that he had been running away from the problem. He was doing it now, sitting upon the couch, staring rather than acting on what he needed to do. But...he was so afraid to act. He wasn't a warrior or a hero. It wasn't within him to act at a moment's notice, no matter how well laid a plan may be. Link was the hero, the one driven on by the courage to do what he needed to do, no matter the cost or who asked it of him, the one who went where no one else could go to because he had been blessed to do so. He was Shad, the archeologist, the scholar who had spent far too many a night buried in texts that continued his father's work in finding the elusive Sky People, something that had escaped him still even to the day, despite Link's assurance of their existence. And he...he was so tired, more tired that he was giving himself credit for.

The sound of footsteps broke his musing. His heart began to race as he tensed, his eyes once more turned upon the gleaming handle which led from the gilded cage. It wasn't until several long minutes after the echoing steps faded that he began to relax. Without notice, tears burned down his pale cheeks like acid. Exhaustion seeped from the very core of his soul. He was not the hero, was
not the warrior that had become his family. He was not even the strategist, though they tried to
credit him with such. He was...just the researcher. But once more, he would have to become what
he was not. To save himself. To save his lover.

A strangled, mournful sound wrenched itself from his throat. His lungs ached from holding his
breath yet he paid none of it any mind. With shaking hands, he fumbled for the tiny gold key
hidden below his shirt. The chain nearly broke as he pulled it over his head. He was all but blind as
fresh, hot tears threatened to fall.

The only sounds which filled his ears were the pounding of his arrhythmic heart and his scant,
labored breaths. The distance between him and the cabinet was an abyss. He closed the space on
stumbling feet. He trembled violently, nearly dropping the key, and with it, his courage. As the
tiny bit of metal slid home, there was only silence.

The click was both his salvation and damnation.

Before him, atop sturdy shelves of gleaming wood, sat bottles. Rows upon rows of colorful glass
mocked him. Fire from the sconces danced within the depths of their facets. The same fire burned
through his veins, a siren's call for which he couldn't dare have answered. As he ran his fingers
over the glass and precious stone, he swallowed a sob which threatened to stop his heart. He could
not feel the etched containers as he pulled them from the shelf.

He worked quickly, knowing there wasn't a second to spare although the time he had left was
unclear. His movements were smooth and sure, nearly mechanical in their orderly fashion, never
pausing as he placed each fragile bottle within a sturdy box. As if packing his father's research, he
treated the liquor with reverence seen by few. It wasn't until the last bottle was within its new home
that he allowed the tears to fall and the cries to sound within the empty suite.

Shad fell to his knees as his strength poured from him with each unchecked tear. For just a moment,
he would allow himself to mourn his past and current decisions, would allow himself to grieve for
the man he had all but destroyed with his lust for the only escape he could find. For just a moment,
the nearly illegible letter in his pocket would not remind him of where the boxes were to be taken.
For just a moment, he could forget he shared the vast space with another and that he might return
within the space of a heartbeat. For just a moment, he would be weak.

[-]

[-]

AN: Thanks to StorytellerLore for writing part of this chapter, and of course, beta’ing. The pup's
name will be revealed next chapter.

BN: You know you don't have to put my name up. You flatter me but you don't have to.

**Songs:**

Far by Lzn02

Elaine Ettariel by Adam Skorupa
Superstitions

Chapter Twenty-Three

Superstitions

The autumn noon sun shone softly through parted curtains. Rays of fleeting warmth parted the room only to mix with steady fire and candle light. The mixture of natural and man-made illumination gave the large office a ethereal feel, reflective surfaces glowing faintly. Yet the peace which normally came from standing within the warm sunlight and watching the leaves dance upon the wind eluded her.

Minutes had long since given way to hours which passed with each set of scrolls she read. Zelda rubbed her temples as she stood before the picture window, eyes staring without sight at the kingdom below. A pained sigh parted her chapped lips as she closed her eyes. Something was coming and she need not Wisdom to know that. The harsh wind which rattled the castle windows and glass-pane doors warned everyone of hard times yet to happen.

With another sigh, she shook her head. Time was a fickle thing and no matter its course, free will could and would always change what may be in the future. Now was not the time to think on what may be, for the sensation of warning which fluttered down her spine like butterflies were as fleeting as the fall sunlight. Pressing a hand to the leaded glass, she allowed the outer chill to seep into her delicate flesh.

The first stirrings of mental and spiritual silence began as a loud crash and raised voices filtered through her open doors. Wondering what trouble had been caused, she sighed once more and turned from the window. She held her head high and shoulders back as her spine elongated. The pain which reverberated through her skull never showed on her noble face as she made her way to the open doors.

The sight before her turned her polite smile into a twisted expression of horror. Her pup was curled behind a suite of armor, clearly frightened of the people attempting to reach it. Several servants and, what was worse, members of the Royal Guard, were vainly reaching for the mutt. One tried to shoo him from behind the historical display with a broom.

"Just what do you all believe you are doing?!"

Her shrill words sliced through their raised voices. As if one body, they turned to face her. Some wore expressions of fear, others anger and yet a few appeared as if they had not a care in the world. None spoke as she crossed her arms.

"I believe," she hissed slowly, "I have asked you all a very simple question. Yet if you did not understand my first utterance, I shall repeat myself. What are you doing?"

"It's a Wolfo pup!" squeaked the woman holding the broom. She pointed a shaking finger towards the cowering, whimpering mutt.

"I can see that. Just what has it done to offend each person in this gathering in such a manner that you are demanding its death?"

Her icy tone sent shivers down their spines as the primal part of their minds whined in fear. Her emerald eyes had begun to darken, smoldering with an anger which had not been present since
Ganondorf's reign. Instinctively, they took a step back only to recoil once more as she matched the motion.

"Answer me!"

"It's evil!" crowed a man from behind the broom-wielding woman. She stepped aside to allow the Queen's full attention to be upon him.

"I fail to see how an innocent pup, one who is clearly injured and cowering in fear, can be evil, sir."

"It's the Wolfo in it, m'lady. And it bit him," he added, gesturing to a man standing beside one of the Guards.

One of Zelda's golden-brown brows slowly rose as she pursed her lips. "Come here, sir, and let me see your wound."

The man scrambled to obey, all the more frightened from her calm command. He held out her hand, wincing as she turned it. "He broke the skin, but it does not appear to be deep. In fact, it barely bleeds. What I know of animal bites, especially those given in aggression, is that there is often severe tearing of skin and much blood. Yet before me I see a bite, painful to be sure, as his jaws contain much strength, but not severe. Certainly not severe enough to warrant a posse to catch him."

The man cradled his hand to his chest. "My Queen, h-he'll hurt you! It is fortunate he left your office before he could harm you. I would gladly take a thousand bites from such a vile beast if it meant sparing you pain. He must be killed immediately!"

Idly wondering when the men and women around her had become sycophants rather than people, she ever so slowly shook her head. "That vile beast, as you call him, is a puppy. If he did not harm me when I pulled him away from his dead mother, he will not harm me now. Truly, the only assurance I have of this fact is the past evening and this day. None can be sure of the future, ladies and gentleman, myself included."

A squeal of pain drew her attention from the group as a whole. Her head snapped to the side, her tassels whipping against her cheeks. The sight of her injured pup being held by the scruff of his neck, none too gently if his growing howls of pain were any indication, only stroked her ire. When the man holding him began to shake him, she snarled. "You shall not harm that dog a second longer lest you wish to face my wrath!" she roared.

As those gathered stared in shock at their normally passive Queen, Impa pushed her way through the gathering crowd. The site which met her set her teeth on edge. Her Charge, her mate, was slowly turning from red to purple. Her green eyes were nearly black, her pupils dilated with rage as she shook from the force of her control. White knuckles showed the strength with which she dug her nails into her palms. The air around her all but crackled as she restrained herself. Following her gaze, the Sheikah choked slightly.

The pup whined as he struggled in the vice grip which held him by the neck feet above the ground. The bandages around his side was spotted with blood and at least one of the stitches in his leg had come out. His eyes, like that of his savior, were dilated with rage as she shook from the force of her control. White knuckles showed the strength with which she dug her nails into her palms. The air around her all but crackled as she restrained herself. Following her gaze, the Sheikah choked slightly.

"Give me the dog," she told the man as she neared him. Her red eyes met his brown orbs in challenge, daring him to disobey her. He held it out without hesitation. Impa cradled the pup to her chest as she turned to the infuriated Sage. She handed her the pup.
"Keta," she whispered as their hands brushed. "He is safe now, my love. Calm yourself."

"No," the Queen of Destiny hissed. Her eyes, the same eyes which for so many years always had held submission few would ever understand, now glowed with wrath beyond words. So great was her rage, even those oblivious to her fragile recovery could see the glint of insanity buried within the depths of her orbs.

"Someone tell me this instant why you all found it necessary to harm a defenseless and injured pup. A pup, might I add, who more than likely injured your comrade in an attempt of self-defense."

None spoke until her gaze landed upon the male Sheikah gathered. One of them murmured, his baritone timbre reaching their ears without waver. He met her eyes with humble confidence. "Wolfos are considered messengers of evil and destruction, much like the ReDead, my Lady. Unlike the Keatons, they are thought to be too primal and wild to be intelligent. Wolfo mutts are usually killed due to superstition, because to many, they represent bad luck and death upon any who shelter them."

She held his eyes as she calmed the pup. She knew the Sheikah, much like the Twili, regarded wolves as sacred. In a quiet tone, she asked him why he and his brethren would attack an animal they appeared to hold different beliefs of. She nearly laughed at the skill in which he explained he and his brethren were trying to give the pup some freedom. Sheikah may be many things, secretive and manipulators when circumstances called for it, but none could truthfully call them liars. They had too much pride and honor to sully themselves with untruth.

The pup stared at the two-leggers with fear. His heart thudded against his chest as the loud two-legger kept making the weird sounds. He pressed his head to her heart and put his paw over his head. She and the home-smelling two-legger had saved him. Even if he didn't really like them, they were better than the other ones. With a whimper, he pressed his ears to his head. He just wanted to explore. How was he supposed to know they would attack him? They'd been quiet, not as much as momma, but enough not to alert the two-legger that held him...not at first anyway.

Zelda ran a hand over his shaking body, careful of his wounds. She returned her attention to the group as a whole. "You all are idiots," she spat without an ounce of her normal indiscriminate tone. "While I normally keep my opinions to myself, this is not one of those times. To attack a pup you saw come out of my office, without thought of how he got there, and then to have the audacity to tell me to kill him..."

"Yes," she hissed once more. "I am telling the two of you to either leave the castle or relocate because you listened to superstition instead of rational sense. You took it upon yourself to harass and injure a defenseless pup with your fear and mistrust, rather than trying to coax him out of hiding or leaving him be.

"I had thought the people of this land had learned their lesson when the war had ended. Does your Hero not also have a wolf form? Does my sister monarch, the Twilight Queen, not also take the form of a dark sprite? Are not many of those who fought against the despot's army different in appearance than us? You are all idiots for refusing to see past your petty discrimination. Ignorant fools, all of you! Shame on you. If you treat a pup this way, simply because of his origins, Goddesses help the child whose life you ruin when it needs you the most.
"We may be Hylian, but we are all Hyrulean. Created under the same sky, chosen and beloved: Hylian, Goron, Zora, Oocca, forest being and desert dweller, and those who exist beyond the realm of our borders. To harm one is to harm all." Her chest heaved as she stared upon the frightened people. "You shame us all - your country, the Goddesses, but above all, yourselves. Now get out of my sight!

"All of you!" she added as she noticed the Guard resuming their usual place.

Without waiting to see if they followed her order, she spun on her heel and returned to her office. The doors slammed behind her as she allowed her anger to flow. She cuddled the pup gently despite her wrath and sat curled in the corner with it.

It took nearly a half hour, and the tree-smelling female returning with the horse-smelling man, for the pup to lift his head from the loud female's chest. He snarled at the hand reaching towards him despite his fear. He could take one two-legger. He'd bite and bite and bite until they left him and his two-legger, Hylian she called herself, alone.

The veterinarian chuckled as Zelda held out the pup, not moving from her spot. He checked the stitches on both wounds and re-bandaged his side. "He did break a couple stitches, but the others are holding nicely so I don't see a reason to replace them. He may not have an appetite for a while due to the stress."

Zelda took the pup from the man the second he set him on the floor. She cuddled him again, nuzzling his neck. She smiled when he licked her cheek. "Good puppy." She kissed his head. "You need a name."

The trio looked at one another. Though her anger continued to simmer, it no longer threatened to break free. As she thought of a name for the rascal who apparently lived to make trouble, she wondered what he had been like in the woods with his mother.

The veterinarian rubbed his chin. "You know...he reminds me of the Garo."

"Garo." She rolled the name around her mind and let it fall from her tongue. Recalling stories of the Garo, she nodded.

"Garo it is."

The pup, Garo, looked at her. What was she making those weird noises and looking at him for? Garo...what was that? Realizing she was directing the odd sound at him, he laid his head back down. If that was what she wanted to call him, since there was no way she could say what momma named him, he'd answer. Maybe. If he felt like it.

Right now though, if that dinner-smelling male didn't get away, he wouldn't feel like anything but a snack. Just because he made the pain stop didn't mean he could stay. He growled in warning then smirked in pleasure when the male backed away. See, he could take on a single male. Give him time, he'd take on them all!

The three Hyruleans shook their heads and chuckled at the proud pup. The vet bade the women good evening and took his leave. He had new help to train after all.

Without a word, Impa sat beside Zelda on the floor. She kissed the younger woman's head when it rested upon her shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too. Thank you for rescuing Garo."
"You're welcome."

Garo looked up as the home-smelling female's scent got closer. Grumbling, he pushed his way between her and his Hylian. Momma said sometimes four-leggers like them had people to watch out for them...that his dad called them masters and mistresses. The good ones were nice, like the Hylian woman, who fed, cuddled and maybe played. They weren't always mean like the ones that grabbed his neck.

And by the great wolf, this—this—this forest-smelling female was not getting any closer to his mistress! If she wanted to cuddle with his two-legged female, like she just did with him, then she could at least bring her a big-eyed four-legger or even a small, big-eared fluffy thing. Until she brought dinner, she didn't get close. It was only fair.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Zelda and Impa watched him with matching grins. Really...it should be a crime for something that cute to be such a terror.

[-]

[-]

AN: Thanks to StorytellerLore for not only helping plan this chapter, but also supplying Garo's name.

I recently received a review from an unsigned (meaning I couldn't reply) reader. I hadn't planned on posting this soon but decided to go ahead. Both I and my beta (StoryTeller Lore) have decided to reply to an FFN review.

To A Non-E-Mass,

You are correct when you say it is difficult to balance realism and pacing. Most of the time I let the story write itself, realism and all. I have an outline that is mostly used to keep track of the plans I have. I'm not a writer who can go off a script (outline/prompt) and over time I've learned to write for myself. I've learned that reader's input is valuable but should never be the basis of my story. And when I began Lotus Jewel, I kept that in mind. Thankfully, my readers are all very good with following the story and not asking me to change it.

She is insane to some degree most of the time, which I suppose is the same as crazy. The fact is that she has been broken and "put back together" by an evil psychopathic tyrant. He made her what he wanted her to be, for the most part. In front of others (anyone other than Link and Impa) she keeps her pain and true state of being hidden. It isn't for them to know, especially when it could be used against her. She is eccentric as you said. Very much so in fact. Point in fact: Garo.

Zelda and Impa forever! Unfortunately, there's not that many stories about them. And as much as I love reading them, I won't be writing a billion stories about them just to fill the void.

Thank you. In the beginning, I'd wanted Link to have problems. As the story developed, so did his relationship with Shad. Eventually Shad was given his own history (which will be revealed) that ties into Link's. Because this story is based no real people, events and their stories, I refuse to write a perfect/always happy/never hurting character. It doesn't happen.

I hadn't actually planned for the main characters to all be homosexual. It just...happened. The characters fit together. There will be at least one supporting heterosexual couple many many chapters from now. There are heterosexual characters (such as Mikal and at least some of the Sheikah). One of the reasons most of the main characters are homosexual/bisexual is because
they're based on my friends/chosen family. Link was originally based off one man who is without a doubt homosexual. However, over time, as I used several others for his inspiration, a couple of my heterosexual friends helped shape Link in my mind. After Navi and Midna's wedding you'll see more of the heterosexual characters entering the story. And as for the realism, I don't think it takes away from it. The majority of my friends/chosen family are either bisexual (such as Impa and Shad) or homosexual. Only a few of us were "out" to each other before we became close friends. We didn't chose to be friends because of who we love, but because of who we are. So I don't believe it truly takes away from the story for the main characters to be homo- or bisexual. But as you said, everyone has their own opinion.

Again, thank you for the compliment. I would tell you what the name means but that would spoil the story. I ask you (and any other reader) who may know/look up the answer not to spoil it for other readers. I believe the symbolism is fitting.

Your review was in no way "douchey". It was very well written. I almost cried when I read it. It warms my heart to know what others think of my story and to hear in such detail how I'm doing as a writer.

Thank you,
HermioneSparta

A Non-E-Mass

First off, I would like to say thank you for your review. It was indeed well-written, a very constructive piece of criticism. Apart from my alpha receiving warm fuzzies, which makes my day, it gave me a small sense of pride as well. Because she really is doing a damn good job. You don't sound "douchey", so to speak at all, and you don't have to be a writer to give a good review.

She tries for realism, yes, and a good pace, and I try and make sure that the pace is kept, ask questions, such things. Sometimes we throw ideas but there are some chapters that, even if we've thrown ideas, write themselves. Sometimes a chapter might be too long, however a story should be told in as many words as need be said. If you add too little, then you're not giving all of the story; likewise if you add too much. Even if you have a story worth a page, if that's where it needs to be told in, then Bob's your uncle.

Zelda, I believe here, is crazy. And eccentric, sometimes happy, sometimes angry, sometimes needy, sometimes wanting, brave, afraid, hurt. She's, as we say, human. She's prone to make mistakes, make decisions, to try and live even when it's hard, to fall in love with the woman who's closest to her, to bring a wolfos pup into her home, and damn the world who stands in the way of that.

The story should not lose a realistic edge because the characters are homosexual. I can see where you're coming from. However, a relationship should be based on a comfort level, how comfortable you are with someone, even in those chaotic times. There are relationships, regardless of sexuality, that don't work but for some that do, it's not impossible or unrealistic to hope for that sense of comfort and trust elsewhere, and in this case, it's this story. Where Zelda can wake up next to Impa and have that rock against tumult, even if sometimes they don't agree. Where Link, problem-child though he is, can have someone who loves him, someone who is trying to protect him like Impa would do for Zelda.

To whom or what indeed...I was shocked with this one as well but each time that I read a chapter or reread the story, I find that the symbolism fits very well to it and everything just fits into place after that.
Many thanks,
StorytellerLore
They sat outside time and reality, locked within a world of their own making, one fueled by the desperation and destruction around them. They had brought themselves here, to this place of isolation, though they had been set upon the grim path by those far stronger than they. As flames chased the fall chill from the chimney and through the shadows hugging the walls, they stared at one another.

Their eyes met, twin orbs filled with the hard-won knowledge. Agony and anger clashed as their gaze broke, the air between them thick with words unsaid. Even the stoked fire within its deep hearth and the lit sconces could do nothing to fight the ice which wrapped around them like a cocoon. Betrayal met sorrow as words, hissed ever so softly, rent the air.

"What have you done?"

A head hung from weight of action slowly lifted with renowned strength. Shad met Link's gaze once more. "What does it look like?" he questioned just as softly.

The young scholar had met his lover, the Queen and her Guardian for dinner, as was their routine. Both had laughed merrily at the pup's antics. Zelda had informed them, with the haughtiest of tones to have ever crossed her lips, that his name was Garo and he was not to be harmed. They had assured her the mutt was much too cute and lovable to inspire anything but adoration.

They hadn't spoken any further on the pup after the meal, though the angry glint hidden deep within the Hero's eyes had told the researcher his lover was hiding something. It was forgotten as they returned to their chambers, away from the prying eyes of servants, stewards and others who called the vast fortress home. Where the fluttering motions, as discreet as a pantry mouse, and smoldering glances had been hidden within the voyeuristic halls, the click of the chamber door unleashed a fury of emotion.

Momentarily sated, they had laid upon the sofa the archeologist now sat on, musing over their seemingly old ages and how quickly their fun had ended. With their eyes upon the fire that now mocked him, they had fallen into easy conversation, both before and after their separate showers. It wasn't until nearly an hour passed their admittance into the private sanctuary that the tension had begun. He had known, with every passing second, that it would happen.

"Are you thirsty?" the Hero had murmured. He had nodded, looking into the sky blue eyes and knowing the other man didn't yet know.

Had it truly been moments before? His arms were wrapped protectively around his stomach as he stared at the other male, watching the same fire which had warmed them dance wildly in his eyes. Swallowing, he stood.

"I know what it looks like," Link snarled in a deadly whisper. "I'm not asking what it looks like, I'm asking what you've done."
"I removed it." The utterance fell between them and landed like the gold key upon their carpet under their feet. It seemed to echo through the suite, and though each word was barely spoken, their ears rung from them.

"Why?"

Harsh and direct, never missing a beat. Shad flinched as the words struck him only to continue their descent into his breaking heart. He lifted his head once more, refusing to back down. The sword which he now faced was not the one in their bedroom but rather the honed blade of a quick mind. Now was not a battle of physical weapons but rather of will.

"You know why."

The roar which tore itself from the destined Hero's chest was like nothing he had ever heard. Instinctively, he took a step back. Fear pooled in his stomach and crept through his veins, clenching around his heart and mind like snakes.

"Where is it?"

Link stared upon the man he had trusted above all others but two. He shook as his nails dug into his clammy palms, heedless to the blood seeping through his knuckles. The fear within his lover's eyes stroked his rage further. What reason did he have to be scared? He knew the truth of who he was, had helped create the man he cowered before.

Because he knew he had crossed the line, came the quiet, silky whisper from deep within his mind. With a disgusted sigh, he turned back to the tantalus. The empty shelves mocked him as his frame shook harder. His eyes fell closed in defense, an attempt to change what had already been done.

As his fingers dug into the thick, polished wood, he paid no mind to the shiver that radiated from the back of his hand. Pain raced from his fingertips as he pressed them harder into the giving surface, the darkness around him blinding him from the truth. He kept his eyes shut as his thoughts grew louder.

A bitter laugh tore from his throat. "I must be going mad," he said in a harsh whisper. The knowledge that his thoughts had begun taking on a female voice—not his sister's voice as the connection was closed—made hysterical giggles well within him.

Shad watched, hugging himself, unsure of what to say or do. The primal part of his mind screamed at him to run, to get away from the man before him. He swallowed and shook his head, pushing the instinct away. He had done this, or at the very least, contributed greatly. Yet even if he had not, he would not run. The man before him was no monster, merely lost to his own demons and those of others.

Without warning, the giggles spilled free as they had threatened to do. Link spun around, startling the other male and uncaring as he took another step back. He pushed his thoughts away, including the one which sounded feminine. Insane or not, he really didn't want to listen. They were wrong anyway.

"You should've talked to me first."

"You have a problem."

A sneer twisted his mocking smile, turning it deadly. Shad felt his skin crawl as he stared into the stormy eyes of the man he thought he had known.
"I do, do I?"
"Yes."

He closed the distance between them with the speed of the wolf he was. His vision shifted, becoming stronger, and with it, his other senses. The world became sharper, more defined as subtle smells became nearly overpowering. For just a moment, he felt his facade slip as the pain, the anger, broke free.

"I do not have a problem," he whispered in the trembling man's ear.

Shad began to protest. The words formed in his head as his throat made the first sound. And yet, before the syllable was even complete, he fell silent. This was not how to convince Link. It was not how they had admitted the truth years past and certainly would not work now.

"I...I couldn't stand it anymore," he whispered. His heart pounded in time with their labored breaths. "I couldn't stand looking at it every day, knowing that..."

"That you couldn't have any."
"Yes."

Link pulled away and searched his lover's eyes. He looked deep, seeking for a single sign of deceit. All he found was sorrowful truth, a sadness which came from being within touching distance of temptation. Ambrosia had been within the other man's grasp and yet he had remained sober. His scowl became a smile as he nuzzled the cold, tear-streaked cheek.

"I understand." He wrapped his arms around the smaller man and closed his eyes. Inhaling his scent, he allowed the wolf to retreat as calmness overtook him. His thirst faded as silence descend with his soul. For now, he had what he needed. As long as Shad was all right, nothing else mattered.

[-]

[-]

AN: *shudder* Please review.

**Songs:**
New Divide by Linkin Park
A Beautiful Lie by 30 Seconds to Mars
End of Me by Apolayptica
Not Strong Enough by Apolayptica
Take Me Away by Avril Lavigne
I Will Not Bow by Breaking Benjamin
Dance with the Devil by Breaking Benjamin
Topless by Breaking Benjamin
Your Betrayal by Bullet for My Valentine
Despite the confrontation which had resulted, only those who knew before that evening were privy to Link's drastic change behavior. None of those people, save for Link and Shad themselves, were included in the wedding, either as attendants or guests.

So when Impa all but pounded on their door to wake them in time to leave, as they had requested weeks previously, she didn't know both men were already awake. Just over a week had passed since their chambers has become dry and they'd kept the change to themselves. None saw the annoyance becoming burning hatred within the struggling Hero as he tried to keep himself from withdrawal.

And while none saw the changes within either man, they certainly saw those which had occurred within their Queen and her mate. Every hour, on the hour, they could be found out-of-doors, either watching Garo or playing with him. Many had comment that despite his origins, the new addition was good for the monarch and her protector.

It was the new addition which was now causing yet more trouble. As Impa made her way from Link and Shad's chambers to the kitchen to fetch breakfast, Zelda stared at her mutt. With wide, innocent eyes he stared back. And then tugged harshly on the towel clutched in her hand.

"Agh, you stupid – bloody – dog! Let go!"

Growling, Garo wagged his tail as he hunched down and pulled harder. His two-legger had been much fun over the past nights. This morning was no exception. After eating and doing his business (thank the great wolf that she opened the door for him this time!) he'd followed her. He didn't like leaving her alone for long, even if that other female two-legger wasn't around. She was his two-legger, and he wasn't going to let anything happen to her.

So why was she telling him to let go? She was the one that waved the thick fuzzy thing at him. That's what she did when she wanted to play. So he played.

Annoyed, Zelda knelt quickly and tapped him on the nose. She pulled her hand back as he snapped at her. "Bad Garo!" Wrapping her hair in the towel, she shivered. Instead of being in her warm clothes, she was standing in her rapidly cooling bathroom, soaking wet and chastizing her puppy.

Bad? He'd show her bad. He knew what that word meant now. Pressing his ears to his head, he turned and left. Oh, he'd make her regret tapping him and calling him bad. Just she wait. He'd get her back for this.
"I know you said you didn't want to eat much, but you do need to eat something. Will some of last night's stew be all right?" Impa called as she entered the bedchamber.

"That's fine." Zelda knotted her dressing gown as she left the bathroom. She crossed her arms over her chest and scurried to her closet when she saw the other woman looking at her.

Taking a shuddering breath, the Sheikah shook her head at herself as she murmured under herself. Leaving the tray on the Hylian's desk, she quickly ducked into her own room. Leaning against the door, she closed her eyes for a moment.

As cute as that mutt was, he was getting on her nerves. It wasn't the accidents or even the fact that he caused so much trouble. No, after essentially raising Zelda, and then Link, she was used to childish behavior. It didn't matter if it had two, four or ten legs, a child was a child the world round. No, it was the fact that it refused to let her even hug the young woman.

A little Wolfo mutt, barely three-quarters the size of her head when it curled to sleep, was coming between them. It wiggled between them when they sat on the couch, walked between them when they went for a stroll, climbed into Zelda's lap whenever she was working and, despite all the younger woman's attempts to teach him otherwise, slept in her bed. The second her door would open, at any time of day, he was off the bed and growling at her.

It was ridiculous. As she ran a comb through her hair, she growled to herself. "I am not an errant, hormonal teenager in need of a chaperone," she told the mirror. "But apparently this mutt seems to think so."

Her own red orbs stared back at her. The longer she held her own gaze, she began to wonder if the pup's concern might have a small amount of truth. Above all else, Zelda was her Charge and she would protect, honor and respect her. And by the Goddesses, despite what many would think, having physical contact with her did not mean their bond was a perversion! Even if their relationship was not as it was, if their love had not been admitted, she would still need to assure herself of Zelda's physical well being. How was that perverted?

The fact that the pup was now well enough to jump up and nip at their clasped hands made it difficult at times.

She watched her own eyes narrow as she twisted her hair into a braid. "Stupid damned protective dog..."

[-]

In her dressing room, Zelda also stared in the mirror. She ran a hand over the Hylian banner, staring at the dress which was the symbol of Hylian female royalty. Throughout the entire history of her family, the women had always worn dresses of similar design to formal functions. It was what many considered to be their most regal attire. Yet the fitted silk and high-count cotton which graced her frame only reminded her of things she wished not to remember.

The pristine white skirt mocked her with its cleanliness. As she stared at the delicate embroidery and gold flounce, she saw only shredded, filthy material. The purple bodice was nothing but scraps of cloth sitting atop matching bruises. The banner, the very symbol of the country she had sacrificed much to protect, reminded her of the cruel voice which continued to haunt her.

No longer was this a sign of formality, no longer did it display her status as Sovereign to a nation far larger than many maps recognized. Where all would see an elegant display of noble wealth and regal elegance, she saw nothing but pain. The majority of her younger years had been spent in
similar dresses, banners and false armor.

No more.

Stripping the banner from her waist, she turned from the mirror and stared at her clothes. The thick, red velveteen dust cover used by her favorite dress maker caught her eye.

She had broken, changed and created many new laws and traditions over the years. Today would be no different.

[ - ]

Garo watched the tree-smelling two-legger pace. Up and down, up and down, stop, up and down. He laid beside the door (it was a door, right? That's what they called it) his female had entered. It smelt like worry. He didn't like it. Worry and...something else. Something momma smelt like before the alpha hurt her. Like surprise, but a lot worse.

Whatever it was, he didn't like it. And as he watched the pacing two-legger, Impa his female called her, he knew she didn't like it either. She kept looking at the door, then to the sky, and back at the door. It was starting to make his head hurt.

Impa had nearly given up hope. The sun was creeping higher with each passing minute and they still had yet to leave. While she and Zelda could take themselves, or each other, to the Twilight realm, Link and Shad were another matter. It would require warping from the castle to the Spirit Temple and then activating the Mirror for them. Only once it was closed once more could they follow.

It wasn't like Zelda to be late, nor herself for that matter. Yet it wasn't the passing time which worried her. It was the horror and disgust which radiated from the dressing room. What could cause such a reaction in the short time they had been separated? Casting another glance at the door, she wondered if it would be best to knock.

Before she could decide, the door opened. She blinked several times in an attempt to be sure she was seeing clearly.

Zelda slowly lifted her head, hesitantly seeking approval. The seconds of silence stretched into minutes. With each breath that passed her fragile confidence began to crumble. "Impa?"

The Guardian blinked once more and shook her head to clear it. "I..." Swallowing, she briefly drew her eyes over the...modified...attire. "You look...beautiful."

As she had earlier, Zelda crossed her arms protectively over her chest. She glanced down at herself. Contrary to what many would see, the skirt was not white. It was the palest shade of mint green possible. The bodice was a darker green. The seam master had said it matched her eyes, yet she remained firm that it was forest, not emerald. Cut from the same cloth as her skirt, her pale gloves stood out against the green banner. And it was forest green, thank you very much, not emerald, beryl or any other green...no matter what anyone said.

Regardless of the exact shade of contrasting greens, nothing was white or purple save for the sigils on the banner itself.

Impa cleared her throat, knowing she would have to speak. "What brought on this change?"

And a change it was. The dress itself was identical to her others yet the colors set it apart. As she met the younger woman's eyes, she found the change. Though she couldn't put it in words, it was
Zelda glanced away, unable to hold her gaze. "I just...didn't want to wear it anymore. So I had this made." She turned her eyes to the ground as she whispered. "The others...they...he... I just, I couldn't, the white and... Cleaning the dresses was always so hard, sometimes I just had to burn them. A-and it was time for a change anyway, I mean, I can't wear the exact same dress all my life right, I just can't, it'd be stupid and—"

"Zelda! Please, calm down."

Frantic emerald eyes met calm ruby. The panicked woman nodded, trying to swallow around the lump in her throat. She wrung her gloved hands before bending a knee. She lifted Garo, who had begun to scratch on her leg, and cuddled him without a thought.

Garo licked her chin, ears flat against his head. She smelt like fear. He didn't like it. She wasn't supposed to smell like fear. Turning to the other female, he raised his hackles. If this was her fault he'd...he'd... Well, he didn't know what he would do, but it would hurt and she'd never forget!

Ignoring the pup, Impa sucked a quiet breath through her teeth. She had seen that look before, that half-hidden glint which shone in over-bright eyes. Never before had she been in the position to watch it from the beginning however. Nor had she ever had to stop it on her own.

"Zelda." Her own voice, normally even and controlled, sounded broken and harsh to her own ears. She kept her face blank as the younger woman slowly lifted her head, never meeting her eyes. Damn it.

"There is nothing wrong with this new dress. You are well within your right to change your attire however you wish to ensure your comfort. Do you understand?"

Zelda clutched Garo tighter, her hand shaking as she scratched his head. She gave the barest of nods. "Yes m-yes."

"I am not mad at you for creating nor wearing this new dress without informing anyone. Because it is your right, you do not have to inform anyone. Do you understand?"

"Yes." The whispered reply trembled nearly as much as her hand.

"Good."

Silence hung between them as their hearts beat furiously in their aching chests. One mind churned, searching for answers logic could not give it. The other remained still, only the most basic of thoughts crossing the vast space.

Garo looked between them before squirming. Free from his mistress' arms, he slid to the ground and walked over to the desk. Whining, he stood in his hind legs, careful of the still sore wounds, and scratched. If they weren't going to eat, he was. Blasted two-leggers and their high hiding places.

Both sets of eyes turned to him. Hesitant smiles graced their lips as normalcy began to return.

Unwilling to risk raising her voice, and thereby pushing Zelda back into her previous state, Impa spoke quietly. "Are you hungry?"
Zelda nodded once. The motion was sharp and quick, barely noticeable if one was not looking for it. "Yes."

"Then let's eat."

Garo sat and sulked, knowing with those words that he wasn't going to be eating the food. It was probably cold anyway. It didn't smell as strong as it did when it was brought in.

[-]

They ate in relative silence, consuming the cooled stew without complaint or comment. The silence continued as they donned their boots, weapons and cloaks before making their way to the entrance hall. It wasn't until Link turned from his conversation with Shad that they spoke once more.

"Zelda...um...the pup?"

Both women turned to look at Garo who was happily trailing behind the Hylian woman. Impa raised an eyebrow, knowing instantly the younger woman had no plans to leave him behind.

"What?" Crossing her arms, Zelda shook her head. "He can go too. Midna won't care."

Shad chuckled, wisely keeping his comments to himself as he imagined the chaos the mutt would cause. Link, on the other hand, grumbled, the slightest hint of a scowl marring features.

"You can't take a dog to a wedding."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't know how to behave."

Both ignored Impa's mutters as their eyes met.

"Because you can't. It's-it's a dog. To a wedding!" he repeated.

"Yes, Navi and Midna's wedding. I received the invitation also, if you recall."

Her lifted chin and narrow eyes, coupled with the authoritative tone, made him growl. This was not his sister, was not the woman who had, just half an hour before, pulled at his mind because of the whispers.

"Leave him here."

Garo looked at the gold-eyed male. He smelled like a wolf, but also like a two-legger. And an alpha. His ears flattened again. And not a good alpha either. He raised his hackles and snarled quietly as he stood protectively in front of his omega female.

Link slowly turned his attention to the runt pup. He smiled and drew back his own lips. His flickering eyes slowly bled to solid gold. This mutt thought he could challenge him? The young Hero wasn't sure if he was amused or insulted.

"Don't snarl at my dog, Link!" Zelda stomped her foot to gain the man's attention.

Link turned to look at her incredulously."Did you just tell me not to do something?"

"Yes! You're being an idiot! He's my dog and he's going!"
"It's a wedding, Zelda! He'll get into trouble!"

"So could you, but I don't see any of us saying to leave you home."

Shad snorted and then coughed in his hand as Link blinked in shock.

Impa shook her head. "Sesha, he really should stay here."

"But he's my puppy!"

"Oh gods, he's a dog not a baby!" Link snapped. Her whining was grating on his already strung nerves. He shook his head, trying to see past his chaotic thoughts.

"Just what are you implying?" came the shrill screech.

"Nothing," he hissed as his head began to pound. He put a hand to his forehead. "I just don't think the dog should go."

She sucked in a deep breath before letting it out slowly. She straightened, regaining her composure just as quickly as it had been lost. "We are wasting time. I shall ask Midna and Navi when we arrive. If they do not approve, then I shall bring him back. Does that suit you, Sir Link?"

Pained blue orbs met protected emerald pools. He nodded in agreement, ignoring her mockery of his efforts to keep the country—her country, damn it all—safe. "Fine. Just as long as they say either way."

As the two-leggers started walking again, Garo trailed behind his female. His ears rung from her loud howling and he still wanted to fight the alpha. Stupid two-leggers...

[-]

[-]

AN: You might all be wondering why Zelda would talk back to Link. Well 1-he wasn't there for the slip, Impa was; 2-because he wasn't there, Impa registers as "higher up" in her mind this time instead of Link (right this moment anyway); 3-she's trying to separate herself from the slip and 4-Garo is her anchor. She's focusing on him instead of the past and what just happened.

No songs. Suggestions?

BN: That I do.

The Abandoned Island- Zektbach

Burn My Shadow- Unkle

The Chain- Ingrid Michaelson
 chapter twenty-six (i)

Twilight Butterflies

The journey to the Twilight Realm passed quickly enough that another argument couldn't occur. As the two couples stood within the other realm, Impa sighed in relief. She had expected Shad to react negatively to warping and Link to protest using the Mirror. Yet neither man had done as expected, only remained calm during the ten last minutes. Rather, they seemed too calm. She shook her head as she glanced at them. For once, she wasn't going to think about it. They weren't her Charge.

And speaking of her mate, where was she? Glancing around, the Sheikah muttered as she allowed the bond to lead her steps. Their last visit to the Twilight kingdom hadn't been on very good terms —in fact, it still gave her nightmares. So why would her logical, thoughtful and otherwise caring Charge stupidly run off without even mentioning where she was going?

A high pitched squeal and quick teleport to the source of the sound told her why.

Standing next to Midna, who had yet to adorn her wedding attire, was a very smug Zelda. The Sheikah sighed in relief once more before turning her attention to the excited Twilight Queen. Uncaring of her audience Midna cuddled the mutt. While she and her people revered wolves, a pup was not a wolf yet. It was something cute, soft and with wide, glowing, expressive eyes that begged for love. Much as her Light counterpart, Midna had taken to Garo within seconds to setting eyes upon his fluffy form.

Garo stared at the tree-smelling two-legger. His ears hurt from the high-pitched sound and his chest ached a bit from the night-smelling female that was hugging him, but he was happy. Unlike the tree-smelling female, he had two females cuddling and cooing over him. He pulled his hackles back; his mistress called it a smirk. Yes, he was very pleased.

Ignoring the pup, Impa raised an eyebrow and turned her attention to Zelda. "You couldn't have take two seconds to tell me you were going to see her?"

Indignation began to turn Zelda's amused smile into a scowl. She met the ruby eyes of her companion as she inhaled sharply, preparing to remind her she was a grown woman and could make her own decisions. Yet as her mind brushed Impa's, she realized it wasn't annoyance which narrowed her harsh gaze…but worry. Images flashed through their minds, memory of their last time in the distant realm tearing at their hearts.

"Oh love...I'm sorry. I...I didn't think."

Red eyes closed and the smallest of shudders ran through the lithe frame. Her muscles twitched as the adrenaline began to taper off. Ten, nine, eight, she counted to herself. Impa said nothing, deaf but to the sound of her own rushing blood. When she opened her eyes a moment later, she stared at the sorrowful emerald orbs.

"I accept your apology. I also understand you are still annoyed at Link. However, annoyance is not a reason to forget everything. Even if we aren't in a war, I still ask you to be cautious."

Her breath hitched ever so slightly as she shook her head, sliding her gaze to the enamored Twilight
"You are here not only as a guest, but also a foreign monarch. Very few people will be watching you as a person, Zelda, instead of a representative of the country you rule."

Zelda glanced away, biting her lip. Instinctively, she resumed her regal posture, though her expression remained worried. She nodded in understanding at Impa's words, grateful for the reminder, before turning back to Midna. She held out her hands.

Garo squirmed, having had more than enough of the night-smelling female. He wanted his female, the one that was loud but kept him safe and let him sleep next to her on the bed-thing. Well, she didn't actually let him, but he did anyway. He'd teach her, given time. He taught her to get him food, water and let him out, didn't he?

Sighing, Midna handed the pup back to Zelda. She pouted as she met the other woman's eyes. Her high, lilting voice sounded as she continued to hold the troubled gaze of her sister queen. "He is a good dog. I don't see any problem with him here. And if he misbehaves..." She shrugged. "He is a pup, just as the children are children. At least he will be entertaining. Navi would probably enjoy his antics."

Both women laughed as Zelda nuzzled the pup. "She probably would."

All three women stared at one another before speaking as one, laughter infusing every word. "After all, she followed Link for years!"

While the three women were amusing themselves, Link was staring at the Twilight Castle with unseeing eyes. Memories flashed through his mind and tore at reality, dragging him into a past so vivid he forgot where he was. Without notice, his feet traced a faded path into the castle. He grasped the Master Sword at his back instinctively, the power of the Twilight Realm coursing over him like water.

Shad laid a hand upon the tense Hero's shoulder only to leap back as he swung around. He raised his hands to show he was unarmed, heart pounding in his chest. "It's only me. Where are you going?" he asked quietly. He shuffled to the side to avoid the quick-paced Twili which ran around.

"I..." Link glanced around and lowered his arm. "I'm not sure," he murmured. Anger stirred within him at being interrupted and he pushed it away. Shaking his head, he turned to the other man. "Do you want to try and find the others?"

An opening door beside Shad cut off any response he would give. Both men turned curiously to face the emerging person as they cleared the threshold.

Navi ran a hand through her damp hair, blinking as steam escaped the closing door behind her. "Link...Shad...what're you two doing here?"

Link blushed slightly and shifted his weight nervously as he looked away from the humanoid spirit fea. "I got lost."

She chuckled and laced her arms through theirs. "Well, in that case, you can accompany me to the kitchen. I'm starving, haven't eaten since last night. Nerves, you know," she added with a wink to the stunned archeologist.

Shad nodded and spoke without thought, too overwhelmed to process what was happening. "Zelda has a wolfo mutt with her."
"Oh, really? I bet he's so cute!"

Link groaned as he realized one of his oldest friends was going to allow the damned mongrel to stay. And since Midna all but worshiped wolves, she too would agree.

Wonderful. The day couldn't possibly get any worse.

[-]

As if to mock Link's conviction, the day became worse. The first incident seemed innocuous at first.

Midna stalked through the halls, muttering to herself as Zelda and Garo followed. "Midna...what's wrong?"

The Twilight monarch grumbled, heedless of the Twili parting to allow her passage. They stared curiously at the Hylian and mutt which trailed behind her, whispering amongst themselves of their identities.

"Midna!" Zelda whispered harshly as she lengthened her stride to meet her sister queen's pace. "What is the matter?"

Before she could answer, both were forced to stop as a door open. Shrieks of horror sounded as Navi's voice floated through the opening. Several Twili raced to close the door, pushing against Link's strength as he attempted to keep it open. Midna's eyes widened fearfully as she turned and fled in the opposite direction, heart pounding harshly in her heaving chest.

It wasn't until they were several wings from their previous destination that both queens stopped running. Without a word, Midna entered a room, slamming the door behind her. Zelda and Garo stared at the closed door, not sure what to make of the petulant display.

Ten minutes, a goblet of thick wine and several tossed items later, Midna calmed enough to ignore her friend's admittance into the room ("Slamming a door implies I want to be left alone, Zelda!") and explained tradition forbade she and Navi from seeing each other before the ceremony.

No amount of wine would have her explain why it was forbidden, however.

What did become clear as time passed was that allowing the nervous monarch to stew quietly on her growing nerves was not the way to go. Rather than allow her the speculative silence she asked for, Zelda (and Garo) kept her company until time for the wedding.

[-]

An hour after the brides nearly seeing one another, thick smoke filled part of the castle. The clean, cool air became heavy as darkness rolled through the corridors. Raised voices could be heard as panicked screams echoed off the high ceilings.

"You fool, I'll kill you myself! How could you burn such a simple meal?! We barely had enough time to make the entire course and now you've ruined the main dish?! Leave my kitchen!"

A young Twili ran from the vast kitchen, trying to dodge the utensils being thrown behind him. He hid before either brides heard of the catastrophe.

[-]
Midna sat at her vanity, staring at her reflection with unblinking eyes. She hovered a hand over her face, careful not to smear the delicate artwork that was make-up. Though minimal, the opulent, pearl-like powder shimmered faintly upon her skin. Her focus remained upon her own face until a gentle tugging of her robe made her look down.

"Ah, you silly pup," she cooed. "You want to play." As she looked at the begging mutt, she felt her nerves calm further. Embarrassed by her angry display earlier, she pushed the memory away and smiled as he cocked his head. "You're precious."

Garo released her robe and looked up, ears perking. He knew that word. He hadn't forgotten his female saying he was bad. But now wasn't the time to get her back. The night-smelling female had said play. Yes, he wanted to play. Why else would he tug on the fuzzy thing wrapped around her like fur? Really, did he have to teach her too? He'd already taught his female and the forest-smelling female who wanted to cuddle and be her mate. It was exhausting!

Midna chuckled and waved the hem of her robe at him. She turned to the mute Hylian leaning against the wall behind her. She raised an eyebrow in question, silent.

Emerald eyes met crimson. Darker than Impa's, the red irises seemed to read her soul without delving into living nightmare that encompasses her being. Zelda took a silent, shuddering breath as she looked at Garo. Deep within her mind, she pulled away from the gaze which knew but had no confirmation. Even as she reclined further against the wall, anxiety pooled within the pit of her stomach.

"I'm ok. Just excited for you."

"And it makes you silent?"

"Well, I could chatter endlessly about nonsense," the Time Sage remarked in a teasing tone. "But I doubt you wouldn't enjoy that."

"I doubt you would either."

Garo ignored the limp fuzzy thing and searched for something else to tug on. He had to practice to make sure his female was safe, you know! And how else was he going to fight the bad alpha without practicing? Wait, what was that? Oh, that looked like excellent.

Neither woman noticed Garo as their conversation turned to the engagement. How had it happened, who proposed, where was it, what day? Midna blushed as she admitted she had proposed, though in her defense, Navi later told her she'd planned to propose the same day. It had taken place during a cliff picnic on their way back from visiting the local temple. Yes, it was only a few days before the invitations were sent, and no, you won't get anymore details.

Their giggles broke off as Midna screeched. Launching from the chair, she barely touched the floor as she crossed the room. Lifting the wolfo pup by the scruff of his neck, she stared at him before turning to Zelda. "He's not cute anymore!"

Paw-prints and stretched material had replaced the perfect skirt of the wedding dress. An inspection revealed there were no tears or bite marks. With baited breaths they awaited the seamstresses. The dress was returned to its previous state by expert hands as the queens nervously watched. As the corrections took place, several sets of piercing eyes turned to the mutt and his owner. Zelda ignored them, her own nerves nearly in tatters at the thought of what her pup had almost done. Dear Goddesses, had Link been right about allowed him to come?
Garo sulked as he sat beside Zelda, trying to ignore the weight of the rope around his neck. She'd called him bad... again. All the night-smelling people had too. Oh, they'd regret it for sure.

Link was found pacing outside Navi's door as Shad watched. Both were silent as they waited for the fea to emerge. It was nearly time for the ceremony and she'd yet to appear.

Link grumbled to himself as he sipped from a water-skin. The pacing was making him thirsty. Yet the thirst couldn't compare with the itch under his flesh as the Twilight continued to wash over him. He twitched ever so slightly as he shook his head, pretending not to remember. Though he had to sneer at Zant's memory. If one was going to conquer their own country, one shouldn't be a sycophant. That is where the Twili man had went wrong. He'd followed Ganondorf rather than his own plans.

Shad grew more concern as Link's agitation grew. The sneer upon the Hero's lips was as hateful as his eyes were murderous. Whatever was going through the other man's mind was not something he wished to know. And the way he was sipping from that skin made the archeologist wonder if there was more than water in it.

Their thoughts were interrupted by door slamming against the wall as the fea woman all but ran towards the castle entrance in haste.

"Navi, you're still in your dressing gown!" Link called as she neared the end of the corridor.

As Navi returned to her room, agitated beyond any attempt to soothe her, Impa wandered the castle. She knew Zelda was safe with Midna. Instinct made her explore and learn the vast structure once more. The last time she had been here, she hadn't had time to map the corridors and floors as she would have liked. Now she did.

Despite her focus on committing the foreign castle to memory, her senses remained alert. She heard the moaning voices of Twili, the alien language which sounded more like incoherent utterances of pains than words. Yet she knew they understood Hyrulean. At least, those she and the others had spoke with in the past and today did. Could it be only the higher ranks, such as the healers, priests and castle works, knew one of her languages?

"Oh!" The Twili stared in shock as they rounded the corner. They blinked, gazing upon the woman who radiated Shadow yet had a form so different than their own.

She returned their gaze with an unwavering expression. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she noted the symbols of a temple priest. Midna had pointed them out to her during their last visit, knowing the Sage of Shadows would need to recognize them.

One of them looked away, a soft string of moaned words falling from its mouth. The other hissed, clearly amused by his counterpart's comment. She remembered the Twilight Queen saying there were few priestess in this realm.

"If there is something you wish to say, you may say it in a language I understand," she whispered. She watched them, waiting as they returned their focus to her.

"I said, I do not understand why such an imposter is given the title of Sage when they live in a realm devoid of gray, where only black and white exists."
"You know nothing of me or my world, sir," she murmured quietly, her eyes narrowing once more with anger.

"I know your queen is a coward, your country hid behind a child and you are a fraud. What more do I need to know?" He waved his hand in the air, an arrogant sneer twisting his pale lips.

She took a step forward, baring her clenched teeth. Her chest swelled as the insult seared itself within her mind. Her knuckles cracked as she dug her fingers into her palms. Tense muscles quivered with energy that demanded freedom.

A primal growl tore from her chest and twisted her lips into a vicious smirk of pleasure as their eyes widened with fear.

Before any of them could utter another sound, a voice cut through her thoughts, soothing the wrath which demanded bloodshed in retribution. Peace filled her even as an amused smile replaced the dark mockery of pleasure. "Impa, where are you?! It's almost time to lead Midna down and you're not here!"

She turned from the frightened men, chuckling to herself as her aggravated Charge continued to berate her. She paused long enough to whisper words which would haunt them for years to calm. The soft syllabus, barely spoken, floated on the tense air and stung their ears with their truth. "I do not take kindly to insults of my Charge, nor her brother, gentleman. I won't forget our...conversation."

She whistled to herself as she quickly made her way towards the queens.

[-]

As Midna and Navi made their way towards the separate doors which would lead them to the wedding site, cloud storms gathered. Many in attendance stared at the sky as if to threaten it, all praying not a single drop would fall until after the ceremony.

Preferably not until after the brides had left the reception, the guests had returned home and the clean up was completed.

A gentle wind blew through the assembly, ruffling skirt, pant and dress hems alike. It carried the scent of coming rain, cooling the many people who sat in chairs under the blazing sun. Much like its Light counterpart, the Twilight realm had entered the fall season with high temperatures. Complaints rode the autumn wind like the falling leaves. Though not as sweltering as the season past, many were uncomfortable in their fine attire. It wasn't until the soft music swelled to announce the wedding party that all thoughts of the lack of shade faded.

Despite the heat, previous chaos, frustrated tears, long string of curses and swearing to never have another formal ceremony of this scale, Navi and Midna made their way towards each other. The focus remained on them as they closed the distance between them, coming to a halt before a smiling priest. Several dabbed tears from their eyes, including the Hylians in the first row.

All were so focused on the bride they paid Garo, who sat upon Zelda's lap, no mind. He, in turn ignored them and the rope still around his neck that kept him near the Hylian Queen. Many cried, most cheered and all clapped when the brides were introduced as wives, tears sparkling in their eyes. Love radiated from them as they leaned against one another, reluctant to part any sooner than they must.

The brides led their guests around the castle to a cliff-side. Overlooking the villages below, the
clearing was covered with a large, enclosed tent. The view was stunning, even to the few native Hyruleans. Even the clouds which had previously threatened rain were retreating in wake of such majestic happiness.

Yet it was not the magnificent view or ecstatic newlyweds which held the lone Sheikah's attention. Love flowed through her, warming her rushing blood and making her dizzy with the strength of her feelings. As the Hylian monarch sat beside her, entranced in conversation with a Twili scholar, her heart skipped several beats. The smile upon her mate's face outshone the sun above them. The light in her eyes chased the darkness lingering within them away, if only for a moment. Her hands nearly shook as she restrained the urge to pull her into her arms, desperate to be close to her.

The heavy air smelt faintly of ritual smudge and the fall season during dusk. Yet the thick air, charged with the heady emotions of love and excitement, only choked her. The love which had created a world outside of time and space for them was different, glowing with something new deep within her soul. Casting a furtive glance at her fellow Hyruleans, she quietly excused herself.

Pushing her way through the throngs of Twili, she slowly closed the bond. As she neared the table of refreshments, Impa swallowed harshly. She closed her eyes for a moment, heart pounding in her chest as her calloused palms became damp. Her love for her Charge had always been great, even before it could have been called romantic. Yet this was something different. Possessiveness threaded itself through the pure fire which fueled her.

Today had sparked something. The longing she had felt had little to do with the wistful, fleeting desire which had passed Zelda's face as she'd seen their friends standing before them in wedding attire. No, the younger woman hadn't even recognized that wisp of a thought within her own mind, let alone her Guardian's. But Impa had. What had been a ghost of a yearning within her mate threatened to pull words from her she wasn't sure it was time to say.

She'd told Zelda she'd wanted it, eventually. But eventually wasn't now. Sipping the cool water, she glanced around the crowd, her eyes landing instant upon the woman she had just left. As Link took her seat, the primal possessiveness surged forward once more. She loosened her vice-like clasp on her glass, knowing giving into her rising ire would do no good. The boy had done nothing wrong.

Except...

Zelda was hers.

And damn it all, she wanted everyone to recognize that. Few understood what a mate was. Yet all...all knew the meaning of "wife".

As the word echoed within her mind, the bond pulsed with acceptance and...pleasure? Taking a shuddering breath, she closed her eyes.

The thread of longing began to uncoil, retreating to wherever it stemmed from. A shuddering sigh barely escaped her lips as love, untainted by the possessiveness, soothed her ragged nerves. Why today, of all days? Why now? By the Goddesses, their bond was stronger than any piece of paper could be...but that piece of paper meant a lot, regardless of their respective cultures. It would be a step...further...

Without a thought, she turned from the reception and made her way towards the cliff edge. The warm afternoon wind wrapped around her. Her lungs burned as she breathed deeply, trying to think past the chaos which had eclipsed her precise mind. Confusion dried her mouth and wrapped
around her throat ever so slightly.

"Damn it all," she whispered to herself as cheers and music filled her ears. Not now, she told herself just as quietly. Now was not the time to think of it. As Guardian and Charge, none would dare try to separate them...not for long anyway. While those closest to them understood the depth of her love, only her tribe knew what it meant when she called the younger woman sesha. But to think about being married to her, to think about what it would be like to stand before all of Hyrule and have everyone know Zelda was hers, that her heart was hers... No, best not think on it.

With another sigh, she turned and slowly made her way back to the reception. She entered the tent only to spin around as a hand grasped her arm. Without hesitation, she wrapped her fingers around the hand which held her and twisted. Ruby eyes met pain-filled scarlet as the offending appendage was pulled free of her grasp.

"What do you want?" she hissed quietly.

"You should leave."

She looked the priest over. "I believe I told you I wouldn't forget you. Either of you. Do I appear to have such a poor memory as you that I would not recognize someone who insulted me?"

Their sneers, already twisting their expressions into ugly masks of hate, became grotesque as their nearly-white skin turned molten. "How dare you."

She raised an eyebrow before turning away, having deemed them unworthy of a reply.

[-]

Garo sighed as he watched all the two-leggers. This was boring. Zelda had set him on the ground and was talking to a bunch of people he couldn't see. The tree-smeller (Impa, remember, she does have a name—unfortunately) had walked away before the wind shifted. Scratching his aching ears (they were all so loud!) he sighed again. Glancing at the thing wrapped around his neck, he saw his female wasn't holding it anymore. A plan began to form, and within moments, he was free.

Glaring at the offending thing (a leash, she called it), he sniffed before turning away. He'd show her. Not only had she called him bad—twice!—but she'd ignored him. He'd make her regret that. Nose to the ground, he wound through the two-leggers. The bad alpha was sitting by the smelly water with his beta. The beta smelt...worried, a bit scared. He sat for a minute to watch them.

The alpha didn't deserve his beta, that was clear. If a beta was scared of the alpha, then the alpha was bad. You didn't run a pack through fear but respect. His beta-omega respected him, and so did her possible future mate—look how much they doted on him! But this bad alpha...he was doing everything wrong. If he didn't shape up soon, he'd step in and take the male beta. He wasn't sure if his beta-omega would like it, but he was sure she'd understand. She seemed to like taking care of people who needed help. Like the dinner-smelling male that healed him.

Turning away from the rival alpha, he made his way through the two-leggers again. This was worse than the forest, by the Great Wolf! No room at all! Stupid two-leggers. Why did they have to wear so much fake fur and scent? Didn't they know they wouldn't attract mates smelling so bad? Though in this case, maybe it was a good thing. He didn't like the way that lone female smelt at times...especially looking at his beta-omega.

His hackles raised at the thought.
He didn't say she could have a mate yet. And he wouldn't. She was his to protect. He'd let that tree-smeller help, but not mate. His female wasn't in season yet. A couple times the other female smelt like she was going into season and his female got a little scared. He didn't like that...not one bit. If she didn't stop, he'd make her. Zelda was his beta-omega, his to protect and he would protect her.

Hunger pulled him towards where the most food was. There wasn't much, but some. On the way there, he stopped. The lone female, the tree-smeller. She sounded...angry. Knowing his beta-omega wasn't near, he went to her. She smelt angry. Really angry. The males in front of her smelt...weak. Like fluffy, big-eared dinner, except they were night-smellers. He listened, not understanding their words completely but knowing the names. Their tone and scents interested him more.

Ignorant of Garo behind her, Impa dug her nails into her palms. "What did you just say to me?"

"I said," came the cold reply, "that not only are you a fraud 'Shadow' woman, but that the woman you call queen is less than a two-bit whore. Have you not heard? She has serviced many a man...and woman."

Where love and possessiveness had previously sung in her veins, blind fury burned beneath her skin. Blood dripped from between her white knuckles as she stared at the arrogant man before her. The fact that he was a priest meant nothing to her; at the end of the day, people were people, regardless of their title. No, it was the fact that he dared judge an innocent woman (HER woman!) so callously that made her blood boil.

"You know nothing." Attempting to turn away once more, she halted as fresh words, still uttered with the utmost care, reached her ears.

"I know that she knelt before the boy you call 'hero' and laid back for Ganondorf and his creatures."

She swung around. Her eyes glowed with the power of her wrath, shadows writhing as she shook with restraint. Her throat began to ache as she choked on the words, both of insult and magic, she didn't dare let free. Agony spread across her skin as the heat within her continued to rise, demanding release. She had hurt people for lesser insults to her Charge, and killed for being a threat to her mate's life. This insignificant bug thought he would live to gloat after speaking such lies to her?!

Yet before she could speak or raise her fist, a brown blur launched itself from behind her. A piercing, guttural scream rent the air as Garo clamped his small yet powerful jaw around the man's leg.

"...as if textiles—" Zelda broke off sentence as a pained scream reached her ears. As one, the crowd turned to the howling man. Instinct propelled her from the chair. She saw Impa's hair and knew she would be near the man.

What was going on?!

....and why was the bond closed?

[-]

From his place at the bar, Link stared at the pup. Amusement warred with anger as he watched the priest try to shake the mutt free. Whatever had stoked his ire, the pup was clearly refusing to let it go—literally.
Although...he'd have to thank the man...he'd just proven his point.

The pup was dangerous.

A victorious smirk pulled his lips back in a silent snarl. Zelda would never forgive him if he hurt the packless mutt, he knew that, but if it hurt her...he'd rip its throat out. Gladly. And would laugh as the life drained from such worthless, pathetic gold eyes.

But for now, he'd take amusement in his point being made. The pup had just signed his own warrant.

[-]

The crowd parted slowly as Midna and Navi made their way towards the commotion. Both knew something had happened earlier to put their Sheikah friend on edge. They also knew she would never cause a public scene unless necessary—for Zelda's sake. Right now, they represented Hyrule and Zelda wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the friendship of their two countries. Ergo, neither would Impa.

So why exactly was the Hyrulean Sage of Shadows standing within a foot of where a man appeared to have fallen?

[-]

Garo yelped as he skid across the fake wood. He growled at the yelling male. He'd barely bitten him, barely broke skin! It didn't hurt that much and he would know! Preparing to jump at the prone form, he yipped pathetically as someone grabbed the scruff of his neck.

The tree-smeller was holding him off the ground! That-that-that bitch! She wasn't his beta-omega, wasn't even part of his pack! How dare she?! He snapped at her hands. He helped her! And this is how she repaid him?!

Impa looked down at the mutt pup. The anger which coarsed through her whispered like a lover, begging her to release the little terror on the cowering excuse for a being. "Garo, behave!" she hissed. She lowered her voice further, knowing the pup could understand her. "If you hurt him again, then you're hurting Zelda. Now stop.”

Growling, he settled in her hold and squirmed to be let down. He wouldn't hurt the weak fog-smeller. He pressed his ears to his head and looked at her with wide eyes, whining softly.

Not fooled, Impa snorted softly before setting him on the ground. The weight of an untold number of eyes upon her made her turn her own gaze to the simpering man. She felt Zelda break through the last ring of people. Oh good Goddess...this day couldn't get much worse.

Since the females were busy staring at someone, Garo darted forward so he stood before the tree-smeller. Impa. She wasn't part of the pack yet, but...she was defending his female. He could call her by her name. Sometimes. Maybe. If she didn't lift him like that again. He might even let her cuddle, depending on how she acted.

That settled, he stared at the male. He didn't growl or bare his teeth, just stared. He'd learned staring scared a lot of people. He didn't know why though. It was a good way to get information, whatever the reason for their fear. And the male was clearly afraid. He stunk of it. This wasn't just his or the tree—Impa's doing.

Wait...someone was talking...
The strong night-smeller.

Midna looked around. She glanced at her fellow monarch and knew she knew nothing. Her gaze then slid to the Sheikah, who looked murderous, and to the staring pup. From the look on the fallen priest's face, he had done something to antagonize them.

Wonderful.

Next her searching gaze fell upon Link and Shad. They continued to sit at the bar, watching the spectacle but staying out of the way. Smart...maybe they knew what happened. Possibly, but they were too far away to know if anything had been said. And knowing the arrogant man whimpering before her as she did, something had been said.

Finally, she looked at those assembled. Her wedding had turned into a show. That wasn't about her and Navi. Not that she wanted a display like this, but still! "What," she asked quietly, "is going on here?"

Several people spoke at once only to fall silent as she raised a hand. In a steady voice, she turned to one of the soldiers who was in "plain clothes" rather than uniform while keeping watch on the reception. "What happened?"

And so he told her. His were were spoken with a calm down, never wavering as his eyes remained on her face. A lie never left his mouth as he told what the had seen. Guardian Impa, Sheikah Maderone of Queen Zelda, had left and returned to the reception. Upon her return she was grabbed by Priest Corqen. After pulling her arm away, they appeared to speak for a moment.

Did either of them seem angry? Well, Guardian Impa did, and she turned to walk away. The other priest was turned and couldn't be identified, but he must have said something because she stopped walking. No, I couldn't hear what was said. The closer I became, however, the clearer it was that she was being insulted and provoked. She attempted to leave once more and was restrained yet again. How? A hand was wrapped around her wrist. No, she didn't attack them.

The pup? Well, the pup actually walked over. Never heard it called, it just appeared. Words were spoken—please don't ask for them to be repeated—and it attacked Priest Corqen. Bit his leg actually. When Priest Corqen fell, he kicked out and the pup slid to Guardian Impa. And then everyone arrived.

"Thank you," she said softly. She watched him bow his head and step back from the corner of her eye. Questioning of the priests gave a very different story. They merely wanted to speak with Impa and before they knew it the dog was there. Yet witnesses all agreed with the soldier: she had been insulted, restrained and provoked.

As each person spoke, Zelda kept her impassive eyes upon the woman in question and her mind upon the bond. Something was wrong. The bond was silent. No...not silent. Closed.

Biting her cheek, she took a deep breath and lifted her head. Something might be wrong, but they would deal with it later.

Alone.

Once home.

For now, she was going to attempt to keep peace between her country and Midna's. Steeling her nerves, she made her way to the fallen priest to check the wound her pup had made. By Nayru, this day had been going so good too.
AN: Semi-clifty, I know. I love Garo!

BN Songs:

Labyrinthine Heart- Sleepthief

Practicing Madness- Xenotra2 [Newgrounds]

Prelude- The Flashbulb

Moralite- Lzn02
Twilight Butterflies (II)

Supported by his fellow clergyman, the priest followed the two queens, fea, Guardian and carried pup away from the reception. Three-quarters of an hour later the issue was laid to rest. The Twilight Realm and Light Realm would remain allies. Due to their aggressive actions against an honored member of a visiting land, both men were released of their duties to the temple. There was no need for self-serving and prejudiced people in such high ranking positions, after all. No, the pup wouldn't be put to death—why should he be? He was defending the Guardian of Queen Zelda, after all. If anything, their deaths could be demanded. She was all but equal to her Queen, after all. They had not only insulted but also assaulted her. Did she want retribution in the form of death?

No. As arrogant as they were, they did not deserve death. They had not hurt her, after all. Impa was more angered by their words than physical actions. No, she wouldn't repeat what had stoked her ire. Some things weren't worth being spoken twice, not even to determine their punishment. And yes, Your Highnesses, it was for Queen Zelda's benefit this knowledge be kept to herself.

As the now ex-priests left for home, the party returned to the reception. Tables were being set in preparation for dinner and all were hungry. The brides returned to their place to the raised table, leaving both Hyruleans to return at their leisure.

Without a word, Zelda halted her unhurried steps. The quiet sound of merry voices and music carried on the gentle wind. The noise barely registered to her thoughts as she stared blindly at the reception. With a quiet sigh, she shook her head and glanced at the mutt by her heels. "I should be mad you know."

Garo looked at her, one ear cocked as he tilted his head. She should...but she wasn't, was she?

As if hearing his thoughts, she shook her head once more. "But I can't be. I'm not happy you bit him. And got blood on your muzzle. But I can't be angry. You are getting a bath though," she added as an afterthought.

A...bath. With the water and itchy smelly stuff she called soap? Pressing his ears to his head, Garo laid on the ground and stared at the place with food. This really wasn't fair. And here he was going to let them cuddle! First she praised him then she punishes. He'd thought she was smart.

Impa watched the emerald-eyed woman. "Zelda, I-"

"Don't."

The word, spoken softer than the gentlest whisper, made her flinch. The searing anger, like molten steel, tore at her ears and shredded her thoughts.

"Don't," she repeated. She turned away from the reception and met the sorrowful, confused ruby orbs of her companion. She knew her impassive expression was creating more worry in the Sheikah woman yet she didn't care. Not now.

"You told me I was here, being watched as a representation of my country—as a thing instead of a person. In all the years I've known you, I've never seen you act so...so...so stupid in public! The only thing I know for sure is that they grabbed you and said something that clearly enraged you. Congratulations, they succeeded in their goal of doing so. Because you won't tell me, I can only
guess it was about *me*. But that's okay...because I've been stupid too. I've done things I never want to think about in public, things I got away with because of my age or sex or because no one saw me. I don't care about that. I don't even care that my *puppy* came to your rescue...that's just amusing.

"But...none of that *hurt*. None of that was anything I couldn't understand. I know you're not perfect, I know everyone, including you, makes mistakes. But...you shut the bond."

Agony tore through them as the younger woman violently ripped at the blocks which had separated them so completely. A frustrated sob escaped her as a strangled gasp of pain fell from the other woman. Without thought, she pried at the walls which had encased the older Sage's heart, keeping everything that made her *sane* from her.

"*WHY?*

Impa sucked in a breath and took a step back. The single word, a speculation and implication given in the span of a second, was both a stab to her spirit-her heart-and blow to her mind. Defenses shattered, the world spun as she pinched her nose, stemming the blood which threatened to flow. Never had the pressure from their bond been this intense. "Sesha, *keta*, I-"

"Don't lie to me!" Zelda hissed between swallowed sobs. She met the tear-framed eyes once more, not caring who saw them as she grabbed the other woman's shirt.

"I...please, not now. Don't ask me to talk about it here. *Please*, my love."

A shiver ran down their spines as the crumbling walls trembled, threatening to rebuild. The haunting insanity, which had been all but absent from the vivid green eyes of the Hylian monarch, clouded the depths of her intelligent mind. Glistening red orbs closed for the barest of seconds, listening as insecurity and self-loathing threatened to consume the other woman.

"It...It's has nothing to do with you," Impa whispered. "I was...overwhelmed earlier. And before I had time to open the bond, I was confronted. I felt it best to keep the walls up. Please sesha...don't do this. I promise, it's nothing you did or said."

Garo watched as his beta-omega leaned against the lone female. Deciding to let them cuddle, he waited. He didn't like the smell that came off his female. It...it wasn't pure omega, not like earlier. But it was *different*. Rotting. Like dinner left in the den for too long. It burned his nose and made him want to gag. If the tree-smeller could make that scent go away, he'd let her. The heat coming off her (they called it guilt, right?) said it was her fault anyway.

Impa wrapped her arms around Zelda, ever careful to not restrain her. "I'm sorry my love. I tried to avoid what happened. I had no desire to argue with them. I didn't even know Garo was there. I'm sorry my walls hurt you. I...needed time to collect myself. Sometimes it becomes too much."

"D'you w'go 'me?"

"Home? No...not now. Not unless you want to. Although I wouldn't mind eating," she added as her stomach growled.

Chuckling, Zelda pulled away and wiped her eyes. She glanced at the reception, praying none had seen them. "I'm hungry too. And I haven't forgiven you. I won't forget it either...I want to talk about it when we get home."

Pressing a kiss to the golden-brown hair, Impa nodded. "I know. And we will, I promise. Now let's get something to eat. That means you too mutt."
Garo barely restrained himself from snapping at her heels. Smug woman.

[-]

In contrast to the earlier mayhem, the reception dinner began without a single problem. The burnt course had been made once more, finished just in time for everyone to sit and be served. As the last plate was being set before hungry guests, the sharp ping of cutlery hitting glass sliced effortlessly through the voices. All eyes turned towards the sound, causing both brides and Shad to blush as Link stood.

He cleared his throat and addressed the staring people, pretending not to notice those who silently begged him to sit. "I don't know all the customs of this country, so I apologize if I break them," he told the Twilight Queen and her new wife with a bow. "In Hyrule, it's tradition to toast the newlyweds and say something about them—so I will.

"I could tell you embarrassing stories, but I'll refrain since four very powerful women know more about me than I do about them, and two of them are the brides." He smiled as a collective chuckle ran through the crowd. "I will say this though: I have been very fortunate to call Midna and Navi my friends and more so that they call me theirs. They're complete idiots for sticking by a stumbling boy, but that's just my opinion. But with that stubbornness came compassion, empathy and love for humanity I've seen in few others.

"Through the years I've known them, these two women have faced more than just their own demons. If nothing else, they learned what it means to be truthful (even brutally so, Midna) and to learn patience. They can also nag like you wouldn't believe (Navi)." He grinned and winked at the blushing and scowling brides.

"We're hungry, Link, get on with it!" Navi called as she stared at the boy-turned-man.

"Fine fine...I did say they can nag, didn't I? Well, they can also say the right thing at the right time and always have an open ear. The four very powerful women I know, who are also probably as hungry as me so I'll shut up soon, were fortunate enough to find their soul mates in each other. Midna and Navi are suited for each other and I wish them a long and happy marriage." He raised his glass.

The collective "hey-ah!" could be heard within the castle as all raised glasses to the new wives.

[-]

Dinner passed with idle chatter, though none tried to copy Link by toasting the glowing women. Love radiated off them, warming all those who spoke to them. Their happiness was contagious, especially when music began once more for dancing. Tables were pushed away to reveal the laid floor once more and both women took their place at the center of the space.

They danced gracefully, effortlessly moving with one another. Their eyes never left one another as they moved across the floor, never missing a step as they kept time with the song.

There was no pause between songs as the brides' melody gave way to a quick waltz. Merry laughter rose as some couples stumbled amongst each other. Less than a quarter through the waltz, a good number of the guests had taken their seats once more. Unable to match those still dancing, they watched happily, if breathlessly, as the remaining dances became blurs of colors.

Where the brides had been effortless and nearly perfect in their opening dance, their Hyrulean female counterparts moved as if they were one body. Red and green eyes orbs never strayed from
each other as years of training kept them in step. Breath and heart in tandem, they moved without thought, their motion instinctive rather than cognitive. Swathed in heavy skirts and a thick suit, neither paid mind to the pounds of fabric which threatened to hinder them. They had long since moved passed noticing cumbersome attire.

From the side, Garo watched. The night- and sun-smellers were watching his female and the lone female. Everyone was watching them. Pride made him swell as he smelt envy and admiration. Other wolves had once looked at momma like that, before she went to the great wolf. The fact that his female was now getting those looks... She did deserve them though.

And why were they going so fast? What was the point of making themselves dizzy?

With a sigh, he laid his head between his paws. He'd never understand two-leggers.

Midna and Navi were in fact watching the Sages, though they felt no envy. It was their reception, true, but they wouldn't deny another couple a chance of happiness to be petty. Neither woman was trying to become the center of attention, only enjoying themselves. Both Twilight Queen and fea had long since come to terms with the attention their Hyrulean friends drew. Did they not draw the same at times?

And speaking of attention, why was Link sitting out? He knew how to dance...

Link watched Shad blush as he tried to dance a slower waltz with a Twili female. He chuckled to himself as the other man stumbled before righting himself. He knew the archeologist's father had taught him to dance, but not that well. What else was Shad keeping from him?

Resolute, he set his glass down and made his way to the floor. Ironic as it was, he couldn't dance as well as Shad (much to his sister's amusement) but he could dance. And even if he couldn't, he really didn't like the way that woman was looking at his lover. Shad was his.

The dancing continued, some dancing to all songs and others sitting some out. It was over an hour before the musicians were relieved. The new quartet took their places with ease, playing so quickly it seemed as if there had been no pause.

As the evening wore on, Zelda said nothing about the gossamer-like curtains in the bond. Whatever Impa was struggling with was something she clearly didn't want to speak of right now. The barriers were thin enough that nothing was blocked, although some emotions were more...what's the word...jumbled than others. They were too mixed together, like paint in a rinse cup, to make any real sense of.

And right now, that was ok. In the middle of a foreign wedding reception...it was ok. Impa wasn't hiding, just taking time to sort through her own emotions. And besides, she had to keep watch on Garo. The pup hadn't wandered off again—yet.

And why should he? He was getting continuous praise for coming to the aide of the tre-Impa earlier. He was getting fed and didn't have to wear the leash. The bad alpha was by the smelly water again with his beta. Zelda was doting on him, as were several others. Why run off when he was being treated so well?

Speaking of running off, where were Midna and Navi? Impa chuckled to herself. How the newlyweds had managed to sneak off was beyond her—but good for them. "Would you like to dance again?" she asked while holding out a hand to the Hylian.

Smiling, Zelda laid her hand over the calloused palm. "I'd love to." Allowing herself to be whisked
onto the dance floor, she smiled to herself. Tonight had, dare she say it, gone rather well...so well in fact she wondered if it would be her turn to plan a date night soon...

[-]

Time passed in a blur, leaving all four Hyruleans unsure of when it was when they finally returned home. An exhausted Shad, tipsy Link, humming Zelda, chuckling Impa and yawning Garo made their way from the Temple of Time towards the castle. And thank Goddesses for warping or else they'd have had to walk all the way from the desert.

Impa shuddered at the thought as she pulled her cloak tighter around her. Arm wrapped protectively around Zelda's waist, she glanced around her ushering her forward. Whatever time it was, it was dark enough and cool enough that staying out longer than necessary wasn't advised.

As the Queen carried her nearly-asleep pup, the Sheikah allowed her thoughts to wander a bit. Zelda had looked so...not carefree...but happy. Tonight had allowed her to be a social monarch without facing the mockery of her home realm's aristocrats and diplomats. But more than that, the dancing had given her joy beyond words, just as the wedding itself had touched something deep within her.

And if that came from being a guest at a wedding...

No. Shaking her head, Impa pulled herself away from that thought. The warmth of the castle wrapped around them as she lowered her hood. The door was bolted shut behind them once Link and Shad stumbled in.

No...she wouldn't-couldn't allow herself to think about it. So many people put pressure on the younger woman to marry. She'd always been one who hadn't and that wouldn't change.

But by the dear Goddesses, even deep within her own heart...even in the darkest recesses of her mind...she had to let herself feel that desire. Everyone would know Zelda was hers and she was Zelda's. Nothing short of a legal marriage would grant them that sort of protection from rumor and outside pressure.

[-]

Even the hot water of her shower couldn't wake Zelda enough to worry about the emotions stemming through the bond. As she pulled on her night clothes and tiredly made her way to the sitting room for their nightly cuddle, she smothered a yawn. Impa had promised her an explanation for her blocks on the bond. But at...two a.m...and after such a day...couldn't it wait until in the morning? Preferably after breakfast?

Deciding it could, she sat between the older woman's legs and snuggled against her. Another yawn broke free and she closed her eyes. "Tonight was fun...even with the chaos and everything."

"It was." Impa pressed a kiss to the damp curls nestled against her shoulder.

"Explain in the morning?"

"Yes."

Garo watched sleepily from his place by the fire. Because Impa had stuck up for Zelda, what silly names those were, he'd let them cuddle. His beta-omega seemed to miss cuddling with the lone female. But he'd watch them. He didn't trust that tree-smeller with his female, not when it came to cuddling and maybe mating.
Ignorant of Garo's scrutiny, Zelda pressed closer to Impa as the older woman wrapped a throw around them. She scooted down enough to listen to the steady beat of her strong heart. Warmth cocooned them from the fire and radiated through them from the bond. "I love you."

"I love you too."

Their lips brushed before they cuddled again. From his place on the floor, Garo lifted his head. He'd intervene if they didn't behave. Just because he got a bath and was still trying to dry his fur didn't mean he wouldn't! Narrowing his eyes, he went back to smoothing his coat. He was watching them...

Hey, wait a minute! He didn't say she could put both paws on her! Growling softly he jumped on the kinda-high thing (couch, right?) and pushed his way under the tree-smeller's arms. It was time for him to be cuddled. She wasn't allowed to put both paws on his female.

Impa sighed to herself as she stared at the pup. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he was glaring at her. All she did was hug the younger woman again. Really, this was now beyond ridiculous!

Zelda giggled quietly to herself as she scratched the possessive mutt beyond his ears. "Silly boy. I suppose this is your way of saying it's time for bed?"

Bed? If it meant getting away from the older lone female who wanted to mate with her, then yes. He hopped down to the floor and stared at her impatiently. Why were they touching their muzzles together again? Agitated, he growled softly once more.

Rolling her eyes, Zelda pressed a kiss to Impa's cheek before standing. "I'm tired anyway. Good night love."

"Good night sesha," Impa whispered. She smiled to herself as the younger woman followed that damned mutt. She'd teach him to leave them alone if it was the last thing she did.

As Impa ranted silently within her own tired mind, Zelda climbed into bed and curled under the heavy covers. She peeked at Garo as he wiggled under them, determined to sleep next to her. "You really need to stop that you know. Impa's not bad and we're not doing anything wrong."

Bad? No, she wasn't...but she was a danger. Licking the female's nose, he laid his head down. He wouldn't argue with her tonight. She'd understand with time. He was alpha...it was his job to protect her. She wasn't ready to mate yet—wasn't even in heat! He'd seen wolves sniff at momma when she wasn't in heat...and that's what the tree-smeller was doing. Well, he wouldn't let her.

Besides...

If they spent all their time cuddling, who would cuddle him?

[-]

[AN: As ever, thanks to StorytellerLore for her fabulous editing (and suggestions!) to this chapter and story as a whole.]
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Shape My Heart (I)

Weeks after the tactfully edited morning explanation of the reason why their bond had been closed so completely, the last tattered threads of fall warmth gave way to the warning chill of late autumn. With less than a fortnight until winter truly began, the golden country of Hyrule all but sighed in relief as the last preparations were completed. The lull between seasons, the time in which all could rest from the intense summer and fall days of seemingly never-ending work.

The trees shivered as they shed the last of their leaves. The mighty pines stood tall in the face of the looming cold, as prepared for the coming snow as the burrowing creatures which took shelter under them. Farore had given all her children, from the smallest pebble to the most sentient of creatures, the ability to survive Din's brutal cleansing period. Whether they chose to rest during it was their and Nayru's business.

From his warm place by the great window in Zelda's office, Garo lazily watched people scurry in the Market. Bored, he laid his head between his paws and sighed. His beta-omega had been too busy lately to play like she normally did. And there was only so much plotting he could do for when and how he would take the other alpha's male beta from him.

What was that?

Lifting his head, he looked at the door before hopping from the cushion and making his way to the hall. Zelda was safe enough in her long, boring, if quiet, meeting with a lot of lone wolves. There were several nature- and shadow-smellers watching her. Plus, he'd seen these particular wolves before...and they weren't a threat. They deferred to her authority like good loners should. They might not like it, but that was too bad. She was an important beta from what he'd heard. An alpha in her own right.

Following the mysterious noise, he wondered who could possibly be going towards the front courtyard. The winding paths and many stairs led to the big doors, and some smaller ones, that opened to the big, fenced-in piece of outside. But no one goes there and tries to do it secretly.

Ignorant of the pup following her, Impa wandered aimlessly through the vast maze of corridors. Her steps were quiet as she walked through patches of dim light and darker shadow. Thick clouds covered the sky, blanketing the castle and surrounding area in a constant state of chilly dullness. Without the last bit of fall sun, everything seemed almost lifeless. Colors had lost their radiance as if in mourning. Yet even the cool nearly-winter air which blew through a cracked window (mental note: get that fixed) didn't truly enter her thoughts.

"Impa."

A quiet voice, spoken so softly it made a whisper sound like a bellow, struck her idle mind. She paused mid-step and softly laid her foot on the ground. Her thoughts fell like water off a rooftop, draining into the recesses of her mind where they wouldn't be a distraction. Her skin hummed at the nearness of a spirit so similar to her own.

Kin.
Warrior.

Sheikah.

"Reyel," she called just as quietly. She turned slowly, facing her tribe brother.

Several years older than the Sage looking impassively upon him, Reyel merely blinked as he stepped from the shadows. With calculated silence, he waited until she began walking once more before speaking.

"This year has been wearisome."

"It has."

Paying the growing pup beyond him no mind, he followed the other Sheikah with her same lazy pace. "I haven't seen you training lately."

"I have been."

Deciding to continue following—she was starting to sound defensive—Garo sprinted through the door into the biting wind. Sneezing at the sudden change in temperature, he shook to fluff his coat and trailed behind them. Impa might not be part of his pack, but Zelda would not be happy if something happened to her...and he really didn't want to deal with a mourning and fluttering beta-omega.

Reyel lengthened his stride enough to walk beside her and then resumed their shared, sedate pace. "With the Queen."

A statement, not a question. Without turning to the older man, Impa answered just as certainly. "And you are not assured by this."

"Have you gone soft?"

The words barely clung to his breath as they fell from his lips. When she swung to face him, he met her eyes steadily, unafraid of the crackling lightning which shone in their depths. He met her insulted expression with one of nothingness.

She searched his face and stared deeply within the eyes which were so similar to her own. No, it wasn't Reyel's way to insult...he saw no use in it, for the most part. Yet such a question was asked for a reason. It was their tribe's way. All things were done for a reason.

"Slow," he murmured. Without warning his hand sliced through the air, aiming for her throat. She wrapped her fingers around his wrist, spinning around him to pin his hand behind his back. As she did so, her other hand clasped around his other elbow, her fingers digging deep into the joint.

And then he broke free.

They became matching blurs with their dark suits, red eyes and silver-gray hair. His mind touched hers as they danced to a melody of ancient times.

You have become slow, his attacks told her. You have become soft. Have forgotten what it means to be Sheikah, to be a Living Shadow.

I haven't, she told him with each reaction. I haven't forgotten.
The air thrummed with energy as they sped around the vast courtyard. She fumbled and began to fall only to use the gravity to sweep his legs from under him. For just a moment, her motions became frantic as she searched, dug for something long dim.

Dim, but not absent.

The wind became gentle chimes of ceremonial songs as the beat of their hearts pounded like primal drums. The dark blanket of cold, steel clouds became a moonless night while the hard ground was desolate wastelands, rugged mountains and lush forests. Their steady yet increased breaths were the almost silent yet thundering chants of generations past.

Deep within the core of their spirits, passed what made them people, the consciousness of their tribe pulsed within the root of their being.

You haven't? My dear sister, I love you with all my heart, but you are blind to the truth. You guard Wisdom, for she is the other half of your being, and yet you have not learned from her. You have lost your way in this place of modern comfort...in a place where they worship yet do not see those they pray to. You have lost touch with your tribe, with what it means to be Sheikah...have all but abandoned your first family.

Not a single word fell between them as they continued to follow a dance only they knew. She struggled with this silent truth, knowing that it was true. It hadn't been a purposeful action...she hadn't meant to pull away from her people. Zelda was her world, her existence. But her tribe...oh Goddesses, her tribe was what had made her what she was. They were why she could protect her sesh-a-nole the way she could, why she could use the Shadows which strummed through her spirit like blood flowed through her veins.

And yet...

How could she hold onto a collective tribal bond with the bond to her Charge encompassed everything she was?

You don't think about it, he seemed to whisper reassuringly. You let the bonds soften themselves out. Our tribe is one of family and the bond you have with your Charge—the calling you were given—is much too sacred for any of us to presume we understand or are above it. But my sister...you mustn't let that calling, that love, consume you. The ties you have with us can easily merge with those you have with her. We'll protect her just as you do, for she matters to you. She is our family too, my little sister.

They acted without thought, playing out events they were much too young to understand and which had occurred so far in the past they only reason they knew they existed was word of mouth. There were no written accounts of the travels of the original Sheikah, nor their encounter with those who would later become the Hylians. They had no maps of the path their fore-bearers took, no knowledge of the ancient languages which had been spoken.

And yet...they knew. They knew in a way an infant knows fire is hot. They knew in the way a flower turns towards the sun or how a bird firstly learns to fly. The instinctive, primal knowledge that was their tribal consciousness, the shared, impression-knowledge and the subconscious memories, moved their limbs without hesitation.

Having grown dizzy trying to watch them, Garo shook his head and ran towards a servant's door to reenter the castle. The lone female was safe with her semi-pack member. Speaking of pack members, maybe Zelda was done with the meeting...she needed a break.
Back in the garden, as the first raindrops began to fall, their minds became silent. Nothing but actions flew between them as he struggled to pull his sister back into the family, to open the bond which had kept her with them for three decades. Just as fiercely, she defended her bond to her Charge while desperately searching for the bond to her tribe.

Where had it gone?! What had she done?

As those first raindrops soaked into their suits, they became as still as they were silent. Eyes locked, hearts pounding and chests heaving, awareness strummed between them.

There... The barest of shudders ran through her body as she touched the bond that connected her to all Sheikah, as few as they were. Tears sprung in her eyes as she struggled to breathe.

With a vulnerably rarely displayed, even to the one who gave her breath and beat her heart, she leaned her head against his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her as they stood hidden between an archery pillar and a heavy, wrought-iron gate. He cooed softly as their shared heat enveloped them, protecting them from the cold drizzle. His sister had asked for comfort after so long...and he would give it.

[-]

As the hot water poured over her aching body, Impa stared at the wall. Her red, water-logged palms pressed against the smooth stone. Heady steam rose between her and the target of her focus, fogging her vision as surely as confusion blurred her thoughts.

She had...been walking.

And then they'd...sparred. Fought.

The bonds...

A hug...

Closing her eyes, she rested her head above her hands and whispered a prayer. Rolling her shoulders, she stepped away from the wall and lathered a rag before closing her eyes again. The soft cloth and unscented soap washed the last traces of sweat, tears and rain from her face before moving down her neck and arms.

He knew.

They all knew.

She'd bet all her weapons even her grandmother knew.

Yet...she couldn't bring herself to the one person who should know.

Even after these past weeks...

Dear Nayru, was she a coward?

Or obsessed? Her grandmother and tribe brothers had warned her. Her eldest friends had subtly chastised her. Even her own Charge had commented.

Yet...

In this subject, prudence was best, right?
Raising her face to the stream, she waited until the last traces of soap was washed away before allowing her thoughts to continue.

Except...

Maybe it wasn't.

A snake of emotion she refused to name coiled in the pit of her stomach, stoking the possessive fires deep within her, only to rise and wrap around her heart. Possession, protection and love churned in a mix of nauseating feeling as the snake squeezed tightly before choking her. Confusion gave way to pain as she bit back a sob within her own washroom.

She didn't know what to do. She just...didn't.

Not this time.

Not for this.

Not...

Not now. Now then and not now.

How could she when the mere mention of it...

Sent the focus of these feelings into a blind terror?

By Din maybe she wasn't a coward.

And if she was...there were worse things to be.

As she stepped out of the shower and wiped the mirror clean to stare at her own face, she swallowed harshly.

Better a coward than selfish.

[-]

With the cold drizzle, the half-forgotten corridors she and few others used to travel were deserted. An odd castle worker would scurry passed but they were few and far between. These halls were haunted, not by ghosts, but by memories. Below the chambers she shared with the Queen, nearly the entire section of this castle was all but abandoned. Though the rooms had long been stripped, cleansed and redecorated, the darkness left by Ganondorf's invasion so many years before was still felt.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she stared out the leaded glass at the water washing down the castle walls. Her tribe brother had (justly) challenged her to prove herself not only as a warrior but also as a Sheikah—and she'd barely held her own. That was humiliating in and of itself. She wasn't—ok, maybe she was—arrogant enough to believe she should have easily won. She had in the past. But it wasn't the fact that she'd barely tied with him. No. It wasn't even the fact that she'd fallen so far from her original family that the bond had all but withered.

It was the fact that he knew. He knew, everyone knew.

Pressing her head against the glass, she closed her eyes and sighed deeply. Her damp breath became steam against her mouth and cheeks as she continued to lean against the cold window.
This...this went beyond wanting to marry Zelda. That was...

Confusing...

Heartbreaking...

Shaming...

All on its own.

It wasn't the desire to marry which reduced to her a child's midnight tears of pain. It was—

She swung around, eyes narrowed as her gaze darted around the corridor. "Who's there?"

The flickering sconces met her gaze, their quiet crackling the only answer. Shaking her head, she started walking once more. Her near-silent steps echoed against the empty corridors, an audible reverberation.

Goddesses help her...

She was so lost.

Eyes as bright as the desert sand watched from within the high ceiling. Dry fingers were pressed to pale, cracked pink lips as tears burned around those golden orbs. So deep was the other woman's shame, so profound was her confusion, it screamed as loudly as any formal call. The pain which radiated from the other warrior thickened the damn air of the abandoned halls, creating a near impenetrable wall around her.

Answering the rest of the call, a lithe body dropped from the ceiling before the morose Sheikah. It took several seconds, further proof the normally shrewd yet balanced woman was drowning within herself. Fiery red eyes met gold as the Guardian assessed the threat before her. The fire faded within moments only to be replaced with yet more confusion.

"Nabooru?"

Nabooru smiled sadly at her childhood friend. "Impa."

Blinking, Impa shook her head. "What are you doing here?"

"I can't stop in and see my old friend once in a while?" A smirk danced on the Gerudo's lips as she crossed her arms. "You never told me that."

Allowing herself a small smile, the red eyed woman shook her head once more. "No, I...I wasn't expecting you."

Nabooru's smirk faded as she met the desolate gaze of her oldest non-Gerudo friend. The deep lines around her eyes and mouth spoke of exhaustion that went far beyond the body, just as the paleness of her skin and hooded eyelids all but screamed of fading strength. Her strong friend was weakening from the inside out. Allowing her eyes to examine the whole body, she swallowed hard. The other woman was nearing defeat if her rounded shoulders and loose hands were any indication.

"Impa...let's go somewhere and talk."

Nodding, the slightly younger woman mindlessly led her pseudo-sister to a sitting room several halls away. Sitting in a chair, she stared at the woman who was her "Link" (without the trauma, mind you). Her confidant, her non-tribe sister, her oldest and most trusted friend.
For a moment, both became lost in memory.

The cold castle fell away as their minds drifted to decades past. The steady beat of ran against the stone fortress became the howling winds of a desolate desert.

Impa shuddered as she drew breath, remembering.

The scorching heat was merciless to her mountain- and forest-dwelling body. The shifting sand made each step agony as she trekked her way through the wasteland. Her tribe, so similar to the Gerudo, had long ago established peace between both peoples. Their young warriors were sent into the other's land to adapt or perish. It was her own training, given when she barely had eight summers to her name, which had begun the friendship Nabooru now called upon.

The mark on her arm had proclaimed her a Maderone since birth. Cast into the death-land, she'd been told to learn from the desert. None would aid her in this journey. Why should they, when there would possibly be no aid when her Charge was in danger? Her skills had to be honed early, they told her. She must learn to survive on her own. Given a water skin barely big enough to sate a babe in one drink, she'd been cast into the unforgiving land without further instruction.

She'd walked without destination, muscles aching from the unfamiliar terrain. Within hours she'd made camp in a dust-filled cave, sheltering herself from the sweltering sun. As she stared into the endless mounds of shifting sand she'd hugged herself, wondering if she'd survive this test.

It didn't take her long to realize searching for food was pointless. She was not a desert dweller and had little study into their lifestyle. All creatures, plants and pockets of water were far beyond her reach. A sound between a sob and scream tore from her throat as she made her way back to her cave, kicking the sand with each step.

Nabooru chuckled to herself as she too remembered.

Her sisters, mothers, aunts...everyone of importance had been acting strangely for days. Deciding to skip the rest of her lessons—they were almost over for the day anyway—she trailed her sister and one of their mothers into the desert. She watched a silver-haired man speak quietly with them and tilted her head. A Sheikah? She'd only heard stories and seen pictures drawn by her elders, yet the red eyes and silver hair (and who else would wear dark clothes in the desert?) could only mean it was a Sheikah.

Curious, she snuck forward and hid behind a broken pillar, listening. The man was observing someone. A girl. Her eyes widened. A young girl. At a few months over eleven herself, she couldn't understand why they'd send someone so young into the desert. These Sheikah must be cruel to live with! Wait, what was that?

"-ink she'll make it?"

"I hope so," came the man's response. Wrinkling her nose, Nabooru stuck her tongue out at him from behind the stone. Couldn't he sound a bit worried?

"How many are watching her?"

"Three of us—myself, a tribe sister and one of your best warriors."

Realizing their voices were fading, she glanced around the stone. They were walking away. Seizing her chance, she darted into the other direction, into the desert. She was technically old enough to go in alone. Remembering the young girl—she was eight for Din's sake!—she started walking.
Besides...anything was better than sharpening the swords. Again. And then trailing behind that spoiled, idiot boy. Again. Really, why was she his babysitter? Ok, not her alone, but still! Just because he was born of the tribe Mother didn't make him that special.

And what kind of name was Ganondorf anyway? It sounded as ugly as he looked.

Their eyes met as the memory continued to dance around them like the desert wind had.

Ignorant of the adults watching her, Impa sat in the cave for a while before composing herself. Gathering her bundle (a blanket, a spear twice her height wrapped in the blanket and a thick rope tying it all) and the water skin, she left the cave and started walking again. From the position of the sun, there should be a couple hours of light left. She'd heard about the desert temple...maybe she could find it.

Hitching the bundle higher on her shoulder and checking the knife on her hip, she climbed to the top of a high dune and looked around. Maybe...what was...there! Stone was peaking out. It looked...far. Maybe she'd make it by nightfall...maybe. Knowing there wasn't time to second guess herself, she started walking.

Nabooru all but ran through the sand. If they'd really sent someone out here to train, someone not Gerudo, they'd have stuck her here around dawn. She could be anywhere. A couple miles from the desert's main entrance, she found the cave. Small footsteps. Nodding, she scrambled to the same dune Impa had recently left and narrowed her eyes against the glare. It couldn't be hard to find...silver...hair.

And it wasn't. It shone against the glossy sand. And that was saying something.

Taking off again, she trailed behind the girl for a while. A spear, a blanket and a knife was all she had? They really took this seriously, didn't they? Seesh, didn't they know about the creatures? They didn't just come out at night. Some came out during the day. Like that Moldorm about to jump on her. Scrambling, she snatched a sharp rock from the sand and threw it through the worm-like creature's throat. She didn't bother to watch it turn to dust, it wasn't interesting anymore.

Now where'd that kid go? Why did she have to move so fast in the desert anyway? "Quick brat, I'll give her that..."

Impa paused as she heard a high-pitched dying squeal. She swung around and saw nothing. Alert, she slowly started walking again. This place was huge, it all looked the same and even in broad daylight it gave her the creeps. Everyone heard the stories about what lived in the desert.

"Everyone thinks the Shadow Temple is scary...it's got nothing on this big hour glass." Kicking the sand, she kept walking, praying she was going in the right direction.

"Hey!"

Again, she swung around. Her hand rested on the hilt of her knife as she looked frantically around for the voice.

"Over here! Geeze, are you that sun blind already?!"

Over...oh. Following the sound of the voice, she squinted and stared at a figure running towards her. It sounded like a girl but looked like a moving flare. As it got closer, she realized it was a girl—a Gerudo girl to be exact.

Nabooru smiled to herself as the younger girl shifted. "You look lost."
Impa nodded and then lifted her chin proudly. "I'm training. But I'm...trying...to get to the temple," she added in a mumble.

The desert dweller looked the other girl over. She wasn't dressed for the desert. The body suit was loose, but too dark, and the boots were way too heavy. Shaking her head, she shrugged. Not her people, what did she know about their clothes?

"Well," she said after a bit, "I can show you to the temple. I'm headed there myself."

Both girls stared at one another, neither commenting on the obvious lie. Nabooru hadn't planned on heading to the temple, but neither girl wanted to break the tentative...whatever it was between them.

Impa instinctively glanced around. Old habits died hard...and in her tribe, there was always someone watching. Shrugging, she nodded. "Sure. Thanks. Um...which way?"

Grinning, Nabooru turned towards the right, not wanting to keep going the long (wrong) way to the temple. "This way."

Blushing, Impa followed the older girl. They walked in silence (well, Impa did, Nabooru sang songs in a language she didn't understand) for what felt like an eternity to the Sheikah girl.

"So, what're you doin' out here anyway?"

The younger girl blinked at the older girl's question. "Training...I told you."

"Yeah...but why? You're kinda...young."

"I'm eight!"

"Psht. Still too young to be in the desert alone." Something told the Gerudo the Sheikah didn't know she was being watched and she sure wasn't going to tell her. She'd get in trouble for skipping lessons anyway, why add to that punishment?

Impa's steps faltered. She touched her arm without thought, old enough to understand her destiny and young enough to not completely comprehend it. "I don't know...maybe I am. Maybe I'm not. If I'm here now, then it means when I'm older I'll be able to..." she trailed off before shaking her head. "Be able to take care of myself."

"Hm." Nabooru shrugged. "Well, I don't know if you have routines, daily stuff you have to do, while you're here. But if you want, I can spend time with you."

Both chuckled quietly as the fire crackled, drawing them to the present for the moment. How different life would have been if Impa had turned down that offer...

"Sure," came the impassive reply. Only the blatant relief in her expression and posture gave her away. Nabooru always chuckled at Impa's attempt to hide her emotions.

"Ok. Well, let's get to the temple and then we can play hooky. It's only another half hour's walk by the way."

True to Nabooru's words, the desert temple appeared within the next half hour. After Impa was shown where to find water and fruit, both sat to rest in the cool shade of the stone structure. The following days were filled with each other's company. With the sneaky Gerudo child's help, the young Sheikah quickly completed the tasks she was given during her arrival at the desert. Lessons
which would have killed her had she turned down the older girl's offer became games as the red-haired girl taught her new silver-haired friend how to survive.

Stories of their tribes and the places they'd seen bonded the two children just as surely as their treks through the blistering noon sun. When it came time for Impa to leave the desert, they traded tearful hugs. In less than a week they'd gone from absolute strangers to true kindred spirits. Destined from the moment of their births to be different from their tribes, to never fully be understood by those they called family, they had found acceptance within each other.

In spite of that connection, or maybe because of it, the elder woman had yet to tell Impa she was never alone in the desert, nor were any of the other children sent on that journey.

The Gerudo woman never had the heart to tell her younger heart-sister that they'd been watched. Yet as she peered at the reminiscing woman before her, Nabooru wondered if that was one of Impa's problems. She was so used to being watched, so accustomed to never truly being alone, that she forgot how to remove that stoic mask and confide in her friends.

Other than Zelda that was.

Something told the Spirit Sage her friend had not confided in the Queen, either.

"Impa," she murmured, "we're been friends for decades...told each other things which would've gotten us in trouble to speak of as children...have always been close. Right?"

Impa nodded as she turned to face the older woman. Her happy smile faded as the memory slid into the recesses of her mind. "Yes," she replied just as quietly. She swallowed hard as the confusion and shame threatened to overwhelm her once more.

"Then...will you tell me what's wrong?" The words were beseeching as they fell between them.

"Nothing's wrong." Cold formality, stiff with denial, drug a flinch of regret from speaker.

Their eyes met again. A log popped in the grate, the only sound other than their steady breaths.

"I can hear you, you know," whispered the desert woman. "I can hear you crying." Never one to pull her punches, Nabooru lifted her chin defiantly. "You're one of my oldest friends, Impa. You've never lied to me. Maybe never told me something...but never lied. Just as I never lied to you. We've been through too much shit, as children and adults, to start lying now. You don't want to tell me then don't—but don't sit there and lie to my face. I'm not Zelda and I'm not Link. You don't have to coddle and protect me."

Silence reined once more before Impa looked away. Her eyes landed on the area between the window and fireplace. The rain and fire mocked her, an elemental expression of her internal conflict. "I don't know...how to say it."

"Don't think about it," came the quiet instruction. "Just speak...let the words come naturally."

And speak she did. The words spilled free, unchecked like the tears running down her burning cheeks. She spoke of the wedding and reception, described her initial feelings and the primal longing which grew steadily by the day. Without weighing her words or glossing over her feelings, she let the story tell itself. Save for any reference to Zelda's past and current state, she held nothing back from her pseudo-sister.

"...a-and the stupid pup gets in the way!" she finished with a hiccuped giggle. Sniffing, she wiped
her cheeks and turned her tear-sparkled eyes to her friend.

Nabooru leaned back in her chair, observing the younger woman. Everything she'd been told in the last half hour made her head spin. Actually...it made her mind numb. "Information overload," she moaned.

Impa giggled again before sniffing. Feeling lighter than she had in years, she wiped her cheeks a second time. "Sorry?"

"No, it's ok..." She blinked and rubbed her forehead. "And what do you mean by pup? Link?"

The Sheikah hissed, eyes narrowing dangerously as, for a moment, rage stirred within her. It settled just as quickly, leaving in its place tired amusement. "No. Garo."

"You have a member of the Garo tribe...in the castle..." came the skeptical, drawled response.

"I didn't say that!"

"You said Garo."

"The puppy, you fool!"

"Link?"

"No, the Wolfo mutt."

"There's a Wolfo mutt?"

"Yes. In the castle. Named Garo."

"But...why?"

"Why is it named Garo or why is it in the castle?"

Nabooru growled as she saw Impa's smirk. "You are useless, you know that?! I should've let you rot in the desert!"

Ducking the pillow her fellow Sage threw at her, Impa chuckled. Taking pity on the older woman, she shook her head. "Zelda found a Wolfo mutt trying to wake its dead mother. So she...we...brought it home. Its name is Garo."

"I bet it raises hell."

"Among other things," came the muttered reply.

Eyebrow raised, Nabooru leaned forward. "What's this?"

"The pup. It...doesn't...let me...hug her."

"A pup."

"Yes."

"About 'this' small?"

"A bit bigger, but yes."
"You're annoyed...because a small puppy...won't let you hug Zelda?"

"Yes."

"You're not useless. You're just an idiot."

"Nabooru!" the Sheikah growled.

"Impa!" the Gerudo mimicked.

They stared at one another for several seconds before bursting into laughter.
Their banter slowly found its way to the reason for Nabooru's visit. As both women reclined in their chairs, the Gerudo warrior regarded her Sheikah friend. "You've told me what happened...but will you tell me why you're so...hurt?"

Their eyes met. What felt like an eternity passed before Impa nodded.

Drawing her knees to her chest, Impa continued to meet the eyes of one of her oldest friends. "I...I told you what happened at the wedding reception. And what I felt...still feel... But..." Her breath shuddered as she drew it into constricted lungs. "By the Goddesses, Nabooru...I don't know what to do. I look at her, speak to her...feel her-" she barely paused as she touched her chest to indicate the bond, "-and all I want to do is ask her to be mine. She is my mate, my sesha...but I want her as my wife. I want everyone to know, to have to acknowledge what we have and what we are.

"I want...I want to be able to hold her in public and not have to hear the whispers. The gossip...the lies. It'll always be there, but...if she's mine, legally, it won't be as bad. I know she hears it too. The whispers, sees the looks. I hate that we're mocked so horribly. That they've reduced her, and me, to...to such...lows because they refuse to understand.

"I want...I want to know that no one can take her from me. That everyone will know she's mine, my wife, and that they can't have her. That they can't keep asking for her hand."

Nabooru watched as a single tear ran down her sister's cheek and felt her heart twist with empathy. "I can only assume what they say."

"You haven't heard?" came the choked, mocking question.

"I have. But not all of it. Gossip runs through a country regardless of who it's about...but most people have sense enough to keep lies about my friends from me. And I have no desire to go searching for them," she added quietly. "What the two of you do is your business, not mine...or anyone else's."

"I want her to be mine." Agony filled crimson orbs, darkening them as tears made them glisten like freshly spilled blood.

"She is, my friend."

"She is, but she isn't. She's...she's his, she's theirs, she's her own...but not mine. Not like this. She's my Charge and my mate but she's not mine."

"Impa..." Nabooru's eyes became hooded ever so slightly as she leaned forward. "She loves you more than words express. You told me she refused all others because she thought she could never have you. She worships you."

"But she's not mine!" Impa cried. Unnoticed, fresh tears began to spill down her heated cheeks. Her voice, nearly muffled from swallowed sobs, broke. "She's not mine, she's everyone's but mine!" Blood coated her tongue as she bit her lip, desperately restraining the stories which weren't hers to tell.

"How do you want her to be yours?"

"I told you! I want her to be my wife! I want everyone to know, to have to acknowledge she's
"mine—legally! That they can't take her!"

"So you want a ceremony, piece of paper and bits of metal?"

"Yes-no! Damn it Nabooru, stop twisting my words!" With a growl she leapt to her feet and made her way to the window. Her words were harsh as they sliced through the air, her voice a deadly hiss as she spoke through clenched teeth. "It's not the ritual, it's the acknowledgment. The symbols of our love and relationship don't define what we have to us, but for others, they do. Lega—"

"If you say 'legally' again I will hit you," came the equally harsh, yet deceptively calm, retort. Nabooru crossed the room and swung the other woman to face her, hands resting heavily on her shoulders. She shook the other woman. "This isn't about others, Impa, and you know it. It's not about what people think of you, so stop hiding behind that—stop lying, damn it all—and tell me the truth!"

"I want her to be mine." It was almost a plea, her omission. Her eyes sought those of the older woman as, unknown to her, her expression became one of beseeching confusion. As she spoke, she searched for answers, for reassurance, she couldn't find within herself.

"I want her to know that I won't leave her...and to know she won't leave me. I want the security, for both of us. I want...I want..." A mewl of pain part her trembling lips. Her body shook as the windows rattled, sobs flowing from her like thunder. "I want her to be mine."

Wrapping her arms around the sobbing Sage, Nabooru closed her eyes as desolate understanding flooded her. "It's not about what you call each other, is it?" she murmured quietly. "It's about what you are. What you call each other...it's just the label. The mask. The pretty bow that covers the truth."

"She's mine...but she's not." Almost pitifully, the repetition was offered as an excuse.

"She's yours. She loves you, has forsaken all others for you...and once she reached a certain age, you did the same for her. Even if she didn't know it."

Desperation rose within the lost Maderone as she realized Nabooru would never understand, not completely at any rate. Because while what happened to her love had been abuse...those long dead still had her within their grasp. Even beyond the grave, they laid claim to the woman she called keta and sesha. And Link... A growl rumbled deep within her as she thought of the young man.

"Impa?" Nabooru asked quietly as the soft growl sounded within her ear.

"It's nothing."

"This pain and confusion. Is it because you want to marry her (and I'm not saying it's not partially for that reason) or because you want to be her lover?"

Red rage filled her mind as the younger woman pushed her old friend away. Her sobs gave way to wrathful growls as she narrowed her eyes. Her nails dug into calloused palms as she shook with the force of her fury. "What did you- You said what we do isn't your business!"

"It's not," Nabooru answered calmly. She stared at the woman before her, unblinking, even as she recalled that battle so many years ago. The deaths the shadows had caused...Impa had caused. "It's absolutely none of my business. But you need to face the truth. I don't care what you two do or don't do. But I know you and I know Zelda well enough to kn-argh!" Clutching her jaw, she stumbled back.
Her chest heaved as her heart pounded painfully within her strained ribs. Lowering her fist, Impa stared at Nabooru with cold eyes. "You don't know anything!"

Rubbing her jaw, Nabooru shook her head. "Impa...you can get as angry as you want and beat me within an inch of my life. But that doesn't change the fact that you're mad because I made you face the truth. We've always told each other the truth and I won't stop now because I pissed you off. So hit me, see if I care. But think about this. If you hit me because I asked a question, because I'm trying to help you so you'll stop screaming in agony, what would you do if Zelda asked you? Hm? What will you do when she finally asks you why you won't meet her eyes or are so distracted or in so much pain? What will you do when you can't lie to yourself anymore, hm?

"You want to protect her. That's why you said you didn't tell her whatever it was that priest said. You want to protect her from yourself, that's why you hurt so much. You're fighting yourself over something you're blowing out of proportion! Yes, you want her—everyone, Zelda included, knows that! Goddess save me, but you are so dense sometimes! You want to marry her, to make your relationship more permanent—and it scares you to death.

"But what kills you is that you want to deepen what you have. It destroys you because for some reason you can't accept the fact that it's natural. It's normal! You love her, and she you, and you just can't deal with the fact that a puppy sees your inner struggle! By Din you are stupid! It doesn't tick you off that he's stopping you from hugging her—it irritates you because you know he knows, in some way, that you want to have more than you do and he's keeping you from her so you can figure it out!"

Impa stared in shock at the Gerudo leader as she put her hands on her hips, lips pulled back in a snarl despite the bruise forming on her cheek.

"I love you like a sister, Impa, but sometimes I could hit you, I really could! You are condemning yourself to the pits of agony because you want to have a sensual and sexual relationship with your mate! Get over yourself! Talk to her about it and stop sulking! You want to be her lover? Here's a novel idea—talk to her about it."

"I can't," came the whispered reply. "I can't tell you why...but I just...I can't."

The redhead's stern expression slowly faded into a compassionate, instinctive understanding. "It's not my business, so I won't ask. But I really do think you're underestimating her."

"You didn't see her...when everyone was telling her to marry. You didn't see what it did to her."

"But you aren't everyone," was the gentle retort. "You're you. Impa, her Maderone and sesha. You won't be telling her...but asking. Eventually."

Impa raised an eyebrow and drawled sardonically as she tilted her head. "Eventually?"

Nabooru nodded confidently, inwardly sighing in relief that the wrath had passed. "Eventually. Because you're too stubborn to let this insecurity keep you from asking for long."

Impa barked with laughter. "The irony. She's the one who started this relationship."

Nabooru waved a hand. "Pft. Technicality. From what I remember, you said it was because your 'pig-headed, arrogant and very idiot self had decided she didn't have a brain'. Clearly you've learned from that mistake. Or you will."

Impa merely smiled, a bit unnerved by her knowing expression.
"I'm sorry about your jaw."

"Egh. Had worse."

They walked quietly through the corridors, smiling at one another as the memory of their younger selves (such as Impa's attempt to jump from one ledge to another and thereby landing on Nabooru) played through their minds once more.

"The Gerudo are still scattering," Nabooru muttered quietly.

Dodging the workers, they slipped into the kitchen and retrieved leftovers from the missed lunch before returning to the hall. It wasn't until they were making their way back to the sitting room, bounty in hand and trying not to think about the glares they'd received from the cooks and scullery servants, that Impa spoke.

"Is there a reason why, or just because of..."

As the Sheikah's words hung in the air, the door closed behind them with a gentle push of Nabooru's foot. The audible click of the bolt sliding home echoed through the room as silence reined for several moments. The admission came in a breathless whisper as they sat down.

"Our traditions, our very way of life, has always been based on the male Gerudo. To have our King became evil...to all but corrupt a sacred relic from our holy Mothers..." She trailed off as her eyes met those of her spirit's sister.

"We live off the land, much like all other Hyruleans. We keep to ourselves...we always have. In the past, there have been times we've had to...be less solitary. But those times are few and far between. This war, it...I don't know how to explain it. It destroyed all we stood for. A lot of people view us with suspicion and disgust, a lot like the Sheikah I bet. And we don't care. They call us thieves and it only proves their ignorance. But to have one of our own, our rare male, become the epitome of evil...how do we recover from that?

"So many of us have been ripped from what was by what he did. Our legends, our traditions, our very way of life...he not only mocked everything we stood for but twisted it into a cruel shadow of what it was. The man who should have completed what we began generations ago—reuniting with Hyrule as a whole—obliterated any chance of that."

The bark of a laugh escaped her lips before her face settled itself into a pained grimace. The irony of the situation, of the Gerudo's age-long dream for a savior-turned-traitor, silenced any words that waited in Impa's throat, and before any more could form, that pain in Nabooru's face gave way to a seething anger in her voice.

"It had been years since my tribe, my family, was attacked for being Gerudo. But thanks to that—that vile excuse of a being, our younger girls fear for their lives. People come to the edge of the desert and attack us. They violate our sacred temple, befouling the place we honor our holy Mothers. You're lucky in that way, friend, because the Shadow Temple is nearly impossible for the average person to find. While the desert does hide our temple, too many outsiders know how to find it..."

She shook as she drew a broken breath through a closed throat. Tears stung her eyes as fire burned within them. A loud snarl escaped her clenched teeth as her nails, cut to the quick, dug into calloused palms. Words became meaningless fury blossomed within Impa once more, mirroring
everything that burned inside of Nabooru. Their homes, their very rights, violated and desecrated beyond recognition for so long. Their families torn asunder without a single wound to the flesh. Twins within their fury, their bodies shook with the force of their restraint, nostrils flaring as they searched for some semblance of calm to quiet the primal rage that roared through them.

After what seemed an eternity, Nobooru spoke. Her voice trembled with emotion as the clipped words drifted through the air.

Impa listed silently, eyes trained on the woman before her, the woman who shared his lineage. The very core of her being howled at being denied vengeance, at the chance to make someone pay for what had been done to her precious love. However, with each second that passed and word that was spoken, Impa realized that, to an extent greater than she had originally realized, Nabooru did understand her anguish about Zelda.

"The Great Goddesses created us all equal. But have you ever noticed Gerudo and Sheikah are never treated equal? Our only peers are each other. One dwells in the desert, the other in the forest—or the mountain, as it were this time. Always on the edge of 'civilized' society, never included. The people you protect, the very rulers of this mockery of a country, betrayed your tribe. And yet you still protect them. But us...our own people betrayed us. Our flesh and blood. Not only our male, but the women too.

"Our strengths have become our weaknesses, Impa. We dwell on the edges, but no longer is our solitary nature good. This isolation is destroying us—all of us. Your people sent you out into the desert to train or perish. Mine sent me outside of it. I went to the lake. Others go the woods, the mountain, the plains. Thrusting mere children into the depths of hell to be strong or to die, forcing them to carry on the lineage of tribes who have become used to traditions whose origins they have long since forgotten. Tell me, please, how this is better than tyrannical exile because I sure as hell don't understand it."

Impa grasped the clasped hands of her mentor as pleading eyes stared at her with raw need. She spoke softly, her own heart breaking at the pain and truth she was forced to face.

"I don't know. I've thought about it, but...I don't have an explanation. I am the last born of my people. There are only two blooded Sheikah female left—and the Guard are all men. I may not have a chance to do anything for them but you have a chance to change the Gerudo, Nabooru. This I do know. You have generations of women and children, almost all of whom are full-blooded Gerudo. Some are bound to remember the tales of why the Gerudo have the traditions they do. And you can change those, but you must be the one to lead them.

"This scattering is a weakness. Your people need to come together soon or they will become more lost than they already are." She paused. "Everything they knew has been either destroyed or twisted beyond recognition and they have no one to tell them where to go. From the strongest of your warriors to the gentlest of your children, the fact is that they have nothing. The desert may still be there but they've lost the ground they've strived for so long to stand on.

"I don't claim to understand all the Gerudo traditions—but frankly, waiting a century or more for a man who might be born and might act for the good of the tribe rather than himself sounds rather...well, childish to me. Gerudo are all female, and for the sake of my sanity, I'm going to say you 'ah-hem'-" she smirked to herself as Nabooru rolled her eyes at the mockery. ".-with men, somehow only have female children and go on your way. It's—"

"Shut up!" Nabooru cried as a laugh spilled from her throat. "Now you're just making fun of me, stop it!"
"I'm not," Impa retorted primly.

Clutching her stomach, Nabooru all but fell from her chair at the image of the stoic woman looking prim. "Oh. My. Goddess!" So distracted by her laughter, she didn't notice the rocking of her chair. "You look like a fool!"

Both shrieked, though for different reasons, as Nabooru's chair fell backwards.

Moaning between laughs, the Gerudo sage rubbed her head and climbed from the chair to glare at the other woman.

The Sheikah sage slid from her own chair to avoid a similar fate and allowed the hysterical relief to overtake her.

[ - ]

As the sun kissed the horizon at dusk, Nabooru prepared to take her leave. Both women slowly made their way towards the servant's entrance ("Climbing the walls and ceiling isn't something I want to do this late in the evening"). Arms linked, they spoke of small things, hearts lighter than they had been.

A sad silence fell as they crossed the threshold, knowing it might be a while before their next visit. As Nabooru swung herself onto her horse, she smiled at her younger friend. "Next time, don't wait until your soul is screaming to talk."

"Next time," Impa mimicked, "don't wait until you're ready to throttle your own tribe before coming to talk." She returned the easy smile with one of her own, a rare sight when Zelda wasn't around. "Don't be a stranger Nabooru. And next time...use a door."

"I used a door this time," came the innocent reply.

A snort followed her words before they were even complete. "Use the floor then."

"Kill joy."

With a parting nod, Impa shook her head, chuckled to herself and headed towards the castle. As Nabooru turned her stead from the stables, she paused. "Hey, Impa?"

Facing her friend once more, the Sheikah tilted her head in question, doing nothing to close the distance between them. The voices drifted through the cool air with ease as their eyes met. "Yes?"

"We may be scattering, we may be getting attacked...but for the most part, we ignore the rumors. We don't talk to each other about our traditions and beliefs, and that's why we're so broken as a tribe. Something that I plan to change. It seems like you're going through the same thing...just on a much smaller scale. Consider that, will you?"

Words spoken earlier and things left unsaid hung between them as, even from so far away, Nabooru watched the understanding and worry cross Impa's face. She lowered her voice, knowing the other woman's trained ears would hear. "If what you say is true...if your love is strong...then you've nothing to lose. You're underestimating more than yourself by keeping silent. Understanding, trust and healing comes with time and truth, not lies and secrets. Just...think about it, ok?"

"I will," came the whispered reply as Nabooru turned away. "Thank you."
"You're welcome, sister."

Late within the night, long after all but the night-post soldiers had gone to bed, Impa mumbled to herself as she tried to brush the fog of sleep from her mind. What had woken her? That soft, familiar sound.

Footsteps?

Groaning, she tried to roll over only to freeze in shock as the covers rustled and a warm body pressed against hers. Hot, gentle breath brushed against her neck and ear as her companion shifted.

"Zelda." Barely a breath, neither was sure if her name was a greeting, prayer or question. Maybe all three.

"The bond finally loosened," the young Queen whispered as she wrapped an arm around the older woman's waist. She snuggled against the warm back of her Guardian and yawned quietly. "You aren't pushing me away anymore...and I couldn't bare to leave you alone anymore," she added. So quiet were her words she wasn't sure if she'd even spoken.

Smiling to herself, Impa laid a hand over Zelda's and snuggled within the soft mattress again. "It's all right. Good night Zelda."

"G'night Impa."

AN: As good a place as any to end it. Please review!

Songs:

Shape of My Heart by Sting

Blight by Koh Otani

Everybody Hurts by Avril Lavigne
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Garo snorted as he woke. Groggily, he looked around. Where...? Jumping off the bed, he inspected the moving barriers—curtains she called them.

If she wasn't in their den, then she was with the lone wolf...because the lone wolf hadn't left hers yet. He would've woken. Growling again, he closed the see-through door and sat by it for a bit. She could wait a minute. Where was the water dish?

Brr. Cold water and cold morning. Rubbing his paw over his muzzle, he yawned and sniffed at the lone...Impa's door. He'd give her credit, it was a good den. No one could see how to get in. But still.

Sitting again, he stared at the wall/door thing. How to get in... His ears pressed against his head. Zelda was his female. She wouldn't leave him would she?

No! What was he thinking?! She was beta-omega, of course she wasn't going to leave. But she'd left him behind, knowing he didn't want her alone with the other female.

How was he supposed to protect her if she left him behind?!

Sighing, he looked at the wall/door before scratching against it and whining. Loudly.

That would make them wake up and get him.

Looking around, he scooted a bit closer to the door. He could see...but it was still so dark.

Growling softly to himself, he shook his head and ignored his pounding heart. She was in there and it was probably dark in both rooms, but he had to get to her. Scratching again, he carefully drew his nails down. Didn't want to tear the camouflage. Or wake Impa. He knew Zelda would wake if she heard him.

He growled again, wondering if the lone wolf wasn't keeping her from opening the den cover. If she was, she'd pay.

[-]

Having quickly grown accustomed to Garo's presence, Zelda had barely began to wake before she was heading to the door.

Or trying to at any rate.

Pushing at the thing wrapped around her, she bit her tongue as the thing groaned and tightened around her. Swallowing, she pried open her eyes and looked around the darkened room. Window. Darkness. Walls. Embers. Ceiling.

Wait, embers?

Squinting, she rubbed her eyes and stared at the grate, ignoring the whining pup for a minute. It was on the right, approximately halfway across the room. The room...window... Impa.
Releasing the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, she willed her pounding heart to slow. It wasn't like her to wake before dawn, not when Impa was asleep. At least, it hadn't been since she'd began talking again. So why had she?

*Mmm, arr-row-rr, mmm. Sc-r-at-ch. Scratchscrat*scratch.

Chuckling softly, she slipped from Impa's arms (and when did they reverse positions anyway?) and quickly opened the door. Spying Garo's growing body flying across the room, she shook her head and closed the door again.

Shivering, she slipped between the covers and held them up long enough to let the pup curl beside her. Running a hand through his thick fur, she cooed softly to the shaking pup. "It's all right boy, no reason to be afraid. It'll be light soon."

"'s not 'posed b'm'bed," said a rough, sleep-clogged voice from behind her.

"He's scared though," she whispered. "Go back to sleep."

"'s almost time to get up anyway," Impa muttered between yawns. "What's the mutt doing up this early?"

Burrowing into the sheets, Zelda kissed the furry head laying on her pillow. "He must've woken and realized I wasn't there. He's afraid of the dark. Impa, don't snort, he is! I've noticed it. When he's alone, he's afraid of the dark. I think he still misses his mother."

Yawning again, the Sheikah muttered under her breath about projection and spoiled pups, earning an elbow in the ribs for her comment. "If he makes a me—"

"I know, I'll clean it up. Now do your business and get back in bed, I want to go back to sleep!" was the after-thought command.

"Yes dear," came the snarky reply.

It didn't take long for Impa to "do her business" and return to the narrow bed. Climbing over the young woman, she too burrowed under the thick blankets, shivering in the fall, early morning chill.

"I thought you wanted to go back to sleep," she murmured as, her eyes now adjusted to the darkness, watched Zelda run her fingers through Garo's fur.

"I did. Do. But I can't yet. 'm starting to wake up."

The half-awake monarch smiled to herself as a rough sigh ruffled her hair. She bit back a giggle as incoherent mutters followed the sigh.

"So glad you think it's funny," Impa grumbled. All but purring in contentment, she loosely draped an arm over the other woman and nuzzled her neck, taking in the unique scent that was purely her seshas.

Turning her head to look at the older woman, Zelda's breath caught as their lips brushed. Ignoring Garo's protest at being ignored, she twisted her body, pressing closer to the warm frame of the Sheikah beside her. A silent sigh parted her lips as an arm slipped under her torso. A strong hand splayed gently over her back as the synchronizing beats of their hearts pounded through her like a primal drum. Without notice, delicate lashes adorning pale lids closed like lily petals at dusk. The lack of sight allowed the tactile sensations to become ever-more powerful.
How the merest brush of lips could change the world from a comfortable place to one of bliss.

Lifting his head, Garo narrowed his eyes. He didn't allow this any longer. Both paws were on his female and by the Great Wolf, who said their muzzles could touch?! Growling, he tried to pry them apart.

…only to find himself pushed to the floor. Shaking his head, he pressed his ears back for a moment. Zelda left him alone in their den for this lone wolf, in the darkness and cold, and now ignored him? Feeling alone, he jumped back on the bed and nuzzled one of her hands, whining softly when she made a shooing motion.

This couldn't be allowed. She would not ignore him! She was his pack, his beta-omega, his mistress as momma would've called her. Anger mixed with loneliness and he bit her sleeve to move her arm, pushing the rest of his body between them at the same time.

Lifting her head, Impa stared at the pup. He did not think she was going to allow this. Running a hand through Zelda's hair, she met Garo's eyes and held his gaze. No longer would a pup keep her from her mate. Enough was enough. Grabbing him by the scruff of his neck, she moved him to sit behind Zelda.

Understanding his possession for what it was—and how to put an end to it—she pressed a kiss to the younger woman's neck. She never blinked as he growled in warning, still staring at her. For Nayru's love, it was time for him to learn his place!

When Zelda ducked her head to meet Impa's lips, Garo looked away. He understood. Forlorn, he curled atop Zelda's pillow, looking away from the women. Pressing his ears against his head once more, he acknowledged the fact that like it or not, they would be mates—were already becoming mates. And there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Nary a thought crossed her mind as Impa allowed her lips to linger. Instinct guided her as she tilted her head ever so slightly. Even through the soft flannel which shielded them from the autumnal cold, the warmth of the Hylian's body touched her own. The feel of a hand on her arm and fingertips skimming her cheek like mist over a glade made her breath catch for the barest second. She began another kiss with a bit more pressure only to swallow as wetness brushed her lips.

Pulling back, Zelda blushed and ducked her head, licking her lips once more. "Sorry," she whispered softly, insecurity causing the briefest of hesitations.

"You did nothing wrong," came the equally as quiet reply. Red eyes blinked several times as a strong throatswallowed once more. Seconds passed in silence even as time seemed to stand still. Neither drew breath as they waited, though for what they did not know.

Her movements were quick and clumsy, lacking the finesse such an action would normally possess. But maybe that was a good thing. It probably would be better not to show what she'd learned from him…. Right?

But now wasn't the time to think about it.

Like a cat after a mouse, she moved without warning. Her lips pressed firmly to the plump, dry ones of the older woman. For the briefest moment, her tongue darted past her own lips, making the barest of contact before retreating. She pulled back enough to meet the stunned gaze of the other female, heart pounding so hard it choked her.

Garnet orbs held a gray-green gaze as words unspoken passed between them. The immediate shock
and flimsy desire gave way to more concrete feelings. A soft coo fell from the Maderone's lips as she nuzzled her Charge's neck once more, the need to comfort overriding all other thoughts. The instincts of a Guardian could, and as history had proven, would be at war with and possibly tempered by those of a mate. But for now, the only desire she felt was the one to stop those brimming tears.

"You did nothing wrong," she murmured. Thought soft, her words were firm with conviction. "I am not mad. There's no reason to be afraid or upset, my keta...my sesha."

As Zelda buried her face in her shoulder and eventually fell into a confused, half-sleep state, Impa grimly stared at the lightening window and darkening embers. When the morning arrived properly, it was time to talk.
The Ripple (II)

The world seemed endless as ethereal light painted the hidden room in a white-gold glow. Silently, Zelda closed her eyes and counted to herself, waiting for her eyes to adjust from total darkness to morning light. Barely resisting the urge to bury herself under the warm covers once more, she peeked from under her lashes once more. Thought the curtains were closed, slivers of light scorched the floor, giving her an approximate time.

Around breakfast then.

Opening her eyes fully, she sliced her gaze almost frantically around the small room when she realized there was no one beside her. Only on her third pass did she see a figure sitting in a patch of shadows cast by the roaring fire. Wrapped in a blanket, Impa sat with her back against the wall, the flames reflected in her blind stare. Despite previous protests, Garo lay curled beside her, head resting under her hand.

Smiling to herself, Zelda followed the Sheikah's example and wrapped the quilt around her. Ignoring her body's urgent call, she rested her bare feet against the carpeted floor. With only the sound of her breath, crackling fire and gentle glide of cloth over rug in her ears, she quietly made her way to the seated woman. Her arms wrapped tighter in the blanket as she bit her lip, heart skipping a beat. Had she been presumptuous the night before?

Without a word, Impa patted the floor beside her. Only when the nervous Queen sat down, huddled so carefully in her blanket that neither cloth touched, did she speak. "How are you this morning?"

"…confused," came the whispered reply. "And worried."

Garnet orbs remained focused on the crackling fire as a strong, calloused hand ran through golden-brown locks. A silent sigh escaped from a tired body as those garnet eyes slid into momentary darkness. "Why?"

"Should I have not come?"

"No," was the instant reply. "I'm glad you joined me."

The words tumbled free, fueled by an impatient body and nervous spirit. "Did I do something wrong? Is that why you've been avoiding me…been pushing me away? Are you mad about last night, because I kiss you? Is Garo—"

"Zelda."

A single word, a name, halted the babble with its firmness. Garo lifted his head and glanced between them warily. Only after lithe fingers stroked his neck and shoulders did he relax his guard.

"You didn't do anything wrong. Not before or last night. I'm not mad." Another sigh this time, though not silent, parted chapped lips. "I was avoiding you because I… I was—worried. I… didn't know how to deal with what I felt. I still don't, really."

Silence reined as their eyes met, words unspoken hanging between them. The youngest Sage nodded and stood. Nary a sound passed her lips as she made her way to the washroom only to
return minutes later. She took her place as silently as she’d left it, still wrapped in the thick quilt. Acceptance radiated from her, engulfing them in a bubble of uninterrupted peace. She waited, confessor-turned-confidant, and her patience was rewarded with nearly whispered words.

"To be who I am, do what I do, I have to know myself…my emotions and beliefs. I don't have time for regret or self-loathing. I can't hesitate, can't mince words or allow myself to doubt. The only thing I will ever know, have known since I met your pregnant mother, was you. I don't…I don't know how to cope with feeling things that… They don't exactly go against my need to protect, but they aren't perfectly in line with them.

"Know something, my love," came the all but silent, breathless plea. "What I am to say can never do justice to the entirety of what I feel, nor does it encompass all I feel for you. Above all else, I will love and protect you first."

Though no words fell from closed lips or thoughts slipped from their still bond, a charge played around them. Breath stole from their lungs as one heart clamped while a fissure of fear ran down the other's spine.

Words chosen with a surgeon's precision waited in the fore of a shrewd mind. Yet when she spoke, it wasn't the careful, yet truthful explanation which fell from her mouth. Twin expressions of shock graced their features as the truth of her statement resonated through the very core of their souls.

"I want you to be mine."
Inner Strength

Chapter Twenty-Nine

An eternity passed in agonizing silence as their eyes held one another's, both silently pleading to have heard incorrectly.

"You...what?"

The choked question was filled with such chaotic emotion it stole Impa's breath. She watched as beautiful emerald irises became eclipsed by pupils as black as the midnight sky. "Zelda, I—"

"What...what do you mean?" Even to her own ears, the shrill words sounded nearly hysterical. Shaking her head frantically, the Hylian wrapped her arms tighter around her and clenched her eyes shut. Desperate to avoid the memories which assailed her, she barely heard Impa speak until the other woman shook her.

"Zelda. Zelda! ZELDA! Look at me!" Glassy, almost feverish eyes opened and stared at her. Impa shook her head and held the frantic gaze of her beloved, gently holding the bond. "Sesha...easy. Please, breathe, and let me explain."

"What do you mean?" Self-hatred filled her as the weak words escaped her, chased from her by a whimper. Disgust stabbed her heart as her body shook with growing fear.

"I meant what I said. I want you to be mine. You're my mate. I...eventually...want you to be my wife." Impa turned away, unable to look upon the tortured expression any longer. She forced herself to breathe slowly, calmly, knowing anything but calmness would only hurt them further.

A strangled sound wrenched itself from Zelda's throat as she violently shook her head, seeing the evasion for what it was. "You told me that...before. Please don't lie, please Impa...not now. Not again." Tears blurred her vision as she stared at the older woman. Without notice, her arms wrapped around Garo when he pushed himself into the blanket.

"It's the truth. I want you to be my wife."

"Your wife...or your lover?"

Garo looked at the lone wolf as her heart accelerated.

And waited.

You're underestimating more than yourself by keeping silent, Nabooru had told her. Steeling herself, she called upon the courage which had driven her to fight her clan-brother, to confide in her land-sister...to ask Link the truth of her Charge's mind and promise a dying seer she would care for her daughter.

The same courage which had allowed her to admit her feelings and accept her keta's love.

"Both."

[-]
Neither of them knew how long they sat in the pensive silence, backs pressed to the wall and wrapped in their own blankets, both staring blindly at whatever their wandering gazes fell upon.

The initial terror which had coursed through her was slow to fade. Zelda clutched Garo to her chest, face half-buried in his thick winter coat. Unnoticed tear streaks stained her pale cheeks as her mind whirled. Violent shivers wracked her without warning, though she paid them no mind. Numbness settled over the gaping wound in her soul, silencing the voices and blotting the memories. It was temporary, barely effective, but for now...for now, it was enough.

"Why?"

"Because I love you." The simple, truthful explanation spoke more than most words could, though it told nothing.

"That doesn't..."

"I know. I don't know how to explain it."

Rumbling softly deep in his throat, Garo lifted his head from Zelda's chest and licked the dried salt from her cheek. He whined softly, ears pressed to his head as the dizzying scent of her ever-changing emotions filled his lungs. She smelt off again. Like her...but not. And Impa smelt...sorry.

He glanced between them, not sure what to do. As his beta-omega's hand ran through his fur, he felt it shake. For now, he would stay where he was. He'd keep her safe and calm. Something told him it would be ok. Laying his head back down, he listened to that something.

"Now?"

Feeling older than her grandmother, Impa turned to the expressionless woman beside her. No, not expressionless. There was expression...minute, but it was there. Her face remained as pale as fine china, her eyes darkened with unfelt fear. Yet it was the traitorous tremor in the other warrior's voice, the one which broke the word and rose it an octave, which explained the question.

"No. Not now...not soon, not until you're ready. I want you to be my wife...to be your lover...but that want is just that: a want."

The need for comfort outweighed her instinct to run. Hugging Garo to her with one arm, Zelda shook her blanket off and wormed herself into Impa's arms. Shivers continued to plague her despite their combined heat. Her throat caught as she tried to speak, fresh tears filling her aching eyes. Heart skipping in her chest, she looked up towards the Sheikah. "I...I don't..."

Cooing softly once more, Impa shook her head and wrapped her arms tighter around the shaking Hylian. Blistering heat radiated from the younger woman as she fought the urge to flee. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head again, wondering once more if it wouldn't be better to forget the subject for a while...or for good.

"You don't what, seshu?" she asked quietly. The question, so obvious, was necessary for both their sakes. Without it, it wouldn't be long before the younger woman become dependent on her—before she began making assumptions rather than checking facts.

"Don't want...know... I...I can't... Impa, please, I..." Tears so hot they felt like acid ran down her cheeks. Though part of her screamed to hide from the threat, or to fall into silent submission, she did neither. Her teeth chattered as ice filled her, wrapping around her heart and soul.

"T'm...broken. Used. You shouldn't...want me. 'm dirty, worthless. All...all I know is...is the pain
and the hate and it hurts! It always hurts and I-I-I...I don't...I don't want to hurt you. Don't wanna hurt you." Blood roared in her ears as she shook her head, trying with everything she had to erase the gruesome images. It hurt, but she was used to that. But...hurting Impa...

"Oh keta." Burying her face in the silky locks pressed against her chest, she drew a shuddering breath. "No pain. If-If we became lovers...there would be no pain."

"Always pain," came the muffled, miserable reply.

Fresh tears soaked her nightshirt as she struggled to find words that could help. Then came the memory of her conversation with Link and new dread filled her. How could she explain to a woman who had been broken by pleasure, had been twisted by false words of love, that the things she feared wouldn't harm her?

"Hurts." Nodding to herself as if Impa had spoken, Zelda lifted her head and pulled away. Ignoring Garo's soft growls, she fumbled with the hem of her shirt.

Horror burned her mind as Impa fumbled to restrain the young woman's hands. "Zelda! Damn it, stop!"

Keeping her hands free of the ones trying to trap her, she shook her head and lifted her shirt enough to expose her stomach. She wrapped a hand firmly around the other woman's wrist and placed the calloused palm against her stomach. Laying her fingers against Impa, she drew the very tips of her fingers over a barely-present scar. Nearly impossible to find due to healing potions, the majority of the scar tissue rested beneath the surface.

She looked up and spoke, focused entirely on what she was trying to show the older Sage.

"Always... hurts. Always."

Calming her struggles, Impa met the owlish eyes of her sovereign before looking at their hands.

"What happened?" she heard her hoarse voice say.

"Love," was the whispered reply. "My fault... said not... wasn't... good enough. Didn't appreciate love. So... only pain after."

"He said," came the strangled question, "that you didn't deserve to not be hurt?"

Red eyes met green as a barely lifted head nodded. Indignation forced a sound from her throat. Caught between a laugh, snort and sob, the shadow woman wondered what else Fate had decided to bestow upon the Queen of Destiny.

"He was wrong."

Stubbornness and lack of understanding made the golden haired female shake her head. "Right."

Conviction made her voice stern as Impa caught the gaze of the one who was her world.

"Ganondorf was a sadist who enjoyed torturing innocent people. His joy came from the things that he could do to your mind and I hope he is suffering for what he has done. You did nothing—NOTHING—to deserve the pain you went through. Ab-so-lute-ly noth-ing."

"Did."

"What could you have possibly done to warrant such torture—that you haven't already told me
about," she amended when the younger woman began to protest.

Grumbling, Zelda huffed, the simplistic reasoning of an almost child-like mindset making it difficult to think beyond what she had been taught and told. "Good for."

"No, you're not only good for pain. Zelda, I love you, and if it kills me, I'll prove it to you."

Impa watched as Zelda tilted her head. Gone were the refined mannerisms of a nearly impeccable Queen. In their place was a woman stuck within a world of limited understanding and few words. The...wildness...she was seeing made Impa wonder if this was something primal, if Zelda had instinctively reverted to something closer to how their species had acted before "civilization", or if it were something created.

Prove? The only proof she understood came from his hands. Her lips curled back as she hugged the cub tighter. Her legs pressed together as she stared at the other female with suspicion. She was protector. Or at least...had been. Now there was something that she wanted to prove.

It didn't take the bond for Impa to know Zelda's thoughts. Frustration made her run a hand through her hair. "Zelda, stop! Snap out of it! I'm not going to hurt you to show you the truth."

"I know."

"No, you don't, and that's why we're having this conversation. You don't know...and it's not even your fault," she added in a whisper. "You don't understand that anytime anyone wants to help you it's not a game...that a simple hug is nothing more than comfort. You don't understand...and I'm not sure you can. Not yet anyway."

"I want you to be my wife. I want everyone to know that you're mine and I'm yours—that everyone who keeps petitioning you, keeps scheming to marry you, can't...that you're taken. Few people recognize our bond and relationship for what it is. Fewer still would acknowledge it as long-term because the law doesn't recognize it as such. Wanting you to be my wife has nothing to do with what we may or may not do together."

Her breath caught as she stared at the cracking logs, hand resting on the bared small of the younger woman's back. "I tell you I want you to be my wife and you automatically assume I mean lover. I want that too...but the two aren't synonymous. I honestly don't believe you are capable of understanding that what he told you, what he did to you, was the exception, not the rule...not all people are not like that. And I look at you, knowing that's all you've ever known in terms of love and touch...and I understand that you can't understand anything different."

"But...knowing what I do...having seen how you react to the mere mention of marriage...can you see why I don't say anything? Why I don't want to say anything about it? I absolutely loathe that certain words or actions...feelings...can send you into a blind terror which robs you of all reason. I hate that a mistake on my part can make you think I'm the vilest of evils."

Bitter tears ran down her cheeks as glassy eyes closed to hide from the world.

"And yet...I can't keep silent. I did that before and it hurt you more than my words did. You told me not to assume about you, that I knew nothing of what you felt or thought...and you were right. I know what you let, and sometimes want, me to know. Rarely more. So as much as I would love to keep quiet, to pretend I don't feel this way, I won't. Because...that silence...me treating you like a child, insulting you...that is what you don't deserve."

"So I won't. Yes, I want you to be my wife. I told you before, we Sheikah recognize mates as more
than partners, but the world isn't filled with Sheikah tradition. I am your Guardian, I live in your culture, not my own...and I will honor the traditions as Hyrule. I want to. You are my mate, and to Hyrule, marriage signifies mates. I want that assurance, not only for myself, but for you too. I want you to know that I'm not going to leave you or stop loving you because we have a fight or something doesn't go as planned.

"But it's not wanting to marry you that you don't understand. I know intellectually, some part of you can understand that. It's my wanting to be your lover that terrifies you, that triggers you. It's the simple knowledge that I desire you. And since the only desire you've ever know was directed at you from abusive people...how can you know I'm different? I can't show you, you aren't ready. I can tell you, but what proof do words give you? I can let you feel every emotion, see every thought and memory, but that could just be another manipulation.

"How can I tell you what I want, when what I want is the very thing that broke you?" came the ragged question. "When I said I failed you, you told me Ganondorf was the monster...that I hadn't failed you. But I had, my love, and I still do...because in your eyes, I am no better than he. How can I ever be safe in your eyes? How..." She trailed off and bowed her head, broken sobs wrenching from her clenching throat. Unable to bear the pain in silence any longer, she let the tears fall as she had the day before. No longer could she be strong in the face of Zelda's fears and her own. The knowledge that, no matter her intentions, she could always do or say something which would be seen as forced...to have to accept the fact that it would take a moment of ignorance, of being caught up in her own desire to fail to see the truth...

The agony which poured from the woman holding her mirrored her own with such absolution that Zelda carefully moved to sit beside her and wrapped her arms around Impa. This time, the tears which ran silently down her cheeks had nothing to do with her. The woman who held her heart was hurting. Impa was right, she couldn't understand that desire wasn't bad, that...touching...wouldn't hurt. But she could understand pain and heartbreak...could understand misery. How could she not when the soul-shredding agony had been her companion for so long?

Laying between both women, Garo remained still as the scent of their combined tears washed away all others. He watched the den's entrance, ready to protect his beta-omega and her...Wrinkling his nose, he begrudgingly admitted the truth once more. Her...future...mate. They were hurting and there was nothing he could do to help that. There were no wounds to lick, no fur-less spots to keep warm. But he would protect them. The lone wolf was part of the pack, if barely, and she was vulnerable. She'd let him in her den, her safe haven, and he'd respect that.

With a wary glance at the females, he bit back a soft growl. That didn't mean he'd let them do more than cuddle. By the Great Wolf, they could be worse than cubs in first heat. Laying his head back down, he stared at the burning light. At least it wasn't dark anymore...

[-]

[-]

AN: And this...is why chapters are not usually planned. Because they don't follow those plans. Please review.

Oh, before I forget! A quick explanation about Zelda's child-ish/"primal" moment. I'm not sure if it has an actual name, but I've seen and gone through this myself when emotions/memories become too intense. It's sort of an overload of stimulation that causes a short circuit. In the words of Buffy "Fire bad, tree pretty". It's not that a person doesn't understand full language, but that it's much less of a struggle to speak "improperly". This can last anywhere from a few minutes to hours...and possibly even longer.
Upheaval (I)

Chapter Thirty

Upheaval (I)

Few words were spoken as they uncoiled from their protective embrace. A lingering glance caused them to tarry for a moment as they stood by separate doors. Only when Garo tugged gently on Zelda's pant leg did she look away and slip from the room.

Looking around the small enclosure, Impa shook her head and sighed softly. In an uncharacteristic display of procrastination, she left the blankets where they lay and entered the washroom.

Lost in their own thoughts, they showered and dressed. As the sounds of the other inhabitants of the castle drifted through the closely guarded chambers, they met in the sitting room. Trading tentative smiles, they assured one another without words that everything was all right.

Licking his muzzle clean, Garo sat patiently as he waited for the two females to start walking. Scratching his ear, he watched them. They were quiet, but that didn't seem wrong. He was always tired too after the salt water ("tears" they called them) came. It worried him though. Their stillness. It wasn't like them. Even their heartbeats sounded quieter. Still strong…but quiet. Shaking his head, he huffed and stretched. It wouldn't do any good to worry.

At least they weren't touching muzzles anymore. Or using two paws... Growling softly, he kept his eyes on them.

Smiling at the impatient pup, Zelda sighed softly and laid her head on Impa's shoulder. She slipped an arm through the older woman's as lips pressed against the top of her head in a comforting kiss. Humming contently, she pulled her arm free and made her way to the door. Looking over her shoulder, she waited.

Nodding, Impa lifted the Queen's sword and her own weapon belt from their resting place. Handing the Hylian the sword, she donned her belt with ease. Her lips pressed together as she fought a grin as she watched the younger woman twist around, trying desperately to see why her skirt had suddenly ridden.

"You pinched the dress," she murmured. Closing the distance between them, she carefully pulled the skirt free. Resisting the urge to smooth the ever-so-slightly wrinkled material, she straightened the simple plait which hung down her Charge's back. "Wouldn't you be warmer in pants?"

"No," came the equally soft reply. "I'll be warm enough…don't worry."

"I always worry about you."

"Please don't."

Dropping a kiss on Zelda's nose, Impa shook her head, looking over the impeccable monarch once more. "Ready for the day?"

"Not really," was the groaned answer.

Another groan left her as her stomach growled, belaying her words. A long-suffering sigh fell past grinning lips as the Sheikah chuckled. "Stop laughing," the Hylian ordered.
"I love you too sesha. I love you too."

-[

Garo laid in a patch of sunlight, head between his front paws as he stared at the shadow-smelling men at the door. Sheikah, mistress called them…clan of Impa's. He wasn't sure how he felt about them. Sure, they'd tried to save him from the others, but…. They only moved when *his* beta-omega did. It made him twitchy. Their senses shouldn't be that good.

Grumbling, he snorted softly. He'd never tell anyone, not even the Great Wolf…but he didn't like the odds. There were too many males around her. They didn't seem to be sniffing around her, only seemed to want to protect. But *still* *He* was alpha and he didn't like it. The lone wolf was bad enough.

Speaking of alphas…. Pressing his ears back, he stood and slowly made his way to Zelda. His hackles rose as he growled quietly. There was no way in he would let that disgrace of a traitor anywhere near his female. She was *his* (ok, Impa's too) damn it all, and the older wolf would have to fight for her. He growled again, ignoring her reprimand.

Link looked down and smirked at the pup, also ignoring Zelda's annoyed command for both of them to stop. He watched the little fluff ball step towards him and chuckled. "Try it, mutt, I dare you."

"Oh for the love of the Goddesses, Link! Stop antagonizing him! He's a canine, you're not. Stop acting like a child already," Zelda hissed as she narrowed her eyes at the laughing Hero. "Just because you have a wolf form doesn't mean you can forget your true self when it amuses you."

Blue eyes met green in a silent battle of wills. As quickly as it had begun, the conflict ended. The younger male sighed and looked away.

"Fine," came the muttered retort. "I'll leave him alone."

Wrapping a hand in Garo's fur, the irate Queen returned him to his spot beside her. "Stay."

Eyes never leaving the bigger male, Garo lay beside the chair. He'd remember that challenge. Oohhh, the other alpha just did *not* understand who he was messing with. Ignore his beta-omega and mistreat his own…. Well, he'd have to get used to being a lone wolf.

She shook her head and muttered to herself, wondering when the *children* around her would ever grow up. Garo she could understand, he was a pup. But Link? If it wasn't so pathetic it would be hilarious.

Turning her gaze to the Hero, she felt them something within her stir. Not even Wisdom could compare to female intuition. "Link," she said softly, her voice hard. "*What* did you do?"

"What? Nothing!" protested the young man. Like a child caught with a cookie before supper, he shifted his feet and avoided her knowing eyes. "I didn't do anything!"

"You don't come to my office before lunch looking serious unless you did something wrong. Even with business, you play around before speaking of serious matters. So you did something."

Leaning back in her chair, she laced her fingers and made a tent in front of her mouth. Observing the soldier, she mused deep in her mind how dynamic their relationship was. Where he was her Sir, she was his Queen, his commander above all others save the Golden Goddesses themselves. She was, for all intents and purposes, above the laws—and he was her enforcer of them, truly her knight.
in dented armor. Despite their sibling-of-spirit state, she was like his mother at times. Nurturing but disciplinarian.

"Link, you have come to me for a reason. There is little to do if I do not know this reason," she stated, eyes never leaving his nervous person.

Glancing at her, he idly wondered if she knew just how alike she was to the former King. "I might have...possibly...not secured a target as well as I should have."

"And?" she drawled. "I fail to see why this mistake would warrant a visit to my office."

He mumbled quietly, eyeing his boots as the child within him squirmed. "The long-shot tore out a window into the armory...and I think broke something inside."

"Again, I fail to see why you've come to me rather than a militant of rank. The Mothers themselves deemed you their Hero, Link. This doesn't sound like a political or state matter, but a financial one at best."

Biting his lip, he reached behind him and unhooked a long-shot from his belt. Yet it wasn't a royal blue band around the head and handle which he avoided touching.

With the lightning quickness of a cobra, she stood quickly from the high-backed chair and rounded the desk. Tension radiated from her as she stared at the red-banded long-shot. "What. Did. You. Do?"

"Ze–"

"Answer me, Hero of Hyrule!" she hissed.

"It hit something and the point...broke."

"You broke a long-shot. My long-shot which I had received from the Sheikah?!!" Her voice rose as she snatched the warped weapon from his hands.

"I didn't mean–"

"I gave this to you because you wanted to understand the difference between our weapons. You told me, assured me," came the snarled emphasis, "that you would not use it! Testing our weapons is not the same as swinging wildly from targets in the courtyard because you are bored!"

Her chest heaved as her heart bounded against her ribs, fury pulling words from her lips before she could think. He was not a person she had guard her speech from, and in her anger, she couldn't conceive of doing so. "You are so reckless at times! Courage sits in your soul and flows through your veins and you act like a child because of it! Instead of thinking, instead of considering your actions and why I requested you specifically not use this, you impulsively did so!"

Blue, sorrowful orbs found steel-green, angry marbles as memories of the war, of their narrow escapes and reliance of weapons they could barely use in those escapes, flowed between them. He swallowed harshly and bowed his head.

He knew it wasn't the fact that he had used the long-shot which upset her so greatly...or even the broken promise. It was that he had quite possibly destroyed an item that had saved her life several times, a weapon which she still took with her as she roamed the country as Sheik. He had taken away a lifeline, something as valuable to her as his own weapons were. After the blood, sweat and tears which had bathed their tools of war, after so many to-the-death fights they had emerged
from *because* of those bits of metal, leather and wood they cared for...these weapons were extension of themselves.

"Get out," she hissed. Her knuckles whitened as she wrapped her narrow fingers around the shaking item. "Get out of my sight, now."

Head still bowed, he backed from the office and swiftly made his way down the hall.

[ - ]

As Zelda stood before the large gallery window, staring at the longshot cradled in her hands, Impa walked aimlessly through the castle.

Letting Zelda's mental muttering fall to the back of her mind, she took in the place she called home. Her fingers skimmed the stone walls and brushed the smooth tapestry with reverence. Silently, she thanked the Goddesses for all she and her Charge, her love, had. It wasn't the castle itself, but the symbolism behind it. Most, if not all, could have been lost in moments...

Shaking her head to clear the saddening thoughts, she sighed softly.

She was bored. Utterly so. There was no recruits to train, her grandmother would kill her if she visited this soon (especially without Zelda), the library held no appeal, it wasn't time for Zelda's rounds through the country and there was no one to talk (argue) with.

It was times like these she wondered how anyone could stand the monotony of being a national leader. If she was bored, then there were no words to describe how Zelda had to feel. Well, when she wasn't ready to rip Link a new one.

Speaking of Link...

Following the streak of blond hair and green tunic, she silently trailed the young man she (sometimes) considered a son. He looked miserable...desolate. It wasn't like him.

A stirring in her stomach warned her moments before he looked over his shoulder. Barely ducking into an alcove in time, she waited for the cautious teenager to round the corner before emerging. Pressing her lips together, she narrowed her eyes and stared down the empty corridor. Something was *going on*, something she didn't like one bit--and she didn't even know what that *something* was yet.

[ - ]

Closing his eyes, Link leaned against the closed door. Head pressed against the heavy wood behind him, he scrubbed the traitorous tears which had slipped free. His breath shuddered as he forced the air from his lungs, desperate to stop the sobs which threatened to consume him.


He gasped softly as the world plunged into white-dotted darkness. He had *failed*, had broken his promise and her faith and their trust and *nothing* could make it better! He was the *Hero* and he couldn't even keep his sister's weapon from breaking! He dared call himself her brother and her helper when he'd made her so angry, had betrayed her like that by destroying something that had saved her when he couldn't.

His mind became a whirlwind of chaotic, rambling thoughts as his emotions swung wildly. Shakes wracked him as he struggled against the self-doubt which had always followed him. Courage did little against the demons that haunted him and it hurt to know the Goddesses had chosen such
a **failure** for their Hero.

He wasn’t as strong as everyone thought he was. He was *weak*, just a little boy playing at dress up and it was only *because* of the Triforce that he’d fought like he had—and look what good it had done! So many had died and been hurt and he couldn’t even save his *Queen* from everything she’d went through because, even with courage, he was a scaredy cat! Even a *mutt* could rile him. He shouldn't let it bother him but it *did*, because the mutt knew he wasn’t *good* as they believed he was and it was trying to tell them.

Oh Mothers, where was Shad? Stumbling away from the door, he hugged himself, remembering he didn't have a telepathic bond with Shad. Shad didn't know he needed him and he *did* because it was *so strong* and *loud* and it *hurt* and nobody but Shad understood that, not even Zelda because her voices were made by people who hurt her and not *herself* and it wasn't her fault, none of it was, not like it was all his fault.

He had failed Them and the country and Her and himself and Him and everyone he knew and it *hurt*. Bitting his tongue, he swallowed blood as he shook his head frantically. He paced in the small space, gulping air as he shook and his hands became numb. No *no* NO he couldn't and wouldn't, he’d come this far and Shad was already suspicious and upset and angry and he couldn't hurt anyone anymore even though he deserved the pain and—

**SILENCE!** He jumped as the command echoed within his mind. Shuddering, he stared blindly at the wall as if expecting someone to appear. You ARE *weak* because you refuse to do something about this incessant, childish insecurity! You should be stronger than this, Hero, you are stronger—and yet you let the anger of a little girl break your strength like it was spun glass! Control yourself, reclaim yourself, and remember. **Who. You. Are!**

"Who I am, who I am," he whispered. Nodding to himself, he smiled without notice. Taking several deep, calming breaths, he nodded again. But as he walked towards the door, his confident smile fell away, melted like winter snow on the windowpane. He was...weak.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he bowed his head and felt fresh tears fill his clenched eyes. He *wouldn't* cry, wouldn't be weaker, he *would* be strong. But...maybe a little...help? Idly running his fingers over the thin vial in his pocket, he pondered if it was worth it...if it was *early* enough for help.

[-]

Cursing the young man who'd apparently run like the wind after rounding the corner, Impa shut yet another door. The corridor was dead-end, so he had to be in one of the remaining rooms. All that was left, if she remembered correctly, was the storage area. But why would he...

A shudder ran down her spine as she began to realize there was more to the situation than she'd first thought. With silent steps, she neared the first door.

[-]

Pulling the vial from his pocket, he ground his teeth for a minute. *Damn* it all and him with it! He'd promised Shad and yet continued going behind his back—but it was the only way, the *only* way he'd gotten through the war. The *country's* war. His own war kept raging.

A bitter chuckle escaped his lips as his eyes became hard. A war that while his *darling* sister might understand, would never be able to grasp. They were too different, their situations too different. She was broken. He was merely...fractured.
Pressing her hand to the door, Impa closed her eyes and listened. The heavy wood muffled the sound within, but years of training made it possible to hear the minute shuffling the heavy boots, to feel the vibrations of each step. Stepping away, she wrapped her hand around the knob and carefully turned it, willing the old metal to remain silent.

AN: Spon-tan-e-ous cliffy! This wasn't planned to be a cliffy, but I had to do it, I had to because I'm just that cruel–oh you all love me, it keeps you reading! Please review.

In case anyone is confused about the bands on the longshot: in some games, you can see the blue band around the handle and "hook" of Link's longshot. Zelda's band is red, not blue. That's all I meant.

**Songs:**

Truth by Seether (this should actually go with the next installment, but it fits here too)

What Lies Beneath by Breaking Benjamin

Topless by Breaking Benjamin

A Beautiful Lie by 30 Seconds to Mars
It was impossible. Her eyes were wrong. Her brain was wrong. Dear Din, please let something about this be wrong! She could not be seeing what she thought she saw.

Standing in a small storage room barely lit by a half-blocked window stood Link. Well, if he was upset, there wouldn't be a problem.

Except...

"What are you doing?!" Impa snarled quietly. Closing the door gently behind her, she stalked toward the blue-eyed youth, seething.

"What does it look like?" he quipped as a corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk. Shrugging, he pocketed the empty vial.

"It looks," she hissed. "like you took...took..." But the accusation would not come to her.

"We're all adults here, aren't we?" he mocked as he met her eyes, his own flashing with soured amusement. "Let's say it for what it is: I was taking a potion...an illegal drug."

A million and one thoughts ran through her mind as she stared, unable to comprehend how it could be true. And where had the anger come from? It couldn't be true. Link didn't take illegal drugs. He didn't even dri–

But...he did, whispered her memories. Her mind drifted back to the Twilight Palace, to random meals and bits of days forgotten. Shad, frowning at Link while he drunk goblet after goblet of wine, or even one goblet. Link, shrugging off the cornered looks of his partner and reproachful words of his adopted father. Zelda, joking that if she ever wanted to have a girls' night and get drunk, not to invite Link.

Her mind spun as she pulled herself through time, seeing beyond the facade he projected, beyond the image she held of him. She never considered him a "good" boy, a poster child for best behavior– how could she, when she'd been there for his teenage years? But to drink...to use drugs. It was...

Not unexpected, she ruefully admitted deep within herself. Studying the young man critically, she pushed the rage and shock aside, seeing him with the eyes of an adult, a fellow veteran. No, not at all unexpected. They were all scarred from the war, why should he be exempt? No, not exempt. But...less prone to such...self-destruction?

A bitter chuckle escaped her as she understood her self-deception. She had known, had been worried by the excessive drinking...but true to her heart, her duty, she had ignored the problem. He wasn't her Charge, wasn't Zelda, and didn't matter to her.

Her eyes narrowed in anger.

Except...

He did matter to her. Because, like it or not, Zelda was close to him and he could help her.
Another hiss fell from her lips as they curled back in a silent snarl, nails digging into her palms. If he had been drunk or high while with her...if he'd ever been influenced by the drugs...

He stared at the shaking woman and chuckled darkly to himself. He smirked, knowing the blinders had fallen away. The observant Impa knew and considered him a threat. Oh this was going to be fun.

[-]

Elsewhere in the castle, Garo deemed Zelda safe-enough-for-the-moment to leave her. The bad alpha was nowhere to be seen, Impa was gone...and there when the other beta—Shad.

Trailing behind the taller male, he kept out of sight, never letting him drift too far away. As he followed the beta, he surveyed the area. There wasn't a lot of people around...odd. Normally during this time of day there was two-leggers running around. And it was quiet. There was always a lot of talking, even if they pretended to be quiet.

Hey! Huffing, he sped up to slide inside the room before the beta could close the door. Silly human.

Shad smiled softly to himself as he watched the mutt all but tumble in the room. Shaking his head, he shut the door and gazed around his sitting room. His smile fell when he realized the lamps were dim.

Link wasn't here.

Maybe he'd...forgotten?

Shaking his head again, the young archeologist swallowed harshly and admitted the truth to himself. Link hadn't forgotten their lunch plans. Not when they'd talked about them at breakfast.

Tears stung his eyes as he bowed his head. The cushion below him felt like stone as he sat heavily in one of the chairs, eyes focused on the blurring rug. The younger man hadn't even been in their chambers since breakfast, that much was clear. And even though he, Shad, had been a few minutes late...Link wouldn't have left just because of that.

"Great Goddesses," he whispered as hot, sour tears of heartbreak ran down his cheeks. "Mothers of all that Is, I beseech You. Your son is lost, Golden Mothers, and I have no way to find my way. Din, I beg You, grant me the mental fortitude to face the trials I've created...and will face. Nayru, allow me to find the compassion necessary, please. Farore, lend me the physical strength to avoid temptation."

The last words spilled from his lips like wind through silk. Fresh tears hit the rug as he closed his eyes, lips moving with silence as he clasped his hands before his heart. Slipping from the chair, he fell to his knees and raised his head to the ceiling.

"Mothers, he begged deep within his mind, this humble son is Your servant and begs for Your mighty compassion. I've done such wrong in my life and seek every day for redemption beyond me. I need Your embrace, Holy Mothers of All, I need Your caring words and the sacred trinity you carry for Your children—hope, love and faith. I know I've damaged Your trust and possibly the Heart's Triforce, but I beg You not to cast me from Your thoughts in this dark hour.

A shudder ran through him as he swallowed a scream of disbelief. A primal whimper escaped as he
choked on his broken heart. The tears which flowed freely from his cheeks was the blood from his
gaping soul, the only expression of his pain he would allow himself.

*I know I deserve these trials, Mothers. I know I have hurt many in my path of self-destruction...of
the vessel You granted me. But no one else deserves the pain his actions will bring. I caused many
heartache and damage when on the same path, Great Ones. This can only be justice,
this agony and lack of knowledge. But the others who love them, who were here before I was—who
don't know what I did to lead him down this path—don't deserve this. They've done nothing to...to...

"To be privy to this suffering," he whispered. "You know best. I merely beg You, please, spare
them...spare him. Thank You, Mothers."

Bowing his head once more, he drew his knees to his chest and hid his tears in his arms. Sobs
wracked him as he struggled to accept what he couldn't deny. No longer was he toeing the line or
testing the limits.

Link hadn't just slipped or had a relapse, hadn't just strayed from the path.

He'd left it completely. And this time...Shad couldn't be the one to guide him down the treacherous
road.

As Shad became lost in the sea of turmoil he'd vainly hoped to never experience, Garo inched
closer. Pushing his head under the two-legger's arms, he wormed himself between his legs and
body, licking the tears from his face.

The other alpha had caused this. Growling silently as the beta male hugged him, he vowed the bad
alpha would pay. He'd dismissed HIS beta-omega, had hurt and angered her...and mistreated his
own. He'd challenged him over *his* beta-omega...

And he'd lost. This hurt beta, the one who held him and spilled clear-blood of *agony* like the ones
he'd spilled for momma and the ones Zelda spilled at night, wasn't safe with the other alpha. He'd
hurt too many people, was a *traitor* to those he called pack.

Garo whined softly, trying to calm the two-legger beta. When the other male made the odd sound,
the one that sounded like amusement but wasn't, he licked the bottom of his fur-less muzzle. He'd
take care of the beta, even if he couldn't *help* him.

And then...

And then the alpha would *pay*.

[-]

[-]

**AN:** Even though there was something else I'd wanting to do in this chapter, it felt right to break it
here. This wasn't an easy chapter to write—in fact, it's getting harder and harder to write this story.
Not because I don't have ideas, or can't find the words (although the latter IS part of it
sometimes)...it's because this story is *raw*, it's *truth*. Close friends of mine or not, I was given
permission to write stories of people who want their stories told so others can learn from their. It's
not just my own pain which goes into this, but the pain of others, the suffering I've seen first
hand...and the joy and healing. It's not easy. Thank you all for being patient as I, and those who
contribute *so much* to the creation and continuation of this story, try to find our voices, to find the
necessary and sometimes perfect words, to write *Lotus Jewel*. 
And of course, THANK YOU StorytellerLore for all you do. ;p And thanks for being brave enough to take on TMS too. I honestly have no idea what'd I'd do without you when it comes to writing. I doubt it'd be as refined (or even complete) without you!

A note on Shad's prayer. He's an archeologist who has close relationships with those who not only hold Triforces but have also been to "holy" realms, have been to places where only the Sages and Goddesses themselves tread. I believe that he, like many citizens of Hyrule, would honor (and worship in some cases) the Goddesses and Sages. He's not fanatical or anything, and won't make the Sages to be anything more than they are--imperfect people picked to do what they do--but I do think he would honor the Goddesses. And this is what I was trying to show. I haven't really gone into the spiritual/religious side of Hyrule yet, but that'll start coming out now that I'm in the part of the story where it makes sense. It'll play more of a role in the future.

**Songs:**

Careless Whisper by Seether

Murder by Within Temptation (might be better for next chapter, but still)

Shot in the Dark by Within Temptation (Shad)

Hopeless by Breaking Benjamin

Fade Away by Breaking Benjamin
Chapter Thirty-One

With sightless eyes, Impa wandered through the castle. Without destination, she followed paths long ago memorized by her body. Her mind in chaos, she spared the passing workers little thought nor spoke to rushing advisers and barristers. Her heart fought against the knowledge her mind had accepted oh so many seasons ago.

Even as the confused woman worried within her, the warrior paced with agitation. The man she had left, just as well confused by shock and anger, was no longer a threat to the core of her being. He was an enemy, a danger she could barely comprehend.

He was unstable, using substances which compromised his lethal mind and agile body without hesitation. He had training few others could match; knowledge of weapons, fighting skills, methods of incapacitation and death effective on most beings in the land.

But it wasn't the brother, the steadfast knight which shook her and stirred her protective fury. It was the warrior who had survived darkness, had fought his own dark image and won because he had accepted it for it was. And instead of controlling it, instead of using it for his own skill, it was consuming him. Making him...irrational. Beyond irrational. Not clumsy by any means, but more than willing to take risk.

Shivering, she paused to look out the window, the cool outer wall nothing compared to the sickening chill which fueled her scattered thoughts. Bare trees and desolate fields stretched as far as the eyes could see, though she barely paid the barren land any mind. The provinces were becoming brown from cold and the fields were muddy from post-harvest tilling.

The image of naked trees swaying in cold wind stayed with her even as she left the window behind. Movement gave her some sense of coherence, giving the incomprehensible some semblance of understanding.

He had helped her dispose of many threats over the years, had even taken care of a few himself. And yet now he was the threat, the enemy which everything within her demanded die. How could she lift a hand to the boy her love considered a brother? Yet how could she not when amusement so twisted burned behind his eyes and fell from his lips? It wasn't the darkness which scared her, for darkness was the opposite of light. It was mystery and rebirth, the place of shadows. No, it was the...

There was no word for it.

It wasn't evil, but it was...

Potentially. There were few words to describe the threat which could potentially be evil, which was so similar in his expression to the last threat she could barely wrap her mind around it.

Hugging herself, she swallowed hard.

"Impa."

Cursing herself to lapsing in her vigilance, she swung around, instinctively reaching for the dagger
at her side. When her eyes laid upon her brother-kin, her hand fell and allowed her gaze to do the same. "Reyel."

His name was barely a whisper, just as hers had been. Yet where his had been neutral, ever watchful of outward appearance, hers seemed to lack emotion entirely. But to him, to the one who had known her since he was barely knee-high, the apparent emptiness was brimming with feeling. Her voice seemed absent of all caring, of all feeling, where his name was a plea of agony and confusion.

Realizing she would not meet his eyes anytime soon, he shook his head and began walking. A small smile fluttered over his lips as she followed him without thought. Just as she had as a child. Always following them, wanting to know what they were doing and if she could play too. Swallowing a chuckle, he led her into Zelda's vacant office.

"The others?" she murmured while leaning against the heavy desk.

"With her."

A quiet hum of acknowledgment rumbled in her chest as she looked at the floor. She didn't...understand. Link of all people? It was so...unexpected.

He moved almost silently, possessing a feline's grace as he closed the space between them. Only when they were close enough for their breaths to mingle, for the heat of their bodies to brush one another, a quiet yearning for contact they so rarely had, did he lift her head. His fingers pressed lightly against her chin, more of a request than a demand.

He met the eyes which were so similar to his own, yet oh so different. "You aren't alone," he said quietly. He knew she would understand, that he would not ask for details, knew he knew it wasn't his business.

She held his gaze, desperately wanting to. It wasn't until her eyes began to water that she blinked and turned her head, breaking his gentle hold. Without pause, she slid easily between the body before her and desk behind her. Standing before the picture window, she wrapped her arms around herself once more, cold on the inside.

Silence reined as they watched. He her, she them. He watched her stillness that wasn't truly still, how she swayed and shifted ever so slightly. She watched the Guard surround Zelda as she spoke with the workers who lived outside the main body of the castle. His family, her life, their tribe...the pack. Connected but not whole, two separate collectives tied together by one woman, by a single person born to a life she'd never asked for.

To a life she'd thought of giving up...before realizing whoever came after would never do what was best for Hyrule. Would not be Hyrulean born, would not understand their ways of life. A crown she'd worn since birth, though the title had not been hers 'til recently.

A shuddering exhale escaped the lone female Sheikah as she watched her beloved lead their favored steeds to pasture, Epona following obediently behind with Ben at the end of the line. A small smile played on her pursed lips as the larger mare swatted her tail at the young boy, not at all happy at having a lead rope "just in case" she got away.

Though no distance changed between them, she shuddered once more as she felt him near. He didn't have to move to be close. Clenching her teeth, she shook her head. No, she wouldn't look for a reason to be angry. Damn it all, she was already angry, she didn't need a reason!
She spoke without looking at him, never taking her narrowed gaze from the window. "You're wrong."

He raised a brow. "About...?"

"Saying I'm pulling away from the tribe. You're wrong."

"But I'm not," he answered quietly. "You admitted such."

Stalemate.

Turning slowly, she clenched her teeth, struggling to word thoughts she could barely catch. He was right, but... "To say I pull away is to state my actions are intentional."

"Only in implication. Many events happen by accident, though the decisions leading to them may be intentional."

As their gazes met once more, the strong, steady beat of their hearts became drums. Not nearly as old as the journey of their ancestors, not yet old enough to be in written history, the struggle of familial and eros which all but dominated the Chosen women of their people swam through their minds like blood through their veins.

The essence of all those that came before her, and would come after, flowed through her spirit and filled her trembling body. The spirits of those who could never teach her, of the ones she could never teach, touched her aching heart in comfort. She was the bridge between two worlds, between cultures so vastly different, just as all other Maderones would be.

The core of his brothers, his fathers and sons sung a warrior's song deep within him as he remained still. The ones who had never taught all they'd known and those who would never know all he did soothed the bleeding wound in his chest. He was the anchor, the one meant to Guide the Guardian.

Mirror images, they stared at one another, their battle of wills coming to a swift and painless end. Where she was Protector, he was Teacher. As he kept her from losing herself within the sky, she pulled him from the depths of the ocean. Kin of blood and spirit, bound of the energy which had created them and she wielded.

He was not wrong, just as she was right. Both knew the complexities of the situation, him as a high-ranking Guard and her the Chosen Maderone, of the agonizing Queen they struggled to protect without stifling. Where she had pulled away, he had closed off, and as she isolated herself, he withdrew.

Theirs was a world of reality, filled with harsh truths and no comforting lies. There was no shield from the horrible truth of their errors. Not theirs, or their tribe's, nor even for the one in their care. Their ignorance was not deliberate, though it felt as such at times. No, it merely...was. None, not even the Goddesses themselves, were perfect.

This too was a painful truth they had no choice but to face. As they breathed deeply, he spoke and she replied, but neither heard one another. They were siblings in spirit, in heart; words were unnecessary.

"You aren't alone."

"I can't speak of it."

"I'm not asking you to."
"Yet I can't keep silent."

"Is there ever a good reason to?"

"Not truly."

*I'm sorry,* came the unspoken, barely thought apology. She knew without telling him that he understood, that there were no words- mental or verbal- which she needed to say.

Did not all siblings fight at some point?

"I don't know what to do," she admitted quietly, as she glanced away shamefully. She half-turned, wanting to avoid the possibility of meeting his eyes. Of looking at someone who would listen without judging, who would consider her words and tell her the truth.

"There are times most of us don't."

"Must you be so annoying with political correctness?"

He smiled as she growled, the child within his memories ruffling her younger self's silver-gray locks. "I have no control over your emotions."

"Rey-el!"

She grumbled as he chuckled, lips twitching despite her resolve to hide her amusement. Levity made the horror bearable as the last half hour reared within her unguarded mind. Her smile fell, weakened by pain and anger and further waned by such confusion.

"I don't know what to do," she repeated quietly. She hesitated before meeting his eyes. Moments ago she had been confident in the knowledge that he would listen without judgment; now she waited for rebuke. Never had she been immune to self-doubt and insecurity, despite what everyone wished to believe. Would he call her on her deliberate ignorance?

"About what?" he asked quietly. He saw the worry in her eyes, the vulnerability seen by so few. Whatever had happened had shaken her, had torn large rips in her reality. Deep within his mind, far behind the calm patience he'd fought hard to have, he paced. He wanted to shake her and demand answers. But...it wasn't his way. It wasn't *their* way. Theirs was a people of calculation. There was little to be won by acting impulsively.

And so he waited.

She mumbled, hugging herself while denying the desire- the need- for comfort. "Stuff. Him. A lot of things."

"Him? Who do you mean?"

She hissed softly. "No one. It's just...stuff," she repeated while waving a hand in dismissal. "I just..."

"Don't know what to do. I can't help you if I don't know what's going on," he told her with a soft smile. "C'mon sister, you know you want to tell me."

"I'm not a child any longer, *brother,* taunts won't work."

"Then how about an admission that I- we- are worried about you?"
She shifted her weight from foot to foot, looking anywhere but at him. "I worry about you too."

He hugged her loosely and without warning. When her head rested on his shoulder, he pressed his cheek to her crown. "You aren't perfect. And you aren't alone."

"I know."

"You need help at times...and there's nothing wrong with that."

"I know."

"We are observant, we have bonds...but we aren't All Seeing like the Mothers."

"I know."

"I'm not going to ask you to tell me what happened. But you can, if you want."

"I kn- Why?"

He raised his head as she lifted hers. Their eyes met once more as he furrowed his brows. "Why...what?"

"Why won't you ask?" she questioned silently. "You've said that since we were teenagers. I never understood why."

*For the same reason you do it*, he told her without words as he kissed her forehead. "It's not my place to ask you to tell me. If you want to, you will. If not, then you won't."

She laid her head on his shoulder again, inhaling the scent of kin, of her childhood companion. It was comforting. Not in the same way Zelda's would be. But still nice. Familiar. Safe. "Potential traitor," she muttered before the contentment could fade.

Despite his loose, almost reverent embrace, he tensed. A million and one scenarios ran through his mind before he stilled his thoughts. They were not people of rash action and now was not the time to become such. "Potential to defer?"

"Yes."

"Risk level?"

"High."

"Security needed for..."

"...Head of State."

His ears rung as if she'd screamed rather than whispered. His mind as still as moon-cast shadows, only the narrowing of his eyes betrayed him. *She* was in danger...possibly. Probably. More than likely.

"Stability of threat?" he questioned as she continued to rest against him.

She felt his hand run absentely through her hair. "Unstable. Too many variables."

"Location?"
Only the beat of their hearts and sounds drifting from the corridor met his word.

"Impa," he said quietly, sharply. "Location of threat?"

"Close."

"How close?"

"In the castle," she barely breathed.

Closing his eyes, he drew several deep, slow breaths in a deliberate attempt to remain objective. Whether she was afraid to admit the truth to herself or him, he didn't know.

"I don't know what to do," she moaned softly. "Nothing is black and white, there is no clear choice. I should...have always...when able...eliminate the threat...the possible threat. But...I can't. She wouldn't understand. She wouldn't...forgive me."

He waited with baited breath. Though it wasn't his place to push about her, the woman in their care was just that: in theirs. He had to know. He would give her a chance to tell him, to work through her emotions before calling upon the cold warrior within her. He wasn't impassive to the confliction, the pain she was feeling. But their primary goal was to protect, always.

"Reyel...what do I do? I want to kill him, eliminate him on principle. But...I can't. Because it's possible he can change, get help. She would never forgive me if I..."

Him. Her. There was only one "him"- Reyel understood. He understood with perfect clarity.

Unlike his sister, he couldn't bring himself to dwell on the fact that the woman under their protection wouldn't forgive them. He liked the young man, thought of him as a much younger brother. Yet he and the others of the Guard had known, had heard and seen what had gone on between the Hylians over the years. The Princess-turned-Queen had sworn them to secrecy, had invoked the oaths they'd sworn to her and cited her acceptance into the tribe.

It was not their place to interfere between Guardian and Charge, and when it became obvious the Sage of Time had no intention of telling their tribe sister...what could they do? They were bound to silence. They suspected the reason behind their actions, behind the orders and discipline, but without proof...without a statement from someone that she was being harmed...they could do nothing.

No matter. Impa now knew the truth, Zelda had told her.

And Link...

...Link was now a threat.

For a few moments, he would keep his peace. He would allow his sister time to sort through everything. And then, when she asked what to do, as he knew she would...he would tell her. There was nothing to gain by lying or being nice.

[-]

They stood in silence, arms around one another, her head on his shoulder and his cheek pressed to hair, for what felt like hours. Somewhere between the planning on assassinating Link in his sleep and dismissing that plan to figure out how he would have an "accident", he heard his tribe-sister speak.
"He's unstable...mentally and otherwise."

"Do you think he would attack her?"

"Physically...I'm not sure," she admitted. Reluctance and self-doubt dripped from her words. Yet as she continued to speak, her despondency shifted to disdain. "Emotionally, mentally...I think he might. Especially if she insulted him today. I wasn't paying attention to what went on."

"Is Shad a threat?"

"Not from what I've seen. Only...Link." The name fell from her lips like a curse. He growled as renewed anger roared within her.

Pulling away from the embrace, she twisted her hair into a bun and found his gaze. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Not another word was said as she turned from him. Her posture was impeccable as she held her head high. Her shields were slightly dented but not broken. The cloth of reality had been patched, and though there was a few loose threads, it was no longer in danger of unraveling. Later, there would be time to mourn and grieve, to wonder "what if" and cry for the man she'd thought of as son, and more recently, peer.

Now was not that time.

She strode to the door only to pause as she lifted her hand to open it. She never turned back, refusing to allow herself to luxury of meeting eyes. It wasn't a comfort she could afford, not now, not when there was danger to her Charge. "What do you think I should do?"

"Observe," he replied without hesitation. "If you threaten he may retaliate. Find out the exact threat he poses. Remain on guard, however."

"Always. And Reyel?"

"Yes?"

"His instability...it's fueled by drugs and drink."

Even after she'd left, leaving him alone in the modest yet stately office of Hyrule's Queen, he stared where she had been. This...

This changed everything.

[-]

[-]

**AN:** Well, erm...that's not how I'd thought the chapter was go. But...it works. I think.

**Songs:**

Headstrong by Trapt

Intoxication by Disturbed

Lithium by Evanescence
The Catalyst by Linkin Park

Defy You by The Offspring
Chapter Thirty-Two (I)

The cold, late-fall winds became bitter knives against the unprotected fragile skin of those outside their dens. Sheets of frost, so thin they shattered like spun sugar upon the floor, covered the ground as the chill continued to invade the country. As the Winter Solstice neared, all prepared. The longest night of the year marked the rebirth of the Great Mothers' Sons and was a time for worship as much as festivities.

Everywhere one looked, from the mighty Sage temples to the rickety shacks of the impoverished, was cleansed with waters of the first snow which blanketed the slumbering land. Dust left from the final harvest colored rags only to be rung free with each rinse. Even in the vast castle, workers could be seen cleaning and decorating.

Hospitality made itself known when the first frost came. As with many generations previous, Zelda opened the castle doors to those who would otherwise be unable to survive the harsh season. In exchange for food, lodging, clothing and wages, the adults worked to replace those who left the country for the season to be with family abroad. Children were given lessons so they could catch up and stay with their peers.

Yet, as with all things, there was more than what was seen. Behind the festive smiles and carols were troubled thoughts. Many felt the tension yet few knew its cause. Few remarked when Link and Shad's raised voices filled the corridors around their chambers. Nary a brave soul outside the Guard commented on the barely concealed hostility between Impa and Link. When one saw Shad, Mikal and Impa talking quietly amongst themselves, they turned the other cheek.

All believed the Queen knew something about these matters. Yet none approached her for fear of reproach. If members of her court were bursting with such strain, what was to say that Zelda was not suffering the same fate? And what could they have said then?

What they did not know is that she was just as ignorant as they. She confronted both her mate and brother on their behavior and only sighed when they agreed not to fight (in front of her, she knew they wanted to add). She questioned Shad as to why she rarely saw him and ground her teeth when he shrugged, claiming he was busy. Seeing Garo trail behind the man and growl at Link only fueled her suspicion. Asking the Guard left her with blank stares, as she refused to pull rank and demand answers.

Her only consolation was the people didn't know more than she did.

Link shook his head as he remembered her muttering those words. Shaking the memory from his mind, he sighed. Better she didn't know. He (or any of them really) would never hear the end of it. And truly...Zelda wrathful...well, look at what happened to the last person who she didn't agree with. Dead. Destroyed. Beyond all hope of ever returning.

That was a happy thought. Sort of funny, in a morbid way. The great Ganondorf taken down by a slip of a girl- erm, woman.

All but skipping, Zelda neared her brother. "What are you smiling at?" she asked with a grin. She laughed quietly when he blinked and looked away from the ceiling. Her laughter grew as he
blushed.

"Just...thinking."

Sliding her arm through his, she sighed softly and laid her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad you're happy."

He kissed her crown, swallowing the lump in his throat as he did so. "I'm glad I'm happy too."

Smacking his arm, she lifted her head. "Jerk."

"Brat."

"Child."

"Girl."

"How is that an insult?" Fighting a grin, she turned so she stood before him, head tilted as she waited.

"Easy. You're like a kid...a little iddy-biddy, pigtail wearing girl," he told her. He stood straighter and puffed his chest with a smug smile. The approaching holiday had all but eliminate the darkness which haunted him, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

She slapped his arm again, rolling her eyes when he whined. "I must hit like a girl too."

"That hurt!"

"Pft. I barely touched you." Biting her lip, she looked at him with large, imploring eyes. "L-i-n-k..."

"Oh no. No no no," he told her while backing away. "No. Whatever it is, the answer is no!"

"You haven't even heard me out yet!" she told him between giggles.

He shook his head frantically, fighting a smile despite himself. "I know you. You want me to do something I don't want to. Probably involving something embarrassing. Not a chance, dear sister. No. Last time you gave me that look and used that voice, I had to 'get' you a piece of pie. The cook hit my hand with a rolling pin, Zelda. No!"

"I just want to go for a walk," she whined. "Puh-lease Link?"

Ignoring the laughing people around them, he backed himself into a wall as he advanced. "Zelda, you're supposed to be a merciful ruler!"

"I am," she retorted with a cheerful smile. "I'm trying to get you some fresh air!"

"You won't win against a woman, Link!" one of the borders said as he passed. "I've been married longer than you've been alive and I still can't win. Wife, sister, daughter, aunt, cousin...stranger. Doesn't matter. Woman gets that look, you instantly lose."

"Then I'll fight until the end!" the Hero declared while brandishing a weapon.

A piece of pine, to be more exact.

Shaking his head and chuckling, the border muttered about children as he continued on his way.
Zelda clutched her stomach as the younger man took a defensive stance.

"I'll fight you Zelda!"

"Psht." Slapping the pine from his hand, she closed the space between him and gave him the look again. "Link, please? I want to go for a walk!"

"Take Impa! You'll end up shoving snow down my tunic or something else embarrassing. I know you!"

"I promise I won't," she told him as she clasped her hands before her chest. "Please please please Link, take a walk with me, please?"

"Never!" he cried as he sidestepped her. Running, he grinned madly as he heard the roaring laughter behind him. It was funny—but he would win!

If only he knew how wrong he was.

-[

Half an hour later, he grumbled as he dragged his feet through the snow. His armor weighed less than the layers of thick winter clothes. How had she talked him into this?

"I didn't," she chirped, seeing the look on his face. "You agreed."

Snorting, he shook his head. No he hadn't. She'd followed him until he'd had no choice but to give in. She'd run him to death.

At least she was smiling again.

But still...a walk. When it was below freezing?

"I'll never understand you."

"Good. I don't want you to."

Grabbing a handful of snow, he smashed it in her face before running away.

As the wind shifted, Garo growled softly. He didn't like the other alpha with her. But...no amount of tugging, begging and refusal to follow would make her stay. So he'd followed.

Catching the scent on the cold air, he ran behind them. Best not let them get out of sight.

-[

Gasping for breath in the frigid air, Link shook his hair from his face and grinned. Turning to Zelda, he smothered a laugh when he saw her struggling to lift herself from a snow bank. "Need some help?"

Huffing, she nodded and extended a hand. When their gloved fingers wrapped around one another, she tugged. Giggling, she pushed herself from the snow and danced outside his reach. "Gotcha!"

Sputtering, he stood and grabbed halfheartedly for her. "What was that for?"

"You tripped me," she explained. Giddy with freedom, she danced around him, spinning with each step.
Arms stretched towards the sky, she welcomed the snow and wind, greeting nature's time of rest with an open heart. Yes, the country (and by extension, she) was busy this time of year. There were many plans to be made, many indoor restorations taking place. But for the most part, the steady pace of work was almost...refreshing. There would be few meetings with foreign governments, no out-of-country trips to make. The delicate ice which fell from the sky gave everyone time to rest...why not be grateful?

"I did not," he said with a sniff.

"Did too," came the childish retort as she came to a stop. Meeting his eyes, she stuck her tongue out. "Ngh! So there."

"Aren't you supposed to be a dignified monarch?"

"Aren't you supposed to be a fair knight keeping a dignified monarch from harm?"

"Harm? How ever did being pushed in snow harm you, my Lady?" he mocked.

She copied his previous haughty sniff, lifting her head with exaggerated arrogance. "Why, there could have been rocks under the snow. Dear sir, you are clearly lacking in your lessons."

"Speaking of lacking," he said quietly, "it's been a while since I've seen you this happy...smiling this much." Grasping one of her hands, he laid it on his arm and covered it with his own as they started walking.

Biting her lip, Zelda lifted her eyes to the white-grey sky, squinting against the cold air. Exhaling raggedly, she shook her head. The day had been so nice, so free and peaceful. Why... "It's nothing."

"Nothing is always something." As they followed the courtyard path, he glanced at her. "You haven't talked to me in a while, sister. What's going on?"

"It's been a month since you and Impa started going at each other's throats. Why don't you tell me what's going on?" she retorted. "I'm not stupid, Link. This started the day after I yelled at you. I'm sorry about that."

"I know. It has nothing to do with the long-shot," he muttered. "It's...personal. Please, Zel, leave it alone."

"Then I'm not talking to you," came the cool retort.

He sighed.

Neither spoke for several minutes as they walked aimlessly through the vast inner grounds surrounding the castle. When they passed a door leading into the market or a province, they spared it a glance without stopping. Without words, both knew they couldn't just leave. That knowledge didn't mean they wanted to return inside, however.

It wasn't until they neared an archer's station that Link murmured. "We're disagreeing. She doesn't like something I've chosen and...won't let it go."

"It has to be pretty big for you to almost come to blows," she observed with a detached tone.

"It is. But...it's also my choice." Swallowing against the bile in his throat, he bit back the truth that while it was his choice it affected everyone around him. She didn't need to know. And she wouldn't understand.
She'd try to make him stop. Like Impa was.

Fingering the vial in his pocket, he felt his breathing steady itself. He could stop whenever he wanted. He had before. It was how he'd met Shad after all. In rehab. Not that they both hadn't had to go back once released from the hospital...

Shaking his head to quell the reminiscing, he sighed. "It'll work out. Now will you tell me why you've been so depressed?"

"Not depressed," she mumbled, adverting her eyes when he looked at her. "Merely...distracted."

"Uh-huh. Sure. That's why you pick at your food and avoid everyone if it's not business related."

"Are you going to chastise me?"

"No. You're picking...but you eat. I'm not micro-managing your life, Zel. I'm just worried."

"Fine. I'll tell you." Taking a deep breath, she began speaking.

[-]

[-]

AN: Oh look, they're having a civil conversation!
Teeth bared, Garo growled quietly to himself as he trailed behind the two-leggers. Zelda smelt light, like the snow. No pain, no tears, no fear. He liked that. And then she just had to go for a walk with him.

Him, the bad two-legger alpha who no longer had a beta, who smelt tainted and kept fighting with Impa. He didn't even deserve a name.

It was decisions like this that made him wonder if his female beta-omega was as observant as he'd supposed she was. She clearly knew something was wrong, she'd been searching for something. What did they call it...questioning. She'd questioned him. They'd made him nervous, the questions.

And then she stopped!

By the Great Wolf, if he didn't love her so much he'd leave her. Let her see how she did without a pack.

Then again, she did have the lone wolf, Impa...

But still, this was foolish! And now something the other alpha had said had made her nervous.

Growling softly again, he moved closer. He didn't trust the other male. Not one. Single. Bit.

[-]

Ignoring the soft growls which drifted towards them, Link listened, expressionless.

"It started last month. Actually...it started before that." Taking a ragged breath, Zelda wrapped her arms around her stomach and kept her gaze anywhere but on Link.

"You...know what happened at the wedding reception. It started then. She said there was some things she had to think about, that she was confused about. Things she needed to figure out alone. She pushed me away, blocked the bond...would barely talk to me. It hurt...a lot," she whispered, unfocused eyes pointed skyward.

"I'm not sure what made her stop. But one day the bond wasn't blocked anymore and I could feel her. Goddesses, Link, I didn't realize just how much it tore me apart to not feel her. It hurt, I was so empty and mindless without being able to feel her through the bond. Does she get the same way when I close it? Or does her end work differently? She said once it would be harder for me to hide from her than for her to hide from me...but didn't I prove that wrong? I hid from her for years, she never even knew I was hurt."

Hugging herself tighter, the Hylian woman turned her gaze to the ground. Her breath came in short bursts, her heart pounding with each wave of overwhelming emotion. It was too much, there wasn't enough room inside her to consider everything!

"We started talking and she...she told me she wanted to marry me. Marry me. We'd mentioned it before, but it's not the same as actually admitting it, you know? I don't understand it. WE haven't talked about it since but that doesn't make it any less confusing. She loves me, and I love her, but marriage? I'm...broken. Shattered, like a mirror someone tried back together and only broke more."
"I just...don't get it. And to be her lover too! She said that too you know," she confessed in hushed tones. Her shoulders rounded as her hands clutched her ribs, teeth-chattering shakes wracking her. Everything spilled free as chaos consumed her thoughts. A month's worth of worry, of obsession and agonizing silence rattled her spirit to the point of collapse.

"I-I didn't bring it up again. I mean, how could I? She didn't. It seemed like the entire conversation never happened. I'm glad she feels better about it and everything. Am I making this into something it's not?"

Startled by the question, Link blinked before shaking his head. "No, Zel, you aren't."

"Then why...why does it feel like I am?"

Biting back the angry, spiteful retort which sprung instinctively to his lips, he sighed and clenched his teeth for a moment. The sheer repetition of their conversations...sometimes he wondered how he dealt with them and stayed sane. He loved her, she was his sister, and he understood perfectly—but that didn't cool his frustrations. Like a child constantly asking "but why" without listening to the answers or thinking for themselves!

"Because that's what you know," he told her slowly, deliberately drawing the words out. "It's what you were taught from childhood—that unless it imperils, or may imperil, the country or anyone who is a prominent member of it...then it's not important. He just...made that worse."

"But it was years ago."

"And? Since when do logic and emotions get along? They hate each other. The heart doesn't work on a time-line, doesn't understand time—why would other emotions?"

"But that-"

"Doesn't make sense. I know. Again, I ask, since when do emotions and logic get along?"

"Are you mad?" she asked quietly after a moment of silence.

"No."

Even if the word hadn't been so sharp, nor his tone so terse, she would have known it was a lie. Not only because his eyes, his beautiful water/sky-blue eyes that were wasted on a man (or so she'd heard—she'd never admit to agreeing...or not) were narrowed and darkened, nor even from his stiff posture. No...it was because his hands were clenched so tightly his white knuckles shown clearly despite the snow around them.

And somehow, the denial was more frightening than the truth.

[-]

They walked a good portion of the enclosed area. Garo felt his hackles raised for the umpteenth time as a fresh wave of anger burned his nose. But he couldn't do anything because the other alpha was smart enough to not act. He hadn't even reacted to his growls.

Not even when they were loud enough for Zelda to look at him. He knew she knew. She might not know he knew, but she knew about the other alpha. Knew he was angry. What she didn't know was the other smell, the one that stunk and left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Is that the only thing that's been...'distracting' you lately?" Link asked, ignoring the mutt behind
them. Honestly, the half-breed wasn't a threat.

The real threat was his own screaming thoughts.

They were *Loud* and then *HURT* because they were so loud. It had been too long since he'd had something to quiet them, something that made it possible to focus on the here and now instead of what everyone wanted and what he should be but wasn't. It was easier when they were quiet because he could understand that even if he failed, it wasn't the end of the world, that he was only a person, not perfect. But they *weren't* quiet, so it wasn't easy at all.

His breath caught slightly as he took a sharp inhale, trying to quiet the rambling of his mind. Zelda was saying something and he couldn't *hear* because he was too focused on *his* thoughts instead of *her* despite the fact that he'd asked *her* something.

"Yes," she whispered. "It's childish but I don't understand and I can't just leave it alone. She wants to *marry* me and for me to be her lover but the two aren't one...I just...don't understand it. I know she had a lover when she was younger but that's different—she was *young*. Who knows about love when they're young? No offense Link."

Feeling the insult despite her apology, he snorted. "Right. Because that means *you* know nothing of love either—since you're young too."

"I-"

"Are apparently *special*, exempt from your own rules."

"I didn't say that! I know there's people who fall in love as teenagers and live happily ever after. But most people *don't*," she stated. She barely noticed as they moved into a niche to avoid the suddenly roaring winds.

"How would you know," he asked bitterly. "How do you know what most people do or don't think or feel?"

"Link, I...I'm just working off assumptions and what I've heard from others. What did I say?" she asked quietly, worry bubbling within her as she watched him pace in the small area.

"What did I say?" he mimicked before laughing brokenly, cruelly. "What don't you say? Yak yak, all you do is talk and think you know *everything* because you have Wisdom and are Queen. You're not special, Zelda!"

She reeled back as if slapped, staring at the man she barely recognized. Her back hit the wall as her pounding heart mixed with the raging wind, deafening her to all but his words. She could see it...could clearly make out he agony and cold *wrath*, the vengeful anger in his eyes as he sneered.

Meeting her horrified gaze, Link felt something within him snap free as his confidence, so worn by his insecurity and everyone's expectations, lost its hold. Anger coiled within him, warming him despite the cold that radiated from his broken heart.

"I'm so SICK of the holier-than-thou attitude you have, Zelda! You're the leader of the Sages, one more powerful than *Rauru*, you're the holder of Wisdom and you're Queen—and that makes you *special*, because you survived some pain. You act like you were the only one who was hurt during the war, *sister,*" he spat, "and never consider that the rest of us suffered too.

"You pull the rest of us down with you, *degrade* us to the level of the man we were all trying to kill because *you* can't cope, and it's not right! Who gave you the right, the ability, to decide you're
more than the rest of us? I know you don't understand, but you refuse to listen to anyone who tries to explain something to you!"

His chest heaved as the words, so long bottled, rushed from him like a tidal wave. As she had earlier, he could do nothing to contain the thoughts who had been pushed down for longer than one cared to think. But unlike the shocked, shivering woman before he, he chose each word with care, determined to make her feel what he felt. He wouldn't let her ignore him any longer!

"'Link, I', 'Link, me', 'Link, Link, Link, fix this for me because I'm too stupid and weak to realize I can do it myself',' he mocked in a high-pitched voice. He chuckled as tears welled in her dilated eyes and felt the first stirrings of satisfaction. She would FINALLY understand what she had put him through for YEARS.

"If you don't wa-want to talk to me...I-I'm n-n-not going to mak-make you," she whispered, trembling as he stalked closer. She pressed against the wall, terror flooding her with each frantic beat of her heart.

"But you do, I've never had a choice in this because you call me brother and I'm supposed to protect you!" he screamed.

The roaring wind masked his voice. Isolated in their niche, a corner of the outer walls blocked by trees and a wall of flurried snow, none saw or heard. One felt, but blind terror masked the ability to borrow the quivering woman's senses. Even the bond, as mighty as it was, was limited by the vast amounts of primal fear which overflowed to such a degree it all but paralyzed the recipient.

\[ I've never had a choice... \]

\[ Never... \]

\[ A choice... \]

\[ Never... \]

There was absolute silence around them, despite Nature's raw power which hid them. The words, words which haunted her own soul, echoed within Zelda's mind.

And then the world became black.

[-]

[-]

\textbf{AN:} Now...onto part three.

\textbf{BN:} That's funny- thinking about it now those last lines. Link seems to be a violent version of Zelda, because apparently neither of them had a choice in the manners by which they went about their lives, him having to be her brother or her going to be with Ganondorf. They could have walked away but simultaneously neither of them could because something that someone said or did held them to that. I like understanding. It's tasty and delicious in milk.
Stranger (III)

TW: Continuation of sadistic-ish behavior.

Eyes shut tightly, Zelda whimpered quietly. She wasn't to look upon him, not without permission and she had. Oh by the Goddesses she had and because it had been so long since she'd been punished it was going to hurt.

His lips twisted as bitter amusement and vindication coursed steadily through him. Like the blood in his veins, they gave him the fuel he needed, the strength to breathe. He was right and she was proving it. Something within him cried out for her tears, begged for the fear which she reeked of. The hunger for liquid relief was GONE, replaced by the NEED to taste the power—the same power she'd handed him so long ago and had given him again!

She had TAKEN that power from him with the Ocarina, had taken YEARS from him and then given them back so he could fight the same war AGAIN. It had changed NOTHING except his mind and spirit were older than his body. Some of the bosses stayed dead, but some didn't and had to be killed again because she took that CHOICE. SHE was the Sage of Time, SHE was the Queen of Destiny, SHE should have been the ones in the dungeons, not him—but the Goddesses had a sick sense of humor and made him the 'hero of time', as she called him. In jest, no less!

A low, rumbling growl vibrated in his chest and slowly pushed up his throat and out into the air. She was weak and powerless. Instead of standing tall, she cowered and bowed her head. She should be STRONG, strong enough to defend herself and the country.

She hadn't even been able to do that. She'd let HIM win. Eventually she'd killed him, but only because she took that precious Sheikah.

What a disgrace.

She was a disgrace to the throne, to the Goddesses and other Sages, but more importantly, to her family. He had every right to be angry. Her knees trembled with the urge- the need- to kneel, but she ignored it. He hadn't told her to, had never like her too, and she wouldn't do more to anger him. She'd done enough already.

"Will you stop crying?" he hissed when she failed to swallow a sob. "Haven't you spilled enough tears? What right do you have to cry, Zelda? Tell me!"

"N-n-none, S-S-Sir."

"Ex-actly. So why are you?"

"I-I do-n't kn-ow, Si-r," she whispered before hiccupping softly.

He growled, eyes flashing gold as anger threads of fire leaked from him like steam. "Stop. Stuttering. Stop. Crying. Just...STOP!" he yelled. His voice echoed within his own mind as he screamed at himself as much as her—at the whispers which were so TRUE but making it hard to think.

She fell without thought, allowing instinct to guide her. She barely felt the ice and snow beneath her as she sunk to her knees, head bowed in submission. She trembled, holding her breath to remain silent as she clenched her eyes shut to control the welling tears. She couldn't do anything right. If
she made him mad enough he might hurt her. He hadn't been like her other Master yet, not really, but if she didn't start behaving he *might* and she wouldn't *survive* it again.

"GET UP!" Eyes wide and filled with chaotic emotion he stared at her crumbled form. So consuming was the vindication, the anger, so numbing was the cold wind, that he never felt his nails curl and sharpen like a wolf, never felt the biting sting as they drove into his calloused palms. "If I want you on your knees, I'll **PUT** you there, you worthless thing! Get up!"

Scrambling, she stood, trembling so hard she nearly fell again. Struggling to breathe, she kept her head bowed, praying her voice would hold. "How m-may I please you, M-Master?"

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!" Rage and hysteria laced his words as his voice broke. His eyes, already wide from mental strain, began to tear as his lids retracted farther. Spittle flew from his mouth as he snarled the words, his muscles shaking with the last shreds of his control. "NEVER call me that, do you UNDERSTAND?! I am NOT your MASTER!"

"Yes, sir!" she cried. "I understand." Pitiful, weakening emotions ran through as her world fell apart once more. If he wasn't Master, but was Sir, then what was he? What did he want?

"Why are you scared?!" He wanted her to know how he felt, but he didn't want her to cower, didn't want to break the already weak being. She was pathetic, but she could be useful. However the scent of her fear made him want to tear it from her. She had controlled him, they all had, but her more so, for **years**. They had made him feel useless, like a failure, that he could never be **anything** and he would- had!- make her feel that way. But now she was TOO weak, was TOO worthless to him.

She didn't speak, no longer having the words necessary to appease him. She didn't *know*, nothing she'd ever been through had prepared her for *this*, for a Master who wasn't Master and who wanted her afraid but not terrified. Something within her struggled to speak, struggled to give a viable answer, and so desperately, she listened to it.

"L-Link, p-please, I—"

For just a moment, the world became awash with the blackness of unconscious and the red of freshly-spilled blood. The colors became a swirl of emotion within him that exploded, tearing free of the chains he'd held around it for so long. The world within him howled as she begged him for help *again*. One too many times.

Determination steered him as the blinding colors of rage and war and death consumed him. He stepped forward, teeth bared as he unclenched and raised a hand. The wind was cold against his scorching flesh as his arm swung through the air. So high was his wrath, so consuming was the urge to release *everything*, that he gained no satisfaction as she flinched.

Counting silently to himself, he watched with an odd detachment as the space between his large hand and her colorless face closed. The screaming thoughts within his mind became so loud they deafened him.

*Two...on-* Crying out in pain as teeth sunk into his leg, he stumbled back, hands grabbing furiously for the source of his pain. Reality shattered the cage he'd placed around it, slamming into him as the pain tore up his limb. Fury coiled in his heart as he reacted instinctively.

Kicking wildly, he dislodged the thing that attacked him and smirked with satisfaction as a loud crunch rent the air. He stared at the mass of fur in the snow as it shook, trying to clear its daze.
"Call it off." His words were quiet, deadly in their calm utterance as they fell effortlessly from his lips. Only when she faced him, dilated eyes bloodshot and swollen, lips bloody from biting them, trembling from justified fear that he spoke again. "Call it off...or it dies," he added softly.

Garo snarled and prepared to leap at the traitor, at the monster that DARED hurt her. As he pushed off the ground, he yelped in surprise and retreated from the bright, hot wall that appeared. Swinging around, he snarled when he realized it was surrounding him. It was too high to jump, and so hot he'd be too hurt to help her.

Horror pulsed through her frozen veins as Zelda stared at the narrowing ring of Din's Fire which surrounded her pup. Numbness claimed her as all thought vanished, leaving only disbelief. "Garo," she breathed, reaching for the struggling mutt.

"Call it off, Zelda. I won't tell you again," Link whispered. He smiled cruelly, laughing quietly at the expression on her beautiful, if repulsive, face.

He was...serious. He would kill the pup...because he was...trying to defend her. Shuddering, she wrapped her arms around herself. "Garo, sit," came the oh so quiet order. "Sit...stay."

Staring at his beta-omega through the writhing heat (fire, they called it), he couldn't believe she would tell HIM to sit and stay. While the bad alpha was hurting her! But then he heard her plea, telling him to stay so he wouldn't be hurt, that she couldn't bear it if he was. Snarling at the tainted alpha, he sat in the snow. Unable to leave without risking himself, and unwilling to hurt her, he stayed. Oh...but he would NEVER forget this. If he so much as laid a hand on her, he'd regret it. Maybe not right away, not when it could cost them both their lives—but he would make the other male pay.

As she watched him sit, something within her protested. A spark of defiance, of the strength everyone said she had, the same something that had pushed her passed the pain and fear and made her wrap her hands around Ganondorf's throat, urged her to fight back. He had threatened someone she loved, had attacked him. Just like the despot had.

But...

The fear of retaliation, the fear of everyone knowing, of what would happen to Garo outweighed that spark. A single Deku Nut compared to the entire Lost Woods; it was no match against the memories and training. Garo was safe, as long as he listened. Link wouldn't hurt him. Impa hadn't been—and Ganondorf would have.

She couldn't defy him.

And he knew it.

Chuckling once more, he watched the light die in her eyes and smiled with pleasure as she fought fresh tears. His breath hissed as he let it out through bared teeth. Excellent. She was...just as he wanted her. He hadn't broken her completely. Weak, but still possessing enough strength to make it fun.

He neared her, grimacing with each step. Pausing to inspect the bite, his lips receded in a silent snarl when he saw the damage. For such a small mutt, he'd bitten with enough force and depth to tear the muscle a bit. Grinding his teeth, he snapped his head to her.

She shook at the look in his eyes. Bottomless, they seemed to show nothing but pure hatred. Her
own face stared back at her as he backed her into the corner. She sipped the air as their breaths mingled. Pain and memory washed through every cell of her body as her mind narrowed to his expression.

This time, she didn't flinch when he raised his hand.

Good for her.

Clearly she'd learned something in the last few minutes.

Placing his hand against her throat, he remained silent, holding her glazed eyes as she swallowed against his palm. Her pulse fluttered like hummingbird wings under his fingers, quick but so very fragile. Slowly wrapping his fingers to cover her pulse, he continued to stare, waiting.

Even when she struggled to breathe, she didn't fight or look away. Interesting. Tears gathered in her eyes, either from pain or the cold, he wasn't sure, and she didn't blink.

What had changed?

Meeting now-gold eyes with hard-won calm, she felt something within her shift. Magic welled within her as the Triforce burned on her hand from his touch. She held the power back, refusing, as she had previously, to use it. That was not how to win.

First...she had to survive.

Then...

She wasn't sure what came after that.

He was Sir, was Link, her brother and Hero, her knight and the Goddesses' chosen warrior. She had brought him to this point, and asphyxiation was her punishment, so be it. She'd endured far worse.

There. He watched her eyes fill with panic for a brief second. No, not panic. Terror. Something beyond it. Something...

Something that hurt to see.

Terror, yes. But also knowledge that burned him and sullied his rage, his determination, his pleasure at knowing she was hurting like she'd hurt him.

It was the same knowledge, the same acceptance and resignation that he'd seen for too many years when she'd begged.

Loosening his hold, he slid his hand down her throat to trace her collarbone.

There it was again.

Growling, he leaned closer still, making her look at him even as she blinked away tears and tried to look away. "You're doing it again," he hissed, her breath hot against his face. "You're lowering me to his level."

She said nothing, knowing words would only make it worse, would only anger him further. Deep within her, she nodded in acknowledgment, but not at what he was saying.

But at the fact that she'd made the right choice.
Her original Master was dead by her own hand.

But his replacement...

His replacement was much better.

He would punish her, would protect her, would care and love for her when he needed and wanted to.

But he wouldn't...

Go there.

He dragged his hand lazily down her chest, nestling it between her breasts. Curling his lips in disgust at touching them, he shoved harshly.

Her cry of pain as her head and back struck the wall were music to his ears. Soothed, he pressed his cheek to hers and whispered in her ear, not knowing that he'd proven her wrong, not caring that she suddenly started shaking again, ignoring each whispering plea. "If you cross me again, you, your precious Sheikah and the mutt WILL regret it. Do you understand?"

She nodded, head spinning as everything she'd come to realize, had come to accept as true, was torn asunder.

He wasn't better.

He was worse.

So much worse...

He was unpredictable. His moods changed more than His. It was too easy to mess up, too easy to mess up one too many times and make him cross that line.

She didn't even know where the line was anymore.

She'd thought it meant he wouldn't...that...but...

She was wrong.

He might not. But he might too. He was showing it, was close, was really close, so close she could feel even if he was affected by the cold. So close his chest was against hers and his heart against hers and his mouth against her ear and just because he'd done what she'd asked him the past didn't mean it wouldn't change. But he was with Shad and liked men so maybe he wouldn't because maybe he couldn't but still that wasn't the point and—

Her thoughts broke into a million quiet pieces as he pulled away and wiped his hand on his unhurt leg as if disgusted. Her eyes fell to the trampled snow as he looked at her again, waiting for him to say something, to tell her to move or speak or something.

"I don't want your body, Zelda," he told her calmly, trying to soothe the huddled woman. He had proved his point, had taken back what she and Them and everyone had stolen from him, and made her pay for disobeying. He didn't want her afraid now. He wasn't angry any longer, that had gone.

Running a hand over her cold, silky hair, he sighed and pulled her protectively to his chest. Yes, he'd done the right thing, yes. She was his sister, but sometimes he had to treat her like the younger sibling, just like he'd done. Like a kid that took a cookie before dinner, she'd taken her punishment
like a big girl and now he could comfort her. She'd done wrong, and had brought it on herself, but he wouldn't hold it against her.

It was done and over with.

His thoughts became orderly, whispered words of comfort as he nodded to himself. He could be strong for her, when she was weak. And when he needed to rest, she'd take care of herself like a good girl, leaving him alone. But right now, he wanted to comfort her so she knew he wasn't mad anymore.

Taking shuddering breaths, Zelda buried her face in his chest, tears leaking from her closed eyes as the icy wind sliced against her hands, ears and neck. "I'm sorry," she whispered, praying he wouldn't lash out. "I'm sorry for being selfish, for not listening to you and always asking you for things."

"Shh, Zel, I understand. I forgive you." Pressing a kiss to the top of his head, he hugged her tight. "It's ok sister, it's ok, I promise. I'm not mad anymore."

From within the cage of fire, Garo watched, snarling silently as he paced. The sickening stench of the male was overwhelming his beta-omega's slow-to-face fear scent. They were hugging.

He was trying to comfort her?! After...after wanting and trying to KILL her?

Eying the still raised wall of fire, he growled softly. The traitor alpha was sick and smelled bad, like the stuff that man gave him the first day he was here. But his female was sick too, and worse, the male knew it. Knew how to use it.

Knew how to hide his sickness behind her own.

But he couldn't hide from him.

And soon, he wouldn't be able to hide at all—he'd make sure of it.

[-]

[-]

AN: Ok, so, erm...Link's insane. Yeah. I don't think anyone missed that part. Zelda is...also very much insane (most of the time, even if it's subconscious). Not as bad as she was, but still not close to truly sane. Don't think anyone missed that either.

So we have two insane "siblings", one extremely angry Wolfo-dog mutt, a Guardian who we haven't checked on since much earlier in this installment because all she felt was terror.

Next chapter is going to be so much fun!

Songs:

Stranger by Hilary Duffy (interpreted)

Begging for Mercy by Bullets for My Valentine

Stricken by Disturbed

In Pieces by Linkin Park (first verse)
PS: I realize that I never actually mentioned if he went back and forth in time or not...not out-right. If you read it again, you'll realize Link mentions she took years from him, that he fought the same war and bosses again. Remember 1-Link is insane, 2-I'm twisting multiple games into one story, 3-the story's plan isn't set in stone, it always changes! Using the Ocarina he could have lost "years" of his life but not as many as in OoT. Or maybe he did relive the entire war. Or it could be that he really is just THAT lost inside his head. Will the full story of the Ocarina of Time in Their Bond series ever be revealed? The world may never know...
Deep within the darkness of writhing shadows, glittering crimson eyes watched through hooded lids as tense conversation flowed around the small table. An unnatural chill seeped from burning skin. Fingers slowly curled into scarred palms as muscles twitched with the quickness of summer lightning. Each steady beat of a strong heart sounded like a war drum within overly sensitive ears. Normally ruby lips were pulled back in a silent, primal snarl, baring white teeth to oblivious prey.

With nearly excruciating focus, Impa followed every move they made. He made. She smothered a hiss of disgust as she saw his hands tremble when he grasped a goblet of water. A bitter laugh almost spilled from her lips as she watched his eyes dart around. Poor boy, he only had water to drink. Such a pity.

Wrapped in the shadows which were her birthright, she observed her Charge, the glowing, golden light within the consuming black that was her thoughts, as she laughed. Steady, studious and loyal Mikal sat on the right of his Queen, her left shielded by quiet, analytical Shad. And before her, weakened by a substance she dared not touch for the reason he did, was Link. Pitiful, deceitful, disgusting Link.

They thought she didn't know. When asked, both dripping from the melting snow which had clung stubbornly to their clothes, Zelda had told her the truth, with Link confirming her words. They had taken a walk and played in the snow. She had said something foolish, something that had hurt and angered the younger man. Then she had slipped. Not only because of what she'd said, but... She had looked away then, as if ashamed, and her voice had become a bare whisper that grated on the Sheikah's heart. She had also slipped because she kept thinking about them.

Even if it had been the truth, it wasn't all that happened. Truth and honesty were not exclusive.

She hadn't believed Zelda's story had been the full tale, not at all. Link's actions, his shuffling and refusal to meet her eyes, had only told her what she'd already known.

Something had happened.

Something Zelda was keeping from her, something Link was afraid she would find out about....

Something which made Garo keep his eyes on the Hero.

Her gaze slid to the growing pup as her eyes narrowed further in consideration. Where she had previously considered the mutt an annoyance, she now knew otherwise.

The fact that Link had tried, and failed, to hide a limp for the past two weeks had done nothing to endear her to their story.

The dog, as intrusive, loud, conniving, and maddening as he was, had found a new place in her heart in the last fortnight. She knew he knew what had happened. And by the Goddesses, a half-Wolfo trying to tell her without words wasn't the oddest thing she'd ever encountered. But it wasn't his attempts to communicate that drew her to him.
It was his treatment of the boy.

Without obvious reason, yet with a discretion most would think an animal couldn't possess, he had tormented Link. Every day.

And better yet, he had not let the boy within touching distance of her Charge.

Which only further confirmed her suspicions.

Swallowing her rage, she leaned against the corner she had chosen to hide shadows wrapped tighter around her, hiding her from the Hylians. It was probable Zelda knew she was there, but not entirely impossible she didn't. The young Queen was clearly distracted, her pallid face barely conveying her amusement.

Also noticing his brunch companion's silence, Shad questioned his Queen and her Adviser of their plans for the nearing Solstice. It was only days away, they all knew, surely they had some sort of plans? None for Mikal? That wouldn't do, he told them in a quiet, stuttering voice. He, his father and Link were going to have Sabbat supper on the holy night—surely Mikal would join them?

Assured of the flustered Adviser's intent to attend the meal, he turned to the monarch, and with a mischievous grin so frequently absent from his face, inquired as to her plans—as a concerned subject, of course.

He laughed softly when she pointed her fork at him and told him, in no uncertain terms, that unless there was an emergency, she was to be left alone for the observance of the Rebirth of the Golden Gods. Seeing her weak smile gain some true happiness, he nodded to himself and turned his attention to his depressed (and depressing) lover. Kicking the other male under the table, he glared pointedly at Link's food. Afraid of his increasing mood swings or not, he wouldn't let the Hero starve.

Which was really too bad. Garo growled silently to himself as he watched the traitor alpha pick at his food. If he died, everything would be a lot better. Ahh well. Couldn't have everything. At least he'd left...well, basically everyone, alone for a while.

Turning to the older two-legger male next to him, he looked upwards and whined softly. He was always good for a bit of food.

Mikal laughed to himself as Garo begged, handing the pup a piece of sausage. He smiled when Zelda protested. "My Lady, you feed him treats at nearly every meal. I don't think this bit will change much," he told her calmly. When she mumbled to herself, he shook his head and tried not to laugh.

Zelda pressed her lips together in vain attempt to hide a smile. Barely resisting the urge to stick her tongue out at the old man, she waved her fork. "Watch it, Mikal."

He swallowed another laugh and nodded with feigned solemnness. "Yes, Majesty."

Within the shadows, Impa watched the proceedings thoughtfully. Though her heart lifted slightly in relief at seeing her mate, her Charge, happy...she knew it wouldn't last. Something stirred within her, warned her. But what would happen to shatter that happiness, to scatter its fragments like the lazy snowflakes upon the ground, wasn't known. Only that it, whatever it was, would happen.

Whatever it was, she wouldn't let the young woman go through it alone. Not again. Not this time and not ever, not if she had her way.
As she watched them, as her eyes slid over the table and landed upon the suffering Hero, determination filled her. She would have her way.

[-]

The vaulted ceiling of the central chamber shone with holy decorations, strands of evergreen winding down the vast stone columns to the ground floor. Songs, sung angelically by some and piercing by others, echoed lively around the grand room, filtering through the many corridors and seeping through closed doors. Children ran around bustling adults, some tasked by those who watched them and others merely playing. Many laughed despite several near misses, carefully raising their burdens out of harm's way.

The sound of merry song and happy laughter twined easily, creating a melody of peace which very few could resist. Yet those who did, those few who were unable to wrap the holiday joy around them as the rest had, mourned. A father mourned his son, a lover his partner, a sister her brother, a brother his acts, a protector her ward. Theirs was a circle of pain and bitter tears unmarred by the lively festivities around them.

Silence would do that, no matter how justified it seemed.

Running a hand through her hair, Zelda stared at the frost melting on the window. Her eyes followed a single drop of ice water as it curved down the pane. It wove through the streaks of frost and rolled down the frame, undeterred until it fell upon the snow-laden sill.

She winced as her fingers caught a knot at the nape of her neck. It took little time to clear the knot as she slowly turned her back on the opaque portal. She glanced down the hall, noting with sad pleasure that it was desolate save the hidden Sheikahs. She paid the men no mind as her eyes glided over the shadows, searching, waiting. She could feel...could sense...

There.

Paying no mind to her dress, she leaned against the unforgiving wall, the biting stone against her back a welcome distraction. She watched Garo stride purposefully to a door near the end of the hall, Impa at his heels. She narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together. She knew the red-eyed woman was only doing what was natural to her, but there was something about her posture, the deliberate way that she moved, the fact that she tried to cloak herself from Zelda's presence like an animal stalking its prey...the attempt to hide...

Something was going on.

"Impa." The name, so softly spoken, all but rung through the silent hall. It wrapped around the flickering sconces and arched against the ceiling beams.

The air became charged as the Shadow Sage swung around, hand atop her dagger. Their eyes met across the long hall. Grey-green discs became hooded as crimson rings narrowed from dilating pupils. Chapped pink lips thinned and pulled back ever so slightly in a silent challenge.

"Zelda." Once more, a single word flew between them. Rather than filling the space around them, it merely hung between them like a thread pulled taut.

Neither looked away as they closed the distance. Zelda ignored Garo's gentle scratching against her leg, her entire focus on the older woman. Without thought, she hesitantly raised a hand and pressed it to the other woman's chest, feeling the steady beat under her palm.

"What are you doing?"
A simple question became a weighted inquiry with that single touch. Feeling the younger woman's slender hand pressed to her heart, Impa swallowed. In the empty enclosure of the castle's pathway, she allowed her walls to drop. Knowing her tribe was around them, watching, protecting, knowing the mutt who proved himself smarter than many up-right beings was beside them, she allowed the truth to flow. Rather than a steady trickle, the knowledge of what she felt, of what she fought, flooded their bond like a tidal wave.

"Searching. Guarding. Loving," she replied. "I am doing what I have to, what I always will do."

"Searching…for what?" Zelda whispered as fear wrapped around her heart. Deep within her mind she closed the cellar doors tighter and checked for leaks. She refused to remember what happened that night. If she refused to remember it, then she didn't have to acknowledge its existence. If she refused to acknowledge it, then she didn't have to accept that it happened. If it didn't happen then it wasn't true.

She stared into the worried eyes of her keta. "He is a threat to you, always has been. I need to find the truth about what happened that day, about why he continues to limp when he only 'fell'."

"I am your Guardian, my sesha-nole. That doesn't change for anything. My instinct is to neutralize and destroy any threat to you…including Link. I haven't yet, because I don't have proof…and because acting rashly would destroy you more than it already has," she breathed.

"He's my brother," came the choked plea. The world blurred and wavered as burning tears filled her eyes. She looked away, unable to meet the penetrating, knowing gaze of her Maderone, her lover.

"He's hurt you," she stated with unwavering certainty. "Whatever happened in the past, distant or recent…it's hurt you. You've drawn away from the world, from your family, from me. He did something, said something, that scared you, that triggered you…that keeps triggering you. You think I don't see it, but I do. It's in the way you act around him, around Shad, around Mikal and myself."

"He's my brother. I love him."

"I know you do Zelda…I know," Impa whispered as she wrapped her arms around the crying woman. "But that doesn't change the fact that something has happened between you two."

"Nothing did," Zelda pressed her face into the older woman's neck. "Nothing happened."

"Whatever it was that went on that night has made you pull away, has frightened you so badly that you lie without realizing it. I know you love him. I know he's your brother, your family. I know he was there for you when I wasn't...is still there for you. But if he's hurt you, which I believe he has, then I can't let him stay."

"Don't kill him. Please Impa...don't kill him. Please please please. I know you don't like how he helped me in the past, I know you don't like that he still helps me. But please...don't kill him for something that's not his fault." She knew as the words fell from her lips that she was slipping, was admitting guilt if nothing else. She knew, but she couldn't not ask...she couldn't not ask for mercy for the one man who had so much for her.

Delicate lids lowered over red eyes as a quiet breath escaped slowly. Like a fist around her heart, she could almost hear the restrained words, could almost feel the truth through their bonds. Her Charge, her Queen, was so close to telling her...so close to acknowledging something had happened. Yet as much as she wanted the truth, she wouldn't push. Not like this.
Zelda had to choose to tell her or it would tear them apart.

The Goddesses Themselves knew she wanted to push, not only so she could act, but for Zelda's sake...and if she listened to that tiny voice buried deep in the back of her mind, for her own as well. But it hurt to know the younger woman so refused to trust her judgment that she feared for the one that was doing her the most harm.

"You know that I can't do that," she finally admitted. Her voice dripped with pain, knowing she couldn't give the woman in her arms the one thing she asked for. "Making a promise that I might not be able to keep."

_I can't promise. I can't. Can't._ The word echoed through Zelda's mind, shredding through every defense, every futile attempt to hide from the truth. The honest admission drove a knife into her heart and tore jagged holes in her spirit.

_Can't._

Somehow...the knowledge that her Guardian-mate _couldn't_ let Link live hurt more than the fact that the older woman _wanted_ him dead.

[-]

AN: Oh boy...

**Songs:**

Hurricane by 30 Seconds to Mars
Hurricane (II)

Jagged nails bit into soft flesh, unsteady fingers tangling in disheveled locks. Shaggy blonde hair was pulled taut as scarred fists curled within it. Blue eyes, often varying between clear crystalline and summer sky, were dilated with turmoil as fierce as any storm. Pupils as dark as the celestial blanket in winter shone with unearthly light became windows to a desolate soul. Streaks of dark, tarnished gold wove their way through the thin rings of azure.

Staring into the haunted reflection that was his body, Link felt shudders wrack his frame as an internal chill seeped through his veins. As he met his own gaze, he idly wondered how he had fallen this far…just what he had become. Staring back at him was no longer a young man in optimal health. The warrior he had been was once more a mere shell of a being, locked away like the Sages he'd saved. Yet where stone, crystal and spells had entrapped those powerful beings, mere glass and liquid encased him.

Muffled sounds seeped through the doorway, filling the empty, silent room like water. The sounds, already so very distorted from the thick rock and wood between him and the world, were near incomprehensible through the fog within his mind. As he continued to stare at his own face, the face he no longer recognized, he nodded to himself. That senseless noise sounded very much like his thoughts. He knew they were there…but not what they were. The only thing that was clear was how far he'd….

He'd what? Shifting his eyes, those odd, stormy looking eyes with gold streaks, to the crystal tumbler in his hand, he tilted his head in consideration. He'd what? Fallen? From where? The pedestal they'd put them on?

Who?, he wondered.


Himself.

They'd all put him in a pedestal he'd never wanted, put him in a place too high to reach. He hadn't fallen. He'd climbed down. It wasn't fair. This world…it was life. It was hard. It was painful. It was confusing. And it wasn't fair.

Why was he hiding in his rooms? Why was he forced to stay hidden from the world like a coward? Growling softly to himself, he stood on shaking legs and carefully set the tumbler on the table. Glancing around the room, he shook his head. He didn't have to stay here, didn't have to be caged like a dog because he'd finally decided to be a person rather than a thing on a shelf, a weapon waiting to be used.

With quick steps, he made his way to the door. His hand touched the knob, the cold, shining metal knob, and he stilled. The sounds coming through the door were clearer. His thoughts were still confusing, but at the same time, they made sense. How was that possible? Did it even matter?

So entrenched in his thoughts, so lost in the fight against the craving he hadn't wanted to deny to begin with, he never saw the shadows ripple. Never felt the slightest bit of magic which tinged the air behind him nor heard the whispers of ethereal beings. The phantom taste of soothing liquid,
with its sharp yet gentle warmth, blocked the scent of emotion from his brain.

As he made his way down the hall, two sets of narrowed eyes watched.

Waiting.

Preparing.

[-]

*Four hours earlier...*

Impa stalked the maze of corridors with a singular goal: evidence. Find something, *anything*, any proof she was wrong, though she doubted she could find any. Could, would…same thing in this case. She knew she wasn't wrong. He'd told her without hesitation what he was doing.

But…she had to try. Had to try to find a single shred of *something* to prove it wasn't his fault, or not entirely at least. Because if she didn't…

Did it really matter why? She had to—if not for her own sake, then for Zelda's. Link had openly admitted to his drug use, had told her to her face it was such. But she had to at least *try*.

Her steps faltered as she caught a glimpse of herself in a suit of armor. If she admitted the truth to herself, she didn't want to find anything. She wanted to be wrong...or at least to know it wasn't entirely Link's fault. As much as she couldn't stand him at times, she liked the boy. He was...had been...no, was...her pseudo-son.

Thoughts of a child's wide sky-blue eyes and ragged straw-colored hair fell from her mind, as shattered as the love and trust she had held for him. Without notice, she stepped closer to the gleaming metal. Her focus was caught in the reflection of her own eyes. Pools of red, intense discs which Zelda often compared to rubies and garnet, reminded her of blood.

Blood.

The blood which, though unseen, continued to stain her hands.

Her hands.

So tough from work, yet capable of holding a wailing infant.

Or at least...

They had been.

Was it possible the blood which coated her soul, the very blood she had spilled to eliminate the type of threat which lived in the castle, which stood beside her mate daily, was returning to haunt her? The lives she had ended, the souls she had condemned without hesitation, were they reaching beyond the grave to remind her of her sins?

Her gaze slid from her own eyes, the very eyes which now shone with something she dared not name, to her hands. Her mind drifted back through the years. She had watched her hands wrap around throats and wield knives, saw arrows and magic pierce their targets and extinguish life...because she had demanded such. She had been judge and jury. Yet as the memories continued to work their way back, the blood dripped from her calloused flesh to reveal skin. Warm, living skin which had comforted a frightened teeanger. Which had fled with a terrified child. Which had
held a squalling infant.

Which had sliced open the flesh of a dying woman to save that infant.

A shuddering breath rocked her body as she forced herself to move and leave the reflection of her own tainted soul behind. The Shadows hugged her like a cloak, whispering their meaningless comforts, drawing forth the part of herself she kept so hidden.

As her silent steps led her down the corridor and into a hidden staircase, as her feet lifted with each step that took her to a battlement, she knew it was time. Resignation and disgust burned within her stomach and clawed its way up her throat, but it didn't change anything.

It was time.

As the old, heavy metal door opened with a loud squeal of rusted hinges, she allowed the air, heavy with approaching rain, to draw her out.

Out...

Into the open.

If any were high enough to witness the transformation, they would have few words to describe it.

The slightest of hesitations would have given them time to see her red eyes glow from within the dark stairwell, the shadows engulfing her mortal form. They would have seen those red orbs, black streaks moving through the crimson pools like veins.

And as shock would have held them frozen, they would have watched her step through into the open battlement. They would have seen lightning flash across the grey sky, almost as if the Goddess approved.

Or maybe it was the Gods who imbued the air with power, with the tangible, electrifying force that was their pleasure.

Regardless of which Triumvirate, which Holy Parents blessed this lone woman, the onlooker wouldn't have cared for long.

As that fractured light tore open the sky, the illumination would have shown the true being that was Impa. They would have seen the core of all that is Sheikah and the essence of what is a Maderone writhe around her, entrenched and embraced by the Shadows of her own soul.

They would have watched this powerful woman, would have marveled at the sheer magnitude of her aura...and retreated within themselves in fear.

Before them would have stood a woman like no other, a woman few would look upon and recognize.

Where the gentle yet protective Guardian had stood seconds before, where the powerful yet humble Sage had resided seconds ago, there only be a being a darkness.

Of evil, some would say.

This onlooker would have seen a smirk of twisted pleasure grace full, red lips and pull them back in a quiet display of delight. They would have seen those blood-red eyes, threaded with black of all that is hidden, look up in the sky as a chuckle fell from her parted lips. They would have seen a
hand, so strong yet so careful, run over hidden knives which could cut through most material like it was water. They would have seen, for the briefest of moments, veins hidden by scarred flesh become visible as she absorbed the merged core, essence and Shadows all at once.

But there was no hidden witness. There was none but Nature, her own being and the two Tribunals Themselves to see.

And that, she decided as she returned her gaze to the castle below her, was fine.

Eyes focused on a window she had long since memorized for who lived there, she smiled once more.

She could wait. She could be patient. Not for long, not while there was an active threat. But she could.

Canines were irrational. They had enough patience only when they knew their patience would be rewarded.

But felines...

Felines would stalk their prey for as long as it took.

And like a cat, her prey wouldn't know she was upon him until the very end.

[-]

Three and a quarter hours earlier...

Garo kept his nose to the ground as he remained close to the wall, following the trail. It would be easier in the open space...but there was too many two-leggers, too many things to go around. Better to stay hidden and where few could reach him.

Rounding a corner, he kept close to the high stones. The male beta was around here somewhere. He’d seen the other alpha earlier, had seen his tension and heard his angry barking…he had to check on the male beta. Shad. That was his name. Sniffing the air, he moved from door to door.

Closer….

Closer….

There.

Sniffing the air that came from under the door, he nodded to himself. Shad was in there. And the other man too, the not-sire of the bad alpha who his own beta-omega trusted. Nudging the door with his muzzle, he huffed quietly with pleasure. It moved.

He was in.

Squeezing through a thin opening, he darted away from the door and towards the males. They were talking in hushed voices. Shad smelled like sad salt water and the not-sire (Mikal, Zelda and Shad called him) seemed…determined. Grieving too. The air was thick around them. Heavy. It sunk into his fur and made him tired. Shaking his head, he inched forward and pressed against Shad's leg.

His temperature was a couple degrees low. Not good.

Whining softly, he sat on his back legs and touched his front paws to the—no, his—beta's leg.
Shad looked down at the mutt, smiling despite himself. For just a moment the darkness which weighed his mind and stilled his heart lifted, releasing his spirit from those numbing vices. As he met the imploring eyes of the pup, he felt something within him shift.

It would work out.

...in one way or another.

He wasn't sure how he knew, but as he looked at the pup which would have died without intervention, he knew it would work out. In some way. Maybe not the way any of them wanted...but it would work out.

It had to.

Raising his eyes, he met Mikal's gaze. "He's getting worse."

"I know," Link's adopted father said. "We'll have to step in soon."

"An intervention?"

"Don't look so shocked."

Silence reigned for several terse moments as Shad considered the implications—the irony—of their current discussion. He nodded more to himself than to the older man, knowing he was true. Unlike Mikal, he knew what Link would do if they interfered in his personal affairs.

Retreat or attack.

He was a warrior, he knew nothing else. And like the pup leaning against his leg, Link often saw the world in wolf terms, rather than human ones. Where Garo thought he was in charge (didn't all pups think they ruled the world?) Link often made sure he was in charge. In wolf terms, Link was the alpha. And like any challenged alpha, depending on the threat, he would either fight to victory or retreat until he had the advantage.

As if sensing his thoughts, Shad sighed. "We'll just have to make sure he can't run. This can't go on."

"No," said a quiet male voice from behind them, "It cannot."

As the two startled men turn to face him, Reyel allowed himself an internal smirk.

This was going to be fun.

[-]

*Two and a half hours earlier...*

Mikal quickly made his way across the castle. His mind buzzed with all that had happened in the last forty-five minutes, unable to comprehend what he had heard...what he had planned.

His son.

Crippling agony that he hadn't felt since his late wife's death, tore a new hole in his already bleeding heart.

His son.
He was...

He *would*...

If they didn't...

If he failed...

Swallowing harshly, he shook his head to end the vicious cycle of turmoil. It was not his decision, though he *could* ruin it all by saying something. He *could* tell his son what was planned, but...would that help him?

Help them all?

No, no! He couldn't think of this any longer. He wouldn't, couldn't! He had a task, a specific, time-sensitive, very important task to complete. He had to do it, had to—

"Mikal?"

Jumping at the utterance of his name by the very person he was assigned to detain, he swung around. Pressing a hand to his chest, he swallowed hard. "My Lady."

He watched her furrow her brows and cursed himself deep within his mind, knowing she would know something was amiss. But in public, wasn't he allowed formality? Wasn't he, as her Adviser, supposed to uphold the customs?

"Mikal, is something wrong? You look ill."

"Merely tired, my Queen," he told her in a quiet voice. "Could we go to your office? There is something I wish to discuss with you."

He saw her eyes narrow ever so slightly as she looked him over, learning, assessing, analyzing. Her gaze met his and he kept his eyes steady, knowing she would see through any lie, would divine the entire truth from the slightest evasion.

"...yes...let's...go to my office," was the eventual reply. He could only sigh in relief when she turned and strode down the corridor she had just left.

"Please, find what you need," he whispered under his breath to the silent hall.

[-]

*One hour earlier...*

As she sat back in her own chair with her hands tented against her lips, she stared at the now empty chair before her.

Something was...going on.

It wasn't like Mikal to find her, looking as if he'd seen a ghost, and ramble for over an hour. Not that she minded his company, she didn't. It just...wasn't like him.

In fact, everyone was acting off today.

And speaking of "off", where was Garo? She hadn't seen that lovable, annoying mutt of hers in a few hours...
In fact, she hadn't seen Impa, Reyel and a few other Sheikah either. And the Guard was sticking close...

Yes, something was up.

Pushing the chair back, she stared at the double doors for a moment before rounding the desk.

Damn it all, she wouldn't be kept in the dark if she could help it.

[-]

Half an hour earlier...

Garo watched everyone and everything as he walked through the snow. He looked behind him occasionally, making sure she was still there. It had taken him a little while to find her, but he had.

Why couldn't she just have stayed in her office where he'd left her? Didn't she know she was safe there?

Huffing, he shook his head and plowed through the cold, thick white fluff. How was he supposed to know she was looking for him? He had things to do, just like she did. It's just that she's usually in that one area when the sun was at that part of the sky. Why he got tapped on the muzzle for going away was beyond him. She usually didn't care if he went with the tree-erm, Impa.

Maybe she didn't know he was with the lone female? Shaking his head, he huffed again and circled a tree. His toes were getting cold. And from her shivering, so was she. He couldn't let his fur-less beta-omega freeze.

[-]

Ten minutes earlier...

Impa watched one of the servants take the tray from the kitchen. Knowing they would take it straight to Zelda, she left through the scullery door.

She never saw those she left behind shiver in fear.

[-]

Five minutes earlier...

Shad nodded to himself as he saw the double doors close and the male Sheikah stand before them. The meeting had started on schedule.

It was time.

[-]

Two minutes earlier...

Reyel touched Impa's arm, knowing her confliction. "She is safe. Our brothers are watching her and you are always aware," he whispered.

"I know," was her slow, drawn out reply. Her eyes never left the door as she smirked, listening to the bond. "She is annoyed. But...safe enough."
He nodded, knowing no words were necessary.

[-]

*Present time*...

Wards, even those cast by one of the Goddess' Chosen, were sloppy when one was arrogant. Weak. Barely a challenge for the Sage, more a tickle of amusement for her Shadows than anything.

And at this point in their lives, picking a lock was barely even noticed. It was not the worst thing he had ever done as a Guard member, breaking into someone's chambers. It didn't even register to his conscience.

As they slipped in the empty rooms, cloaked from sight by the Shadows that had given birth to their ancestors, unheard due to their own graceful stealth, they knew.

They knew as sure as their blood was red.

They wouldn't find evidence of innocence.

...not when all that stared back at them was of guilt.

[-]

[-]

**AN**: Uh-oh...

**Songs**:

Airetania from Morel Orel (I like it)

Feed the Machine by Red (some parts are figurative, most of it's literal for Link)

Let Go by Red

Nothing and Everything by Red

Buried Beneath by Red (Shad)

Monster by Paramore (Impa)

Set the World on Fire by Black Veil Brides (maybe the chapter as a whole, not just this installment)
Hurricane (III)

Reyel felt disgust slither through his being as horror crawled under his skin. His stomach churned with confusion and his throat clenched with anger. His hands showed the slightest tremor as his eyes darted around the room. Blood pounded in his ears as his heart raced in preparation of fight. The metallic taste which filled his mouth had little to do with his bitten tongue.

He barely paid the woman beside him any mind, his focus on what lay before him. To one who could not See, all appeared normal. But for those who could, for those who knew what lay beyond Illusion, all was not normal.

All was wrong.

His senses, so trained were they to perceive beyond the mundane world, were overwhelmed. The taste of harsh, threatening magics burned his mouth. The scent of dying spirit burned his nose as the sound of whispered secrets pierced his ears. His skin itched from the touch of lies. Yet even with the overload of metaphysical stimulation, he could not believe what his eyes were telling him.

He simply...could not.

His sharp, crimson eyes which had long since been taught to watch a single bird in a vast forest, had to be wrong.

There was no earthly way what he was seeing was possible.

But...it had be. This is what Impa told herself as, like her tribe brother, she too stared.

[−]

Elsewhere in the castle, cognizant of the plan he was part of, Mikal led his adopted son through the library. He paid enough attention to their discussion on law so as not to sound foolish, but most of his focus was on the time.

Time, which had to be measured carefully so as not to make the younger man suspicious. But also so as not to let him leave early. They said three-quarter of an hour was needed and it had been barely ten minutes.

As he spoke, he couldn't help his gaze drifting up and down his son's broken form. The distant glaze that filled his eyes, the restless weight to his stance... Mikal hoped that it would not be vain of him to hope, that he could stall his son, that Impa and Reyel could accomplish what they needed to in time. He held back a sigh, the weight of his age striking him in a way that no politic, no enemy, not even Ganondorf had. His eyes flickered closed for just a second and in that moment, he prayed, and never was there a moment to do so like there was now.

[−]

Reyel's steps, silent as they were light, carried him across the sitting room. His hand was a ghost's touch against the various doors he passed, barely sparing them a glance before moving on. He knew the room he sought would reveal the putrid alcohol which burned his senses alongside the magics.

The open parlor was cloaked, the truth hidden with misused power. He, and his sister, could See... but it did not reveal what they needed. For all its truth, for all its secrets, little could be used to
establish guilt without reflecting on them or the one they protected.

But this…this could.

Standing at the threshold of the bedchamber, he felt bile burn at his throat. What stood before him was either the work of a man bent with rage or one violent with the foul liquid.

…it could possibly be both, he told himself deep within his mind. The sconces and hearth burst to life as a trickle of grounded Din's Fire did its work. The light banished the heavy shadows cast from the doorway, revealing more than what he had hoped to find.

Deadly shards of glass littered a far off corner, a dark pool staining the thick carpet. Within moments he was crouched, fighting the urge to recoil as liters of pungent inebriant threatened to choke him. Carefully lifting a piece of the glass, his eyebrows rose in disbelief.

Aged over a century…and it was carelessly thrown against a wall?

He did not consume the bitter liquid; none of his active-duty tribe members did. But…

A century's worth of work wasted?

Laying the shard upon the others, he rose and looked around once more. The unmade bed told a tale of anger rather than passion. Having seen the young archeologist himself just an hour before, he knew the vulnerable man had not been within his rooms at the time.

Heavy wooden furniture which had survived generations of the royal family and their guests were damaged….some beyond repair. The bare wall behind him was stained with the liquor and a fine dust of powdered glass covered the room, displaying the force of the Hero's rampage.

He turned slowly then, his mind a calm sea as he faced his sister. She stood within feet of him, trembling despite herself. He could see the rage burning in her eyes, the same rage which coiled in his chest. Bloodlust echoed through her trembling form and licked his spirit, calling…tempting…and howling at being denied.

As she stared at the devastation around them, he took in the white knuckles of her clenched fists and the pulsing vein in her temple. Shadows writhed around her, further proof of her dwindling control. He knew by the tension in her squared shoulders that she demanded his death as much as he. That they could not let this continue.

Laying a hand on her arm, he shook his head, not caring that she didn't look at him. The heat which radiated under his palm spoke of something beyond words, of emotion behind compression.

Not yet, he told her without utterance. He cannot be killed outright.

As if sensing his thoughts, she hissed, eyes still trained on the scene before her. "He is a threat and must die, Reyel."

"To kill him without justice would make him a martyr," he said quietly. His voice was steady as he spoke the truth, knowing one of them had to remain calm in spite of their findings.

"I do not care."

"But she would. Would you have her turn against you? Or…make an example of him?"

He smirked to himself as she slowly turned to face him, eyes narrowed with calculation.
"And how would you do that, brother?"

Her smirk matched his own when he told her.

[-]

In the library, Link's eyes flashed gold as he faced Mikal. The stirrings of his magical protections had gone unnoticed until now.

When he saw the expression on his father's face, he knew he had been detained.

Turning away, he all but ran to his chambers.

…only to find them empty, protections raised and not a speck of dust out of place.

But the scents…they lingered, if barely. Someone had been here.

[-]

[-]

AN: Well, what do you think? And thank you StorytellerLore for suggesting the above scene.

Songs:

Let You Down by Three Day's Grace

Watch You Crawl by Red

The Scar by Broken Iris

BN: I took a listen at all three and I like them. I really do, particularly the first two, but they all fit the chapter nicely.
Kaleidoscope

Chapter Thirty-Four

Kaleidoscope

Ben sat on a low, snow-covered wall. He stared at the stables and sighed sadly, ignoring the snow falling around him. The holy day had come and gone, and he'd enjoyed it. But…they hadn't. Miss Impa, Link, the Queen, Mister Shad, Mister Mikal…none of them seemed to enjoy the music and games and stories. Sure, they laughed and danced, but their smiles seemed more like something from a painting.

Scooting along the wall to avoid Geof's searching gaze, he kept watching. He heard the others talking. The other workers like his father, the ones who were in the castle constantly. The ones like him and Geof and the vet, who were in the stables. But others too. The messengers, the shoppers, the soldiers, the researchers. They all talked. Said there was a change, said the Hero and Queen were like puppets and no one knew who held the strings. But he didn't think they were puppets.

He thought they were in pain.

He could see it. In their eyes. In their body. People were a lot like horses, if you knew what to look for. The Queen hid it better, but he knew what to look for because she always showed it to Miss Impa and Garo. He knew she didn't know that he could see it, but he did.

So did a lot of other people.

[-]

A young woman made her way through the castle, shawl wrapped around her despite the warmth. It was only temporary, she knew. Better to cling to the cold in her mind than give into the warmth. She wouldn't be here that long.

She followed the servant through the winding corridors, looking around her with equal parts amazement and disgust. It was all so...so...

So beautiful. So wasteful.

The tapestries, the old armor, the carpet under the feet, the paintings and statues. Wonderful. Amazing. Worthless in the real world.

She knew, logically, that the Queen didn't decorate the vast building. She knew the woman, just a couple years older than herself, probably didn't have time to think about the decorations around her. But...what could the common people, like her, do with the money that would come from a single painting? Just because the war was over didn't mean people weren't still suffering.

"...got to stop. If this gets out—"

"It won't. And even if it does, the statute of limitations-"

"Does not apply!"

Even with as little schooling as she had, the young woman knew what she was hearing was not meant for her ears. She watched her guide's pace become a little more hurried and as she strove to
match him, she caught sight of two men half-hidden in the shadows.

"We're here," the man in front of her said. Turning her attention back to the matter at hand (to ask-beg-for more funds for the food pantry) she took a deep breath and lifted her hand to knock on the grand door.

[-]

Shaking his head, the servant left the young woman behind and headed back towards the stables. Where his son had gotten to was beyond him. Why he had to find his son when he was supposed to be under the watchful eyes of the stableman was even more perplexing. They hadn't been worried, so he knew his boy wasn't hurt or actually missing...just hiding from his work.

Which was not like Ben at all. Shaking his head again, he glanced at the hidden men of state before hurrying past. Some things weren't his business, for all he heard. And saw.

Much like that girl. Her expression as he had glanced at her reflection in the window told him she didn't like what she saw around her. But she didn't seem to truly grasp the castle's auxiliary function. It was a fortress. It was a piece of history, a lived-in museum. Some of the past monarchs had been wasteful, this is true...but not all of them. Many of them had made minor improvements to fading or decaying art, antiquity, or stone, some driven by personal desire and others for political gain. The suits of armor that lined the halls were not just decoration, but displays of honor, a reminder of those who had put their lives on the line in service of man and country. Had she not seen the name plaques?

With a sigh, he quickly exited the warm stone building and made his way towards the barn. He knew where his son was. It was the same place he always was...and probably always would be. The pasture barrier.

Grabbing the thick wool shirt collar in his hand, he pulled his son from the wall, ignoring his yelps. "What are you doing?" he asked with exhausted exasperation. He didn't have time for Ben's games anymore...or the energy.

"Dad! I'm just watching...taking a break," he added, his tone weakening as his gaze fell to his father's scowl.

"Watching what?"

"Everyone. Geof. The soldiers. The runners. The guards."

"The Hero, the Queen, the Sheikah?" came the tired question, knowing where this was going. Ben was a smart boy, but too insightful for his own good at times.

Ben nodded and his father sighed, releasing his shirt. Snow swirled around them as they stomped their booted feet, trying to keep warm.

"My son...you're here to apprentice, not watch. I know you are curious, and I remember what it was like to be your age. You keep up with your school work and your apprenticeship, which makes me proud. But you can't run off when it suits you. Your brother will return in the spring with new animals, the Gods willing, and he'll need your help more than ever. How can you help him when you're too busy spying on everyone to learn what you need to? You're old enough to know better, Ben. The only reason I came to find you is because it's winter, otherwise I would have left you to wait. Your teachers are losing patience, my son."

He watched his son bow his head and knew this time the message had stuck. For how long as a
...and just who was that atop the turret?

[-]

On the turret, a messenger scanned the skies, waiting with baited breath. As long as the hawk cleared the forest, the message would reach her king.

[-]

In the far countryside, a rider waited for the hawk. It took a while, far longer than it should have...but eventually, the tired bird landed upon his outstretched arm. Brushing its silky feathers down, he trilled to the winged hunter and took the small scroll.

"Very good Yela...very good. You don't have to return to the cold, I promise." Wrapping his cloak around the trained bird, he spurred the horse towards the east. The winged messenger may not have liked the confines of the protective cloth but even it knew it could not fly against winter's breath for long.

[-]

Across the country, known to all but those concerned, rumors were rampant. Like dry logs to the fire, with each utterance the mixture of lies and truth grew.

"I heard he—"

"And there's going to be a—"

"But look what she did to him!"

"Is it possible they're...ya know?"

"Anything's possible."

[-]

Within the castle, Zelda rested her pen within its holder and cradled her head in her hands. There was a spy within the castle.

"Could this day get any worse?" she whispered to herself.

When a brisk knock sounded and Mikal slipped into the room, she knew it could.

[-]

Within the Sage Chamber, several Sages conversed amongst themselves as Rauru stared at a portal which showed Hyrule. Their tones were grim as he turned away from the portal, his eyes set with anger. There may be no lost love between him and the Hylian Queen, but all knew even he would not enjoy what was happening around her and the Shadow Sage.

[-]

Hidden within the narrow, filthy corridor, a hooded man slipped a small wooden box to another
man and snatched the purse of rupees. After checking to be sure his payment was real, he ran.

Best not stay near when the customer did their business.

Gold-flecked blue eyes stared at the small wooden box before a gloved hand slipped it into a secret pocket. He couldn't prove they had been there, but he knew they had.

And he wouldn't forget.

[—]

Men and women huddled within the back of the library, near the outer walls rather than the warm fireplace. They bent over an old forgotten table, books and scrolls spread before them as they sought what was their legal right.

Soon, very soon, the *whore* would no longer run what had been a golden land.

Greedy fingers gently stroked that which would expose her for what she truly was.

The journal of a knight.

A *murdered* knight.

[—]

Multiple sets of red eyes met across the empty corridor as their thoughts collided.

Something was coming...

Something they couldn't stop.

At least...

Not to anyone’s knowledge.
The Dark Side of Honesty (I)

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Dark Side of Honesty (I)

TW: Flashback of molestation

Zelda licked her chapped lips and took a swallow of the watered wine before her. Normally she wouldn't imbude alcohol, but...there were just some situations that called for it.

"Tell me again," she bade in a cracked whisper.

Mikal looked up, eyes filled with pain as he saw the vulnerable child hidden behind her cracking diplomatic facade. "They are calling for an investigation...and...and a trial. Of you."

[-]

Unbeknownst to either of them, men and women gathered in the other end of the castle, whispering to themselves. One clutched a book, another a scroll. They whispered of how they were right, how this was right, how it was the only option. They bolstered their courage to do what they had to do, never arguing aloud if it was truly just.

[-]

Within her office, the very room which had been the official work space of her predecessors for generations, the young Hylian Queen continued to stare at her most trusted adviser. Her lips moved but no sound emerged. Her throat worked yet all that came forth was air.

There were...no words. Within days of discovering a spy had infiltrated the castle (again) during her meetings with citizens, she was being investigated? For what?

"They won't say," Mikal murmured as he looked away, knowing she had not meant to speak aloud.

"When?"

A single word, filled with so many meanings, was the last question he wished to hear. He closed his eyes and bowed his head in shame, knowing he had failed her.

"They plan to approach you within the hour."

Sinking deeper into her rigid chair, Zelda felt much like a child lost in the Market. Overwhelmed and without help, she ran through the masses without destination. Where the child would run through people, she pushed through millions of heavy thoughts. There was too much to think about, too many things to consider, too many emotions to make sense of.

"I….I need a moment. Please."

He stood before the whispered plea fell from her white lips and bowed his head. "Of course. Would you like me to send someone in?"

He watched her shake her head without raising her eyes from her desk and sighed softly. Leaving the room as quietly as possible, he mentally cursed his fellow lawmen. What evidence they thought
they had could not be enough to warrant an investigation.

No…this was revenge, pure and simple.

"Mikal? Is everything alright?"

Turning, he looked at his son. His lost, angry, drug-addicted son, who currently looked more like the boy…man…Mikal had always thought him to be. Worried, caring, shy, strong but not overbearing.

Shaking his head, he mumbled something without thinking before meeting the emotion-filled blue eyes. "I…I'm going for a walk. Allow no one else inside, ok?"

He didn't wait for Link's reply before heading for the nearest exit. He needed air.

[-]

Link stared after his father, his words echoing in his mind. There's going to be an inquisition… For a moment, he wondered who the target was….

And then he looked at the door.

Zelda.

Taking a shuddering breath, he acknowledged what this would do to her. To all of them. If even a hint of the truth was found…

Swallowing, he moved passed the stoic Sheikah and slipped into the office.

"Zelda?"

She lifted her head, knowing she couldn't ignore him…he wouldn't go away if she did. She stared at him and saw he knew. He knew she was being investigated. He knew they could investigate him too.

He knew what this would do to her. To him. To the country.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure."

She stood and made her way to the large windows. The white snow blocked her view of the grounds and market below. Touching the icy glass, she took a shuddering breath. What was she going to do? She could not stop them…it was their right, both as citizens and lawmen.

If only she knew what had sparked their interest, had caught the eyes which were so often focused on more trivial matters. Dear Gods, just weeks ago she had been infuriated by their meddling in her future….she would take that in a heartbeat over this.

Fear and realization stole the air from her lungs. They had gone from pushing her to marry….to a formal investigation.

Someone knew.

"They might not," Link whispered. He watched her jump, knowing she had not meant to speak aloud. "They might not know anything," he repeated.
He resisted the urge to take a step back as she spun around, eyes blazing with emotion. She wasn’t a threat to him….but still…she was the leader of the Sages for a reason.

He shook his head when she spat "don't be naive," understanding the reaction for what it was.

"I'm not," he said as he held her gaze. "You don't know that they know anything….you have no proof."

"They went from trying to make me marry, and objecting to my relationship, to beginning a full investigation as my time as Queen. This isn't just about revenge Link, they have to know something…they wouldn't do it otherwise. I know I've made some questionable decisions, but in a war that happens. All of those were later sanctioned by the Council and cannot be investigated. So they have to know!"

He loved his sister, he really did, but sometimes she could be just too stubborn. "How? How could they know? Who would have told, Zelda? You? You only told Impa when you wanted to die. Me? I happen to like living. Impa? Phst. The Sheikah? They didn't even tell Impa. The dead? Because those are the only other ones who know….are the dead."

She stared at him, shaking as she clenched her teeth. To throw that back in her face…to be so casual about it, all of it…. "How dare you!"

"Dare I what? Tell you the truth? That's what you want me to do!" he spat out as he neared her. "That's all you ever wanted from me…the truth."

"How dare you throw that in my face!" She held his gold-flecked gaze, unflinching as his eyes narrowed. "You're saying this is my fault because my head is messed up?"

"No, damn it! I'm saying that no one alive could have told them." He took a deep breath and cut through his rage. It wouldn't help either of them to lose control. They weren't the ones causing the situation.

"Zelda, I….I'm sorry," he said quietly as he gently took her hand in his.

She snatched her hand away, barely resisting the urge to wipe it on her gown. Her skin crawled from the canine heat of his calloused flesh. "Don't touch me! I won't allow you to yell at me and then act as if nothing's wrong."

"You yelled at me first!" he snarled, eyes boring into hers. "What is your problem? I grabbed your hand, big—"

"Yes, it is a big deal!" she hissed, voice dropped with each word. "I didn't say you could touch me!"

"You've never had a problem with me touching you."

"That was before you decided to choke me, you son of a bitch! Don't think I've forgotten!"

Something within him tore free as he balled his hands, fighting against the urge to wrap them around her throat in reminder. "If you'd been a good girl, I wouldn't have had to. If you hadn't compared me to that sadistic sociopath, you never would have been hurt. Don't blame your bad decisions on me, Cess."

Rebellion surged through her as her anger masked everything. For once, even the voices which plagued her existence mattered not. Her words were nearly silent, barely a breath passing her lips,
but she knew he could hear her. "Do not think my trust, my submission, my insanity, is an excuse to abuse me. I ask a lot of you, and accept a lot I don't ask for in return...but not this."

He stared at her, hatred burning in his eyes as he shook from a rage that burned at his heart and tore at his throat, commanding him. A sliver of something, some truth he could see within her eyes without his own understanding, pricked at his thoughts.

No.

He wouldn't....

He....wouldn't...

He would resist. He wasn't what she thought he was.

At least...that's what she told herself. But as he reached for his pocket, no doubt to find something other than his hand to use on her, she reacted on pure instinct. She closed the space between them and pushed hard against his chest. His hand tore from his pocket and a vial flew through the air only to smash into the wall.

They both stared at the glass shards and pooling liquid.

"What have you done?" he questioned in a deadly whisper. Gold eyes snapped to meet emerald. Their roles reversed as he advanced, backing her to the wall. He growled softly as he lowered his face to hers, their noses almost touching.

"What was that?" she hissed in an equally quiet tone. "I swear to the Gods, Link, if you've been doing—"

"Doing what? Drugs? You'll do what, Queen? Hit me? I dare you. Banish me? You wouldn't say the words before you were overthrown. Lock me in jail? I can get out...you know that." He laughed without humor at the fire which burned even hotter in her eyes, anger now mixed with betrayal. "What's the matter, Your Highness? Your perfect little brother not so nice anymore?"

"Get away from me! You foul, loathsome little pig!"

"Loathsome? Probably...most people don't enjoy it. But you know all about that, don't you? Who did you send?"

"Send where?"

"To my chambers! Who did you send?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She pushed against his chest, using the wall behind her as leverage. Unlike before, his solid frame didn't move. "Get away from me Link!"

"Make me," he said with a grin. "C'mon, it'll be fun. But after you tell me who searched my chambers."

"I don't know anything about it! You're crazy! The drugs have addled your brain!"

"If I thought you would tell me anything, they must have," he snapped. "As secretive as ever."

"As devious as ever," she shot back. "Get away from me before I make you."

"Take your best shot."
She stared at him as the words echoed through her mind. *Take your best shot, best shot, the best, your, you're the best...you're my best shot.* Twisted whispered words dredged through the darkest parts of her being, pulling the demon's forward.

"You're my best shot." His breath was hot against her ear as he whispered, his voice holding a smirk she couldn't see. Her nails dug into his skin, drawing blood...yet were so ineffective he only laughed.

"It tickles...do it again."

She thrashed against him as he searing palm pressed tighter against her constricted throat. Her body was pressed into a corner, the cold stone digging into her arms and back as she tried in vain to push him away.

He stepped closer, running his lips against her cheek and down her jaw. A shudder wracked her as he parted her legs with his knee. Instinct made her thighs clench despite what time had taught her. Her lungs burned with agony when he released her throat ever so slightly, chuckling at her pain.

"How are you not my best shot?" he murmured as he ran his fingers over the red marks on her delicate neck. The contrast of colors, her golden skin white from fear and lack of air, the angry imprints which wrapped around her flesh like a necklace...they gave him almost as much pleasure as her weak attempts to push him away.

"You...won't...win." He laughed as she coughed between words and kissed her tenderly, stroking her waist as he aligned his hips with hers. He nipped her ear, cooing at her mewl of pain, and licked away the droplets of blood.

"But I already have, my little princess...I already have," was his whispered reply as he slid his hand up her cold leg, pushing the thick skirts and petticoat aside. "I have already won and you know it. I have marked you, claimed you...have stolen you from the very people you try to protect."

She clenched her eyes shut as his scarred fingers dragged along her pale, sensitive skin of her inner thighs. Her head tilted back as she swallowed her revulsion when his fingers traced his name in Gerudo hieroglyphs, his nails scrapping along the inner crease of her hip.

"Do you know you're my best shot, little butterfly?" he breathed against her lips. "Because you'll never forget what I've taught you...and even as you fight me, you submit."

Fury coiled within her like a poisonous snake, rearing back to strike. Fired burned in her veins as she fought against the memory, against the pain he was causing. Her brother had proven her wrong, had become worse than M—Ganondorf had ever been. He may have no use for what was between her legs, but he took more pleasure in her suffering than the despot ever had.

Her nostrils flared as she sought the breath he denied her. Her fury, her misery, gave her strength she didn't physically have. The scorching heat of his drug induced fever branded her throat, marking it as his.

She pushed against him once more, a desperate cry wrenching from her despite his hold. He stumbled back, stunned. She spun to the side, knowing she was too vulnerable against the wall, only to yelp as his hand wrapped around her arm.

Their battle became one of both magical and physical strength. The Triforces burned as they were pushed against each other, unnoticed by either carrier. His grip tightened as she overwhelmed his own magic, more skilled in the ethereal power than he ever could be. He bared his teeth and
pushed her against the wall a second time, uncaring that her head slammed into the unforgiving stone. His throat began to ache as he held back a groan of pain from the raw power and emotion that raked over his soul.

"Why do you fight?!" was what escaped his clenched teeth.

"Why do you make me?" came her choked reply.

"Because you don't listen! You don't behave!"

"I'm- not- a- dog..." she gasped. The memories which haunted her flashed through her mind, taunting her, weakening her. Why? She choked once more as his hand tightened. Why now, why here? Why must he prove her wrong, why must she always be hurt...always remember that hurt? For just a few moments, why couldn't be just be, why couldn't she live as a regular person?

The desire for freedom welled inside her spirit and poured over. When she pushed against him once more, her spirit wrapped around his, driving her memories into his soul. He lost his physical hold, stumbling back as pain beyond comprehension wracked his being.

She put a hand over her throat and moved away from him, heading for the door. She swung around when he grabbed her arm again, a golden glow radiating from her palm. "Let. Me. Go."

He cried out and dropped her arm, cradling his hand to his chest as darkness burned his flesh. He looked behind her, staring at something...someone.

Turning, Zelda stared.

"Impa..." She whispered the name as if it were a prayer...though for whom she was praying even she didn't know. She met the crimson eyes of the Sheikah woman as she turned away from the injured man. She knew the older Sage was assessing her, taking in her appearance. Her aura glowed with power and her Triforce shown strongly from the hand which was pressed against her reddening throat.

She forced herself not to take a step back as Impa closed the space between them. Anger beyond words burned in those blood-red eyes. Her words were gentle but her tone was firm. "Where are you hurt?"

The lie sprung from her without a thought, so automatic was the response to hide the truth. "Fine, it's just a—"

"Don't lie to me Zelda, not now. You're injured. I can see it, feel it. Where are you hurt?"

Anger at his audacity, his lack of respect for her as a person, burned within Zelda as she glanced at Link. Yet her fear for his life, her grief for the brother she had driven to this place was just as strong. Her heart ached in its wrath and sorrow, but she did not wish death upon him. And as she looked at her Guardian once more, she knew his death would be the result of her words.

"Zelda...where are you hurt?"

Before she could respond, the sound of a fist pounding on the office door reverberated through the room.

She acted without thought, straightening her clothes in seconds. The Triforce vanished from her skin as her regal mask slipped into place as easily as the same golden magic hid the evidence of their fight. Without a hitch in breath, she faced the doors with her head held high as the carved
wood swung open, admitting the majority of her advisers and council.

"Good afternoon, sirs and madams. May I ask what is so urgent that you must all convene in my office?"

She watched them with a gentle smile, unfazed by the sudden shock which spread across their faces. She knew she had bested them, just as she had bested their former Secretary. They thought to catch her ignorant...and they had failed.

A young man, clearly nervous from the change in their plans, cleared his throat. Despite his obvious nerves, his voice was firm as he spoke. "Queen Zelda Nohansen of Hyrule, it has come to light by the members of this Council that you have committed grievous treachery against this land of Hyrule, where you do so rule. As declared by Her Grace Hylia upon her reign, all charges must be investigated swiftly and fully by the Council. Until such time that trial may be established, on this day, before all of those who stand witness, you are hereby accused of treason against the country and will prepare to face judgment. What say you?"

"On what grounds, good sir?" she asked quietly, ignoring the shocked Hero and Sheikah behind her.

She stared in the man's eyes and knew none of them would be able to say their suspicions aloud.

"Charges which are so unfit for public knowledge I dare not utter them," he said after a moment's hesitation.

"To my knowledge I have done no such thing, however, I understand that all leaders are blind to their faults to some degree. I hereby accept the weight of these charges before me," she said with a nod. "Now, please, all of you...leave me. You have an investigation to begin, do you not?"

She smiled once more when they all stared a second time, dumbfounded. As they shuffled and filed from the office, the Guard closing the door behind them, her eyes remained fixed straight ahead, mask in place.

The crowd which had just left would never see the stark terror that shone in her glistening eyes.

[-]

The only sound which filled the air was the screech of metal upon metal. Sparks flew from heavy swords as the force of impact grew with each passing second. Labored breathing was silent as a howl of frustration was swallowed once more.

"A message as arrived, My King," came the quiet words which broke his focus, earning him a deep slice into his arm.

Hissing, he waved away the apologizing man and scurrying attendants. He grasped the scroll within his hand, smiling as the pain faded from his mind.

At last...

It was time to act.

[-]

[-]
AN: From one emotion to the next…

Songs:

Honestly by Kelly Clarkson

Dark Side by Kelly Clarkson

You Can't Win by Kelly Clarkson

Wide Awake by Katy Perry

Ok...so I happen to hear all the songs within a few days of each other and fell in love. They fit the story right now, no one said you had to listen to them. But at least read the lyrics, puh-lease? : )
The Dark Side of Honesty (II)

Her steps were nearly silent as she aimlessly made her way through the halls. Senses sharp, she looked around her, searching for...something. That something which crawled across her skin and sank into the very core of her cells, thrumming through her body and twining around her spirit.

She ignored the people running around her, focused on something most of them would never understand. The Shadows ran through her veins as easily as her blood, merging with the Guardian essence that defined her. She could feel the ethereal and primal energies twining together. They urged her forward, to stalk and hunt, to chase but never release the prey which had caught her attention.

Without pause, she turned her head ever so slightly to the side as one of her tribe brothers walked beside her. She said nothing, knowing her silence would speak for her. Her eyes barely gazed at him before looking ahead once more. Her stride lengthened as the incoherent murmurs of those around her reached her ears. She could pick out bits and pieces of their words, but little of it made sense.

Then she heard her mate's name.

Stopping, she turned and faced a niche, head tilted to one side as her eyes adjusted to the dim light within the recess. Scholars and advisers. Their names weren't important to her right now, but she knew their station by their clothing and adornment. They were discussing her sesha, her keta. Why?

"Impa."

The people hiding in the recess fled as quickly as they could without being seen, trying to avoid the troubled man that approached. She turned once more, facing one of the few people she knew had her Charge's interests at heart.

"Mikal." She stared in his eyes, ignoring her brother as he silently slipped away. She could feel the bond humming with mind-numbing confusion, horror and pain...did Mikal know the cause?

"Have you heard?" he whispered as he stepped closer, ducking his head to keep his words private. "Heard what?"

"I...they..." He swallowed and lowered his voice further. "Impa...they're charging her, criminally. The Council has begun an investigation and will issue the charges within the hour."

Her teeth clenched as she watched him step back. There was no caring within her for his bared emotions. He was of no concern to her. But these...people...these...beings who thought they could threaten her love were. That drugged wolf was.

Something within her shifted moments before a fusion of fear, anger and pain tore through her heart. Radiating from her very soul, the dizzying emotions forced her movements, leading her to the source before she had time to think.
Zelda.

Frightened.

Hurt.

Wrathful.

…and ready to fight.

The shadows rose from her like mist, giving her a dark aura. Those which saw her shied away, remembering the last battle and the blood which had flowed because of her magic. They averted their gazes as she walked passed, shuddering as they glimpsed her hard, glowing ruby eyes.

How she had moved so far from her Charge was not something that she'd thought of. Her wanderings of the castle had taken her away from the young Queen and that was all which mattered. Her steps were hurried but she didn't run, too alert of hidden spectators. Within the few minutes it took her to weave through the castle's maze of corridors, the smothering emotions she felt from her mate became a noose around her neck.

Her nails dug into her palms as her knuckles began to ache from the pressure of her clenched hands. Her gaze immediately sought those of her brethren when she entered the corridor leading to the State Office. None looked away, but she saw the smallest slivers of emotion creep through their eyes. She bared her teeth and swept passed them, telling them that she would not forget this day and their behavior during it.

The closer she came to the double doors, the thicker the air became. Divine power hung in the corridor, a physical barrier of ethereal origin. With the barest shake of her head, she pushed through the tangible presence of the Triforce and wrapped her hand around the warm metal knob.

Something within her riled at the magic which shoved against her yet she paid it no mind. Her goal was singular: protect her Charge. Despite the resistance, she slid into the room without a sound, closing the door firmly behind her. Time slowed for just a moment as she caught sight of the scene before her.

Zelda stood between her and Link, beautiful golden-white ether threading through her aura and pooled in her palm. The Triforce of Wisdom shone brightly on her hand, pulsing in time with her heart as she faced the young man. Though the emotions were no longer as tight, they continued to pull at Impa, clogging her throat. While she couldn't see the younger woman's face, the Sheikah knew there was rage painted upon it.

Link stood near the wall, his azure eyes half-dominated by the wolf's dark-golden stare. His own Triforce shone just as strongly, his hand wrapped around her love's smaller wrist. His chest heaved as if he had been fighting. She watched as his fingers tightened around that wrist, his intent to pull her close clear to anyone who could see.

Without hesitation, her fists unclenched and one hand darted forward. The shadows converged and surged from her palm. So consuming was her fury that the magic which left her was black and so cold it burned. She smiled in grim satisfaction as he cried out and released his Queen, hugging his injured arm to his chest.

Her gaze never left the demon boy's as he stared at her with the same hatred she felt for him. The air stirred as the Hylian woman turned as she neared them.

"Impa." Her name, nary a breath past her lips, caused her to look away from the injured boy. The
Sheikah female turned to her mate, evaluating her state once more. Her power continued to wrap around her as her Triforce-bearing hand was pressed against her red throat. Her eyes were narrowed ever so slightly as the muscles in her slender neck and shoulders grew tenser by the moment.

The distance between her and the younger woman was closed with a few steps. "Where are you hurt?" Her tone was soft, gentle, but her firm tone told the younger woman she knew.

"Fine, it's just a—"

"Don't lie to me Zelda, not now," Impa murmured, glancing over her Charge again. "You're injured. I can feel and see it. Where are you hurt?

"Zelda…where are you hurt?" when the Queen glanced at the Knighted Hero once more, anger and pain blazing in her eyes.

The air itself shook as a fist pounded upon the heavy doors, cutting off any reply the other woman would have made. Hissing quietly to herself, she turned to face the wooden portals. From the corner of her eye she saw her Charge slip into her role as Queen, the Triforce and its power vanishing from sight as if they had never been.

Her eyes remained on the doors as they swung open, most of her Queen's advisers and the council pushing their way into the guarded office. The sight of her tribe brothers staring at the men and women within the room and corridor gave her a feeling she couldn't truly define. Betrayal? Anger? Pity? Whatever it was, it wasn't important enough to focus on.

"Good afternoon, sirs and madams. May I ask what is so urgent that you must all convene in my office?"

Nicely done, she thought to herself as she watched the pompous peers display matching expressions of shock. She knew that Zelda had foiled their plans, whatever those were…and she couldn't be more proud.

A nervous young man, one roughly the age of his sovereign from the whiskers on his face, stepped forward and cleared his throat. Though she knew her mate was being charged, to hear the words shocked her.

"Queen Zelda Nohansen of Hyrule, it has come to light by the members of this Council that you have committed grievous treachery against this land of Hyrule, where you do so rule. As declared by Her Grace Hylia upon her reign, all charges must be investigated swiftly and fully by the Council. Until such time that trial may be established, on this day, before all of those who stand witness, you are hereby accused of treason against the country and will prepare to face judgment. What say you?"

She ground her teeth as she heard the man behind her take in a quick breath. Good…he had no part in this. She wouldn't kill him too slowly then. Though if those marks on her mate's throat had been real and not a trick of the light, she might rescind that decision.

"On what grounds, good sir?"

Her breathing was forcibly steady as the two young Hyruleans stared at one another, neither of them willing to give an inch of ground.

"Charges which are so unfit for public knowledge I dare not utter them," came the eventual answer.

"To my knowledge I have done no such thing, however, I understand that all leaders are blind to
their faults to some degree. I hereby accept the weight of these charges before me. Now, please, all of you...leave me. You have an investigation to begin, do you not?"

She swallowed down a chuckle as she saw them back away, dumbfounded by the golden sage's pretty smile and kind words. She ignored her tribe as they shut the door behind the last person, focused on the woman beside her.

Zelda's eyes stared straight ahead as if she had not registered their absence.

The posse would never see the agony, the panic that shone within those gray-green eyes. [-]

What seemed like an eternity passed as the three warriors stood in silence, minds whirling with such speed they could barely follow their own thoughts.

"Zelda?"

Her name broke the spell that hung between the unlikely triad. Zelda faced Impa with an expression neither Impa or Link could decipher. Something within her began to crumble as she saw the kaleidoscope of emotions within their eyes. She shook as her own emotions began to boil over. A nauseating mixture of blind terror and thoughtless rage drove through her thoughts like a stampede of wild horses.

"How...why..." She tried to voice the questions which plagued her, tried to voice the confusion which resided within her...but...couldn't.

Something within him pulled at the sight before him. His "big" sister was drowning. And yet...he couldn't make himself care. He shook the feeling off and turned away.

"How do you think? They can because they are allowed," he snarled quietly as he stared at the roaring fire behind her desk. Those flames burned within his heart as he felt her spirit flinch and recoil from the Triforce-forged link.

"Stop, Link." Impa said just as quietly. She stared at his hard form, knowing her threat was clear.

Zelda watched them both, unconsciously hugging herself. Things weren't supposed to go this way! Life was supposed to get better, easier, less painful...not more.

"Or what?"

The words echoed through the otherwise silent room. As delicate as a spider's web, that one phrase broke Impa's control and she lunged forward.

Her hand wrapped in the thick, rich fabric of his shirt. A quiet hiss pulled itself from deep within her throat as she stared at his gold-laced eyes. Fear and pain swirled within her heart and blossomed through her body, Zelda's control of the bond slipping. She tightened her grip as she hauled the boy a few inches closer.

The boy...the boy who she had once considered a son, the one person she has trusted with her Charge's life. He was nothing but a child playing grown-up, with no true understanding of the dangerous games he played.

"Or I will make you regret it," she whispered. "Mark my words, boy, you are on your last chance."
Fury bubbled within her, creating an overwhelming torrent of emotion and sensation as she sipped the air, her penetrating gaze never leaving his. As if the Fates had not been cruel enough to deliver her love a life of pain, they had turned her supporters against her. Treason was not a crime which was easy to disprove, especially with the delicate nature of the unspoken charges.

By the Gods and Goddesses, she had little patience for any of them anymore. Zelda needed her comfort, but right now Link needed her anger. "You think I cannot see the bruises upon her, boy? What right have you to lay a hand upon her?" she asked quietly.

A reply nearly rolled off his tongue before he reconsidered his words. Her crimson eyes were black with her rage and power crackled around them. Even the Triforce paused in its steady strength, unsure of the destructive magic. Recalling the slaughter she had left during the last battle, he bit back his retort. He would not forget this threat…but neither would he act rashly.

"I will spare you this once," she breathed as she pulled him closer still. "For her. Because of what you had at one time, because you used to be her family. For HER sake, I will not rip your head from your shoulders and be done with it.

"But remember this, Hero." She spat the title as an affront, mocking him with a sweet smile. "If I find you alone with her, I will kill you. If you look at her, speak to her, even think about her wrong, I will make you wish you were dead long before you take your last breath.

"At this point, it is only a matter of time before I end you. You know this as well as I do. Whether or not you have time to say your goodbyes and grovel for her forgiveness is up to you." She released him, pushing him away from her with a disgusted sound. "Get out of my sight."

He started at her, too shocked to hear her words, wondering if she truly was a threat to him. The aura of power which surrounded her gave him pause, made him wonder if his retaliation for Zelda's impertinence was worth it at this time. Deciding not to risk it, he straightened his clothes and stormed from the room, slamming the heavy doors behind him.

He ignored the Sheikah men as they bored holes into his back with their piercing gazes, just as he pretended the unsteady soldiers were nothing but air. They all meant nothing to him as he strode quickly from the office, his rage a tangible force around him. All kept from his path as he stared blindly ahead, teeth clenched to contain words best not spoken.

She had defied him.

The other woman had threatened him.

The Council was against him.

Soon the Sages would join them.

No…today wasn't the day to make her or any of them remember why he was not to be reckoned with. But soon…soon. When none of them were ready for it, when it would hurt the most…that is when he would make them pay.

[-]

[-]

AN: Dum-dum-dum

Song:
Atrophy by Red Jumpsuit Apparatus
Garo wove through the various people, ignoring their quiet chatter as he kept his nose low and his eyes up. The mingling scents of food and body did nothing to distract him as he followed one particular trail, a growl bubbling within his chest. The sound of raised voices and stomping boots momentarily turned his eyes from the crowd towards the door he sought.

A rush of shoes made him dart along the walls just in time. Hushed yet forceful voices all blended together as he stared at the mass of two-legs as they all but rushed from the office. Ignoring the scent of angry fear mixed with triumph, he darted towards the closed doors.

Only to find himself lifted to meet a set of red eyes.

Growling softly, he snapped at the hand which held him, growling again in annoyance when it moved outside his reach.

"Garo."

Tilting his head, he looked at the two-legger again, the one which smelled and looked similar to Impa. He must be part of her pack. And since he took care of his beta-omega, he would listen…for now.

"You can't go in there now."

Or not.

Ears pinned back, he prepared to snap again before the new words stopped him.

"Soon, pup, but not this second," the quiet male said. Sniffing, he smelt no deceit and waited for more. "If you go in there now, you'll be hurt…and your mistress won't like that."

Be hurt? The only one who would hurt him…

Was the same trail he'd been following.

His ears pinned back a second time and he squirmed, baring his teeth when the male hugged him close.

"Stop Garo. You can go in soon."

Realizing he wouldn't escape easily, he decided to settle back and wait. It felt like a full moon cycle before the door opened and the bad alpha emerged. Growling again, he ran into the den (wait, it's a room, not a den) the second his paws hit the ground. The bad alpha smelled of anger and fear, but the scents coming from the room were much stronger.

The door (stupid name for a wood barrier) closed behind him and he slowly approached the two females. His beta-omega smelled…odd. Fear, anger, con-fus-ion (like running around in circles really fast), and sad all mixed together…made his nose hurt. And the lone wolf was angry. Sniffing them both, he rubbed his body against Zelda, letting her know he was there and would protect her.

Zelda looked down and smiled weakly at Garo, chuckling when he sat. His worried eyes made her bend to lift him. Cuddling the growing pup to her chest, she buried her face in his fur, ignoring the scratching feeling in her throat. The pain to her body was easily dismissed; she had suffered far
worse. But the pain to her spirit, to her heart….

Nuzzling the pup again, she took deep steadying breaths. She began to shake as her emotions crested once more, a force unto themselves. Her eyes lifted enough to meet Impa's and she swallowed, knowing that expression.

"Please don't kill him."

"We've had this conversation, keta," Impa whispered, voice tight with emotion. "He's a threat to you—I can’t let him live."

Tears burned her eyes as she looked away from such conviction, unwilling to see the jury and judge within her Guardian-mate. "It's not his fault."

Fire burned in Impa's chest before she tamped it down. "It is his fault…and you know it. He had no right to strike you, to choke you. He has no more 'second chances'. One of these days he will kill you…and I intend to kill him before he has a chance."

Zelda said nothing as she stared into those unwavering crimson eyes. Several minutes passed before she looked away, hugging Garo all the while. "Can we…go somewhere? I don't want to stay in this room."

Without another word, she turned and left the office.

Impa followed moments later.

[-]

The days passed in a blur of meetings, research and whispers. Far from any prying eyes or eavesdropping ears, the Council laid all charges upon their Queen. None faltered in their accusations as they looked upon the woman who had sacrificed herself, her childhood, for them. At the end of their declaration, she merely nodded and smiled as she had before, reminding them they had work to do.

And so the days faded into weeks as men and women rode across the vast frozen countryside, attempting to find witnesses and evidence for either side. It was in this time that lesser charges of treason and conspiracy were announced to the people. Division of loyalty split the land in two. Many supported their Queen, yet just as many agreed her actions and attitudes during the war were suspicious at best…and condemning at worst.

Letters and books passed hands, from room to room, house to house and even across national borders. Enemies became allies as previous treaties were scrutinized. The world became a mirror of itself, a parody of the peaceful land. Where Twilight had once warped their land, controversy now did the same.

Tension ran high as tempers raised even higher, restraint quickly becoming a distant memory. Yet as red eyes started at black ink, all of the disorder faded away. Those same eyes, filled with emotion beyond comprehension, met discs of gray-green.

"How would you like to see my grandmother again?"

The question hung between them before a sigh of relief broke the silence, a nod the only answer.

Golden eyes turned to them, happy their emotions had lessened, before turning back to the door. Pointed ears twitched, tracking one specific set of feet as hackles raised.
Soon…

[-]

[-]

**AN:** O.o Impaz? Hm… And what's up with Garo?

**Songs**

Fire Fire by Flyleaf

**BN:** When I first opened this, I just got this picture in my head of this little pup and he was on a mission. I know that's pretty much what it says, but it came to me from the first words and it just kinda stuck with me. He's been away for a little while and now he's going to bring hell. I don't have any issues with the chapter and honestly, if I could, I'd hug the little guy too. He puts up with quite a bit but I know he'll have his dues. Paw bump.
Bridges (I)

Chapter Thirty-Six

Bridges (I)

The cross-country ride was mostly made in silence. Their mounts never startled as the happy mutt ran alongside them, having long grown used to the fluffy sidekick. Zelda's horse merely snorted when the exhausted pup was draped across her lap for the last bit of the journey. Impa smiled when she saw the spoiled animal doze off, but even being away from the castle could not lift her mood.

The land around them slowly faded from white to brown as they entered the mountain base. It took little time to slide from their mares and enter the hidden village. Snow dusted the enclosed area, but so light was the dusting that it appeared to be dew at first glance. The Gods' frozen tears twinkled softly as they quickly secured the equines and knocked upon the door of their solace.

Within the warm house, Impaz stared at her door as she slowly rose from the chair. Despite the roaring fire, the cold stiffened her joints, reminding her of her even as her body protested her movement, her heart soared at the sound of their raps.

The door was silent as she opened it, allowing her only family admittance into her home. She looked at the curious dog that sniffed around her living room and recalled their letters. Garo was his name. When she caught sight of his markings, she nodded to herself. A fitting name for one so —

"Grandmother?"

Impa looked at her grandmother as Zelda hung their cloaks. When the elder Sheikah turned her alert eyes to her, Impa bit back a sigh of relief. Something within her…. But no, her grandmother was fine. Tired, and clearly in some discomfort, but otherwise fine.

"Yes child."

Words failed them both as Zelda took Impa's hand. Even when Impaz lead them to the couch, left to make tea and returned with the heavy tray they could not find words to express themselves. But they didn't need to. Their clasped hands, squinting eyes, touching shoulders… Garo's incessant sniffing, ear twitching, unstoppable patrolling….

It all spoke for them.

She poured three cups of the steaming liquid, waving off their silent offer for help.

"It's been a while since you visited me." She slid the cups across the table and looked at them. "Not that I do not understand why."

"We needed to get away."

"I can tell."

No more words were necessary as the two Sheikah met eyes. Neither blinked for several moments before Impaz nodded.
Zelda barely batted an eyelash as she lifted her cup, used to such communication. But when Impa stood and headed towards the door, she felt apprehension fill her. Was something wrong?

Impa turned, feeling the threads of worry, and smiled reassuringly. "It's all right Zelda, I'm not leaving. I just have to check the stables, make sure the horses are warm enough." Not giving the younger woman a chance to reply, she slipped from the warm house.

Zelda turned back to Impaz, swallowing hard at the light in her eyes.

Impaz gently set her own cup down and allowed her thoughts to run their course. Much like her last visit, the young woman before her was skittish and haunted. The mother within her cried out for one she had claimed as kin. It had taken a while, but she now understood Impa's cryptic words.

Impa could not be mother.

"How is the city?"

The odd question threw her. Zelda blinked and tilted her head. "Well enough. Ups and downs, but stable all things considered."

"And the boys?"

Boys? The only "boys" they would both know were…. Oh.

"Shad is…pulling through. He's having a rough time right now. And Link…." She sighed. "Could be better."

Impaz frowned at her words and felt her suspicion grow when Zelda's fingers twitched on the cup. But…not now. Later.

"Poor things. I hope it works out."

"Me too."

"How are you doing?"

Though she expected the question, to hear it still startled her. She started to smile only to freeze at the expression on the older woman's face. Something in it told her not to lie.

"I…. Things are tense."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No thank you."

A strained silence fell between them. Impaz rolled the words around in her mind. The terse tone and clipped syllables told her more than the young Queen cared to acknowledge. She watched creases appear around the other woman's eyes and mouth, whitening from the strength of her emotions. Anger and pain most likely, if the light in her eyes was anything to go by.

_For a woman who hid much, she revealed the same amount_, the Sheikahthought to herself. Her near obsessive, constant inspections of the room, the calculated posture of relaxation, the twitching of her right index finger and ever so slight tilt of her head gave her away. Garo laying protectively by her feet also told the older woman what neither Sage would.

Despite her strength and power, the young Queen needed protection from something…or someone.
"Have you ever thought of leaving here?"

The sudden question brought Impaz from her thoughts. She blinked to clear her thoughts and lifted her teacup once more, humming as she considered the words. "I have. As I said during your last visit, I would not survive in Kakariko…or most of Hyrule. I am too physically different from the rest of my family, Zelda, to simply leave. My eyes and hair identify my race, despite my age.

"But…I have thought of it. The war is over, and since I've seen you both last…I've become lonely. Few people know of this place, and even fewer visit it. I have a merchant and cats for company, my child…. I've reached the point in my life where I need more than memories and a few letters."

Impaz's wise eyes become dull with pain as her mind drifted. Her fingers wrapped tighter around the cup as she took a shuddering breath. She shook her head and returned her focus to the young woman perched on the couch.

"You were correct the last time we spoke, Zelda. The war is over. It may be safer, physically, for me to stay where I am. I've made a home here over the decades, how could I not? My entire tribe was here at one point. But now…now my grandchild and few remaining brethren all live far from me.

"So yes. I have thought of it. But I have nowhere to go." She smiled sadly to herself as the volume of her voice lowered. "My prime is long past, my dear. Here, in this hidden place, I can live my life as an independent woman, not as a burden."

Zelda swallowed hard as the older woman fell silent.

What did she say to that?
Impa sighed quietly as she smoothed the mares' blankets one last time. The stable was warm enough, considering it bordered the wall of her grandmother's hearth. She knew neither Zelda nor Impaz was fooled by her obvious excuse. They needed to talk.

And, if she admitted to herself, she wanted them to get along. They were her only family, not even the Guard could understand her tasks.

"Besides," she mumbled to herself as she left the horses to eat in peace, "Impaz needs someone to mother and Zelda needs a mother. It's a win for everyone."

Something made her pause as she neared the front of the house. It wasn't the bond…Zelda's emotions were there, but not overly strong. It wasn't the Sheikah or Shadow magic. But something…something made her creep, made her crouch so she could open the door just a hair.

"…in this hidden place, I can live my life as an independent woman, not as a burden."

What?
The single word ran through her mind as she stood, staring at the thick wood with confusion.

Her grandmother….

A burden?
An asset, a family member, a teacher, an annoyance, a target…but never a burden.

Stomping her feet to clear the snow from her boots, she slipped inside the house as if she'd heard nothing. As she hung her cloak and scarf, she watched them from the corner of her eye. Her grandmother was hunched and quickly regaining her composure, however forced it was. Her mate was leaning forward, unconsciously trying to comfort the older woman. And Garo, oddly enough, had just hopped onto her grandmother's lap.

"The horses are settled," she said as she turned to face them, fully taking in the sight.

"Good," was all Impaz said as she calmly refilled her cup. "Come, sit with us."

Quirking a lip at her grandmother's quiet order, she shook her head and obediently sat beside the other Sage. The tea in her own cup was long cooled but she paid it no mind as she sipped it, grateful for the beverage. Her eyes darted between each woman, watching, waiting. The Shadows stirred within her, the warm, tickling sensation under her skin telling her they were both amused and delighted by the newest developments.

Zelda waited, unable to confirm what Impa had heard but knowing that she had. She was too quiet, her statement too direct. She knew Impa better than Impa knew her, and there were some things her Guardian just couldn't help. Actually, now that she thought about it…that silence, that directness in greeting, seemed more like a Sheikah trait than one specific to her mate.

Impaz sat back against the cushions and ran her fingers through the mutt's fur. She smiled as he growled softly in his sleep while also rolling to expose his stomach. Some things were just
predictable. Much like her family. She met Zelda's eyes and allowed her amused smile to become one of sadness.

Zelda shook her head, silently arguing with the older woman. "No one else thinks it's true."

"Is it not my own opinion that matters most?"

"It is, but—"

"Then why are we having this discussion?"

"Impaz…you said…"

"I know what I said, child. Words do not equate action, as I'm sure you have learned."

"What if…"

"There is always the risk. That is the way life is; not even you can change that."

The younger woman looked away, staring at the wall. A sour taste filled her mouth and she swallowed hard, blinking quickly.

Damn her heart!

And damn these Sheikah women who always trickled through her defenses like the shadows they were.

"Zelda… Look at me, please?" Impaz asked quietly. She didn't have to see the young woman's face to know her emotions, the tension in her lithe frame gave it away.

Shaking her head and closing the bond, the Hylian refused to look at either Sheikah. Her arms ached for Garo, but she wouldn't wake him. He was still a growing pup who needed his rest.

"Sesh—"

"No!" She stood without a thought and quickly made her way to the covered windows. Why Impaz's denial hurt so badly she couldn't tell. Was this what Impa felt when she refused to tell her the truth? Her chest heaved as anger and pain coursed through her.

Why why why why why why WHY?!

"Why what?" came the murmured question which broke through her silent mantra. She didn't face either of them, knowing her composure would fail her completely. How else would Impaz know what she was thinking, if it hadn't already started cracking?

She shook her head when the older woman repeated the question.

Impaz felt something within her stir and surge forth, something that had lain dormant for years. Annoyance coated her mouth and tongue in a sour taste as she shook her head, her voice strong despite her own emotional state. "Cease acting like a spoilt chit." She gently sat Garo beside her and also stood, unflinching as Zelda spun to face her. "You aren't three. Throwing a temper tantrum won't solve anything."

"I'm not—"

"But you are, child," she chided softly. She stared at the younger woman and sighed tiredly, her
annoyance fading. "You are acting like a child simply because I won't agree with you again."

"No, I'm upset because you refuse to listen to anyone."

"Is it not my own opinion which counts the most?"

The question brought momentary silence from the three women.

Impa looked between her grandmother and her Charge. She spoke so quickly it took several moments for her mind to register the request.

"Grandmother, will you come live with us—the tribe, but also us—in Hyrule?"
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Running an unsteady hand through his equally untidy hair, Mikal closed his eyes. His head touched the cool stone wall as he faced the reality before him.

Cold sweat ran down his back as he swallowed in disgust. No no, they couldn't be telling him the truth. Until now, he'd been confident they could negate each charge with ease. But this one…this one meant all of them had some grain of truth, that none of them could be proven false.

Treason, conspiracy, corruption, crimes of war…. All of it hinged on one single charge, the one he'd at first found most laughable and then rang more truly, more seriously the longer he thought about it.

Consorting.

With the enemy.

Willingly.

For years.

A pitiful whimper tore itself from his throat, the sound of a betrayed animal. He lifted his head, seeking reassurance, trembling as his world crumbled. His eyes met those of the man who'd neither confirmed or denied the report, and he knew.

Zelda had been Ganondorf's lover.

[-]

The sound of heavy, angry footsteps barely fazed the Hyrulian Queen as she stared at the parchment on her desk. Sometimes she wondered if the people around her were as dimwitted as they appeared. She'd asked for an itemized expense report to be delivered biweekly. How that translated into a two-foot scroll that detailed who, what, where, when and why such items were bought (or credited) was beyond her reasoning. It made no sense.

What made even less sense was why the kitchen needed three drums of tallow. She'd have to talk to the record keeper about pulling past order ledgers; some of these items didn't appear correct.

With a sigh, she pushed the beads of her abacus to one side and began the calculations anew, idly scratching on a scrap of parchment with each new item.

Nary a muscle twitched as the heavy doors of her office burst open with enough force to hit the walls.

The Triforce's dormancy told her it wasn't Link. The threads which connected her to the Royal Guard (and the obvious anger) made it known it was none of the Sheikah. Those who were currently trying to have her removed from the throne were avoiding her, busy with their preparations. The soldiers would clang loudly if it were an emergency. There was no yelling, so it wasn't about Garo or the other animals.
A quick glance through her lashes made her sigh again.

"Adviser Evat, would you please inform me as to what is so urgent you must attempt to break my doors—and presumably your arms in the attempt?"

It wasn't until she heard the doors click shut that she calmly raised her head and resumed her upright position. From his dramatic entrance (along with the pounding vein in his temple and the fascinating, white-red complexion) he was angry about something.

Please, Goddesses, let this have nothing to do with the soldiers and their complaints about training! She may be General and Queen, but she was not their mother…it was up to the active Officers to train them, not her. It was not her fault if they thought doing laps was pointless.

He was noticeably trembling and his knuckles were white. His lips were pulled tight against his clenched teeth.

Oh dear….

It wasn't about the army then.

Anger burned through his veins, incinerating his manners and self-control. Any respect he had once held for her blew away, ash in the winter wind. "Ganondorf, my Lady?" he spat. The mockery of her sovereignty went unnoted as all blood drained from her face. "My son was a cover for your tête-à-tête with the very man who massacred untold numbers of our countrymen? Is there anything else I should know, while I work on this sham of a defense? Maybe that the despot's child lives somewhere and is your heir?"

Each word was a blow to her pounding heart. Numbness crept through her, robbing her of the vital sensations which kept her here. The room around her swam in and out of focus, a cruel parody of the rising and falling voices in her mind. She struggled for air as his words echoed in her ears.

She could...couldn't...not now. Not like this, not with him here. She had to fight, had to push it back, had to be strong. She was Queen, damn it all! She had done it before, for her country. She could...would...again...

"I…Mikal...."

"Well?! Is there ANYTHING ELSE I need to know?" he hissed in a loud whisper, heedless to the fight within her.

"What's going on here?"

**Songs:**

Post Harbor by Augustine
Revelations (II)

For once, the angry mutters which accompanied every thought were silent. Or at least, easier to ignore. In a relatively good mood, Link hummed to himself, wondering where Shad was. He hadn't seen the younger man since the day before yesterday. He shrugged after a moment. It wasn't uncommon for Shad to vanish to see his father after all.

"Link."

Hm? Turning, he looked around, wondering how he hadn't noticed someone following him. But when he checked the corridor, there was no one there. Tilting his head, he focused on the shadows.

A Sheikah?

Willingly gaining his attention?

"Yes?"

"Your presence may be of use in Her Majesty's office."

He didn't answer, only nodded and started walking once more. His pace quickened as he resisted the urge to run. Ignoring the snide thoughts in the back of his mind, he wondered what was so wrong that one of the Living Shadows would find him. It couldn't be Zelda's voice; she would have called (yanked) and continued calling (begging for help) until he answered.

Taking a deep breath, he walked past the posted Guard (where was Impa anyway?) and slipped inside the room.

What he found was the last thing he expected to see.

His adopted father and warrior sister were staring at one another. "Mikal, I..." Oh dear. The expression on her face told him everything he needed to know.

"Well? Is there anything else I need to know?" He watched Mikal begin to shake. Well...so much for a day relaxing.

"What's going on here?" he asked quietly. He stepped closer, looking between his Queen and father, his Sage and savior. Rage pulsed from the other man in heavy, scorching waves. He carefully shifted to face the wrathful adviser while also watching their monarch from the corner of his eye.

"You... You..." Mikal's chest heaved as he sought the words which escaped him. Red tinged his vision and without warning, the sound of flesh hitting flesh filled the air.

Link wiped blood from his lip and slowly turned his head to face his father once more, ignoring the burning in his cheek.

"You disgust me!" the adviser snarled.

"Mik—"

"Don't! Just-just...tell me if there's ANYTHING ELSE I need to know! Traitors to the throne, one
a consort to evil, the other her lover; one or both of you were knowingly allowing evil to take hold of this country—the throne is not only corrupted, the whole country is!"

Numbness spread throughout every inch of her body. The only thing which kept her standing was the burning shock of what she had just seen.

Mikal?

Calm, passive, quiet Mikal slapped Link?

She knew without seeing her brother's eyes—her dear, sweet brother whose sanity dripped from her hands like the blood Mikal pointed to—were filled with hurt. For all the war, for all the pain, for all the madness he had endured on her behalf…Nayru's Love still wrapped tightly around his heart, shielding it.

And Link loved Mikal like she had loved her father, the way only a child could.

"Mikal…stop…please…" she whispered. Her voice carried to the men, drawing their attention to her. She sat in her chair as her legs failed her. "I'll tell you the truth. Just…please… Leave Link alone."

[-]

Hand on his cheek, Link strode to the frost-covered windows and stared at the city. The wolf within him stirred, demanding blood, and he pushed it down. Mikal had every right to be angry. His job was to advise Zelda and help keep the country on track. He had supported her when Ganon died. And…neither of them had told him why she had acted so odd over the years, why he had started drinking…more…than he probably should.

In all fairness, they'd been inconsiderate.

Doesn't mean it didn't hurt.

A lot.

He knew Mikal would eventually tire of his antics, of his problems. But…they didn't deserve this. He could understand it, since the older man didn't know the truth yet, but they didn't deserve it.

"Mikal, sit, please?" With a tired sigh, he turned to face his father once more. He waited until the trusted adviser sat and until he himself leaned against a wall behind Zelda's desk.

"What do you want to know?"

"When…why…" Too shocked, the truth too raw and his mind too chaotic, the words could not leave his thoughts. Mikal spread his trembling hands, heart lurching in his chest as he saw his son's proximity to the Jezebel.

"It started when I was thirteen," Zelda began quietly. "After that first big fight." And so the story, told only once in its entirety, spilled forth. An hour then two passed as Zelda and Link took turns explaining what had happened over the last several years. How their stories interwove, how Zelda's insanity and Link's…increase…in drinking were related, and what it all meant for the people around them.

They conveniently left out the fact that Impa had all but signed Link's death warrant, that Garo was ready to help her and that Shad was clearly depressed by the maelstrom of events that were
surrounding him.

Oh, and that Link was just as insane as Zelda but far more violent, that Zelda herself had to deal with running a country that would, if they knew the intricacies that they were telling Mikal, call for her death, and that there was a journal from an assassinated knight currently in the hands of the prosecution.

Wait, he needed to know that last one.

How did they know?

Erm... good question.

One Mikal thankfully didn't press when they remained silent after that revelation.

"Who else knows for sure?" was his eventual response.

Sage and Hero looked at one another before they spoke, one interrupting the other.

"Impa, obviously, after Zelda... told her."

"I think Midna, since Link—"

"Navi always looked like she knew but—"

"Healer Deaso for sure—"

"Maybe the veterinarian—"

Their voices faltered as they traded looks once more, aware of just how many times they had slipped up.

"The Guard—"

"But they won't tell anyone, and—"

"Except I think at least one of the current soldiers saw something—"

"Do any of the Sages know?"

"They wouldn't tell if they did. What about Nabooru?"

"Hm... maybe. Anyone who escaped death when the war ended—"

"If they were part of Ganondorf's inner circle than they knew—"

"Do you remem—"

"No, I—"

"Enough!" Mikal rubbed his head and groaned softly as their words tumbled through his mind, their half-finished sentences ringing in his ears.

"Let me get this straight, please. Several people who currently live or work in the castle, outside of the male Sheikah, have either been aware or may have been aware of this for years. Diplomacy being with it is, no mere mortal can question a Sage, so their silence is guaranteed through loyalty. However it's possible there are some of the usurper's followers and allies live, and they may know.
"Not only this, but the Twilight Queen, possibly those who work in her infirmary, and Lady Navi are aware. I recall mutterings about foolish priests after the wedding, so I can more than likely add some of Queen Midna's people to the list.

"Is there anyone you know for sure doesn't know?" he finished rhetorically.

"The rest of Hyrule," came the echoed, childish response.

Mikal closed his eyes, suddenly wishing he'd never let his anger get the better of him.

This trial was going to be a nightmare.

[-]

Hours later, sequestered in her nursery chambers as if they were children again, Zelda and Link sat near empty bookshelves and pristine shelved dolls. Legs crossed and a platter of treats between them ("Stop hogging the tea Link!", "I would if you'd give me more than a half-cup!"), they spoke quietly. The room reminded them of simpler times, of better times, when their biggest worries were how to get out of the day's lessons (rarely did that happen) and if Impa knew their lunch had consisted of more sugar than real food since they'd been allowed to eat away from the adults (she had).

"I think it went well."

Watching his highly dignified sister-in-arms-and-spirit scrape chocolate from her fingers with her teeth, Link shook his head and wondered if they'd both finally cracked.

It was a definite possibility given the last few weeks after all.

"It went well? Cess, are you ok?"

She swatted his hand when he reached forward to feel her forehead. "Don't call me that, Paladin. And yes, I am. Think about it. He stormed in, accused me of being a whore—which I regularly call myself anyway, so don't say anything—and you of being a traitor. Then he listened to a story, neither of us tried to hurt each other or ourselves—a real feat these days—and he left with a list of ideas. I say it ended well."

"Was that before or after he said we were hopeless fools who regularly forgot there were people who would gladly help us? He also said that because so many people know, or may know, that finding proof of our innocence is going to be much harder. Then he finished by saying if we lost and got put to death, he'd find a way to bring us back and whack us over the head with your Ocarina—after Impa had her fill of course—before killing us himself."

"See, happy ending!" She beamed at him.

He tried not to laugh.

For once, neither of them could hear the demons which whispered to them. Present worries weighed so heavily on their minds that for a few hours, they could simply be the people they once were to each other. Siblings, friends, comrades, one another's shadows. For now, the terror, pain and insanity which normally ruled them could find no hold.

It was nice, they admitted silently to themselves as she poured them both last cups of tea. It was… refreshing…to be able to sit here, like they had as children, when he was still shy and she was still outspoken, and just laugh at the people around them. To remember what it was like to care about
the world but not really understand what the triangles on their hands meant. When her dreams were scary but distant and the only exploration he wanted to do was with her and in walking distance of the castle.

When had life become so complicated, they wondered.

Their eyes locked and they shared a smile.

"Probably that time you made Impa run me through with a sword."

"No no, it was *clearly* when you began correcting one of the priests about the Goddesses during Ostara."

"He was wrong!"

"He'd also been studying our history longer than you."

"But he was *wrong.*"

"...does it really matter what color Din's hair was?"

He chuckled quietly as Zelda blushed.

"Yes, blast it! It does!"

"Why?"

He threw his head back and laughed when her blush deepened and she looked away, muttering to herself.

He missed her. Missed this.

"Where's Impa?"

"That was a random question."

"Zel -da !"

"Busy."

"With what? She's *never* away from you all day. Her or that pup."

"You just don't like Garo."

"Which is fine because he hates me."

She muttered about boys and how they would never act like adults.

"Hey!"

"Well, it's true! He's a puppy, Link. What's your excuse?"

He grumbled and looked away, unable to answer her when she stared pointedly at him.
Impa looked around the room and sighed in relief when the others nodded.

It was done.

Grimacing, she touched her temple then her chest. The magics she had woven hadn't blocked the bond so much as dulled it. Shadows danced around her, ecstatic at their freedom. She ignored them, focusing on the emotions which stemmed from her lover.

She sighed once more in relief when she realized they were clear, focused more on happiness and amusement than the flashes of murky turmoil she'd received earlier.

One thing was certain—Zelda hadn't called for her.

Looking around once more, she met the eyes of each of her kin in turn before settling on the lone sitting figure.

"Are you happy, grandmother?"

Impaz looked away from the memory box in her lap and smiled tiredly. "Yes, child, I am. I didn't think I would be. It's a drastic change, especially at my age. But…I am happy. My family is around me, and while some of the ghosts have followed, many of them can finally be laid to rest."

Impa smiled and bent to kiss her grandmother's cheek, understanding her trepidation for what it was. She hadn't lied when she'd said the world would treat her differently. She'd yet to leave her chambers other than to walk Garo when he somehow snuck into her room.

How on earth did that mutt keep getting into locked rooms anyway?

Looking at the mutt that was currently curled next to her grandmother, she shook her head. "Come, Garo." She headed for the door, knowing no salutations were needed between her and her tribe. As she entered the hall, she heard the quick but soft steps of the growing mutt behind her. She closed the door, allowing her brethren to have their time with the only one of their elders who still lived.

Garo followed the l…Impa, sniffing and snorting as he walked down the stone hall. Whatever she'd done with the funny words and messing with the light had made his nose itch. Weird female. She still smelled like trees though. Even after all the moon's passings he'd been in the rock place, she still smelled like trees. He'd gotten used to the odd place and even liked some of it (it was always warm, unlike the cold white stuff outside) but he still missed the forest. Still missed momma at times.

He thought the other female, the older one, was Impa's momma. She smelled like it. Her momma had come from somewhere outside too, where it smelled like wind and dirt. Away from the trees, but still outside. They all smelled like they liked trees, the night-smellers. Mistress beta-omega Zelda called them Sheikah. He just knew they all smelled like night, that Impa smelled kinda like trees and they all smelled like they liked trees.

Speaking of trees, he really wanted to go outside now. Whining, he brushed against her paw.
Success! She stopped and looked down.

It was getting easier to train these two-leggers.

"You need to go out, don't you?"

He yipped slightly and sat, knowing she now understood that meant "yes".

"All right. Find Zelda and we'll go. Goddess knows she needs to get out of that office at some point."

"Find Zelda"? He could do that! He was good at that.

Ignoring the pressure in his stomach, he sniffed the floor before taking off, not caring if she followed. Several twists, turns, avoiding two-leggers and a run-in with the hissing fur ball that usually lived by where the food was (they called it a kitchen, he called it a den) he scratched at the door, whimpering and growling softly. He could smell her, hear her….but the bad alpha was in there too. He wouldn't let the bad alpha hurt her!

Understanding his frantic reaction, Impa calmly opened the door and walked into the study room. Wondering what they would be doing in Zelda's old chambers, she touched her dagger before following the pup.

The sight that met her eyes behind the open door made her pause. Sleeping on the floor like two children, Zelda and Link laid, unscathed. Surrounded by tea items and photo albums, she could see no signs of violence. In fact, they looked… almost peaceful.

The bond gave her nothing but happiness.

She understood it then. She didn't like it. In fact, she hated it, hated the false sense of security it would give Zelda, hated the fuel that would be added to Link's drug-induced rage. But…she understood it.

For the first time in many years, they'd been nothing but two people enjoying a few hours reminiscing over their shared childhood.

Gritting her teeth, she fought the urge to simply let them sleep. She couldn't do that, especially not now. Link would no doubt wake soon, seeking some sort of liquid relief. She wouldn't let him take that out on Zelda. Moving quickly, she touched the younger woman's shoulder, only hesitating long enough to "hug" the bond.

Green-gray eyes opened within seconds of her contact, lithe muscles tensing in defense. She cooed softly, soothingly, backing away to give the other woman time. It took a few moments, but Zelda blinked and smiled between yawns.

"Impa." Her name was a whispered greeting and it soothed the anger which was building inside her.

"Garo wants to go out."

Zelda nodded, for once not questioning the older woman, for once not pushing to know what had caused that hard glint in her eye. She merely stood and exited the room as silently as any other Sheikah. She didn't look back at her brother, knowing if she did that she would doubt herself. No,
best not to dwell, only to move.

She wouldn't let anything ruin the good memories that had softened his recent blows, not even herself.

Snow fell around them in gentle sheets, each flake a soft bit of cool downy. They watched Garo romp around, chasing birds and enjoying himself if the sparkle in his eyes was any indication. Arms laced together and cloaks wrapped tightly around them, the two women walked leisurely through the hibernating knot garden, knowing the path well despite the feet of ice and snow around them.

Neither spoke as they followed the rambunctious mutt. Their silence was one of contentment as each woman allowed her thoughts to drift, accepting the momentary calm. They didn't focus on the investigation and upcoming trial, nor the expounding complications within their little family. No, for these few minutes, their sole focus was on making sure Garo didn't jump into a hidden pool and they didn't slip on ice.

That was, until a dark figure parted the gauzy white curtain which fell around the garden. Impa turned first, only a small increase of pressure on Zelda's arm alerting her to the movement. What now? Could they not have a moment of peace?

Yet as the figure neared, curls of raven hair peaked from under a thick cowl. The brown material was pushed away, revealing a trusted face and dark eyes.

"Healer Deaso," Zelda murmured. She pulled away from her mate, knowing the man would not seek her unless it was urgent. "Whatever is the matter?"

"My Lady, pray tell, is it true...what they are saying, is it fact? Shall there truly be a trial?"

She flinched at the desperate hope in his gaze and sighed tiredly. "There shall, sir."

"And...?"

"And nothing. Your involvement is not required."

"The others are already speaking to those who seek answers, my Lady. It is not long that my 'involvement' will remain secret."

Impa said nothing, merely watched them. She barely paid mind to the mutt when he sat beside her on the tail of her cloak. The tone of Zelda's voice and the bond told her he had not been one of the...beings... who had hurt her. But... paternal caring? Surely she was mistaken.

Green-gray eyes met cocoa-brown, sorrow meeting determination. "I am sorry to have dragged you in this."

"I am a Healer, Your Majesty. I could no more have ignored you than Master Kaneil."

What did the veterinarian have to do with all of this?

Zelda closed her eyes and allowed her breath to escape in a quiet sigh, heedless of the cold leeching into her boots.

"There are times I wished you had not answered his or Link's calls, Healer."

"I know," he replied simply, his tone as truthful and even as her own. "Yet I did... and as you once
told me, my Lady, even you cannot stop free will by changing the past."

Her lips twitched as she opened her eyes, fighting the tears that pooled. "Unfortunately."

As the two fell silent, lost in their shared memories, Impa watched them. Understanding dawned as she took in the nurturing expression on Eldric Deaso's face.

*He* was the Healer Link and Zelda had mentioned when they explained what had been going on.

He was Zelda's "Mikal", the paternal figure she'd needed but had never asked for. One man of few who had clearly been a vital instrument in her survival, in her sanity. A simple, Hylian man born without magic but who had been able to show her that he could be trusted.

A flicker of hope began to burn in her heart. There was someone *other* than her brethren and Link who knew. *Two* people, in fact, who had been and would continue to be supports for Zelda.

This…this changed *everything*.

If Zelda had been able to trust them, rather than just the Sheikah (as her bonded tribe) and Link (who really wasn't worth thinking about right now), then it was very possible she could recover. Not fully, she would never have the smooth psyche she'd possessed before. The deep, thick scars would remain on her spirit and within her mind.

But this…

This meant there was hope.

This meant that Zelda *had* more than her, even if she didn't realize it.

It meant that despite her fears, however well she hid them from the masses, she trusted two men with her life. More than that, she trusted them with her being.

[-]

Animal Master Kaneil, more often referred to as "Vet", raised his head at the sound of approaching steps. Rarely was anyone nearing his office a good thing at this time of day. Carefully setting his quill within the holder, he reviewed who could be nearing with such determined steps.

The stablemen were off to lunch. The hunters and soldiers had bedded their canines until the night. The lovely falcons had been moved to the Goron's care for the winter, and he'd checked on the messenger birds just this morning. The castle occupants would run rather than walk if t'was an emergency and Ben would have burst in if it were a trader or visiting villager.

Humming reached his ears seconds before the door opened. Smiling, he rose.

"Malon," he greeted quietly. "How are you, my dear?"

"Well, uncle," she replied. When he rounded the desk and hugged her to him as if she were a child, she returned his embrace with equal strength. "And yourself?"

"Also well. Busy."

She raised a single auburn eyebrow as they pulled away. "When are you not?"

"Touché. How is your father? Stubborn as ever?"
"Well…” came the halted response, "he didn't growl and curse your name when I said I was going to the Market."

"An improvement, no doubt," was all Kaneil said in response. His lips twitched, though if it was from amusement or annoyance the young woman could not be sure.

Shaking her head at the men's feud, she looked around the office. In all the years she had been visiting her uncle, the only change she'd seen was more things being added. Books on animal care and medicine, jars and pin boards of specimens, posters of growth stages and anatomy… it all filled every free inch of space. There were days she wondered why her father had a farm when he hated the work so much.

Then she remembered her mother (Nayru rest her soul) and uncle loved animals as much as her. Clearly she got it from her mother's side of the family.

Smiling once more, she looked an arm through her uncle's. "How is my girl?"

"I'd wondered how long it would take you to ask," he replied with a chuckle. "Shall we go check?"

"Yes please!" Without another word, she skipped from the office, pulling him with her.

As he hurriedly closed the door behind him, he couldn't help but feel relief at having an excuse to leave the room.

He really did spend too much time on paperwork….

[-]

Mikal kicked snow from his path, muttering quietly. Wrapped securely in a thick cloak, he watched his feet as his thoughts swam.

His stomach turned as he thought about all he had learned.

His Queen had been-

And his son was-

In some twisted way, though he'd never admit it aloud, some part of him almost wished his initial accusations had been correct. He could cope with treason and consorting, could deal with corruption and taint. But to know the truth, to know that the two young adults had suffered such horrors…

To know that soon, the entire country may know exactly what those horrors were…

He didn't know what to do.

Waking nightmares plagued him. Shivering from disgust and the cold, he wrapped his cloak tighter around him.

The look on her face when he'd accused her cut at his heart. It reminded him of his wife during the first war.

His expression of pained understanding from those words choked him. The same expression had stared back at him in the mirror for years.
As Adviser to the Crown, one learned many things. Not all of them the best of news. Some of it
downright immoral and illegal. One did not rule a country by being kind and merciful, something
he had apparently forgotten when the King died.

Zelda was kind, always had been. She was fair and honest. On some level, he had known she
would never do what he had accused her of doing.

Yet...her father had approved things he'd wished he could erase from his memory.

So why did he tell her that ordering the opposing army a swift death was a valid charge? If he
admitted the truth to himself, it was an act of mercy. No court would try a Bulblin; they would
behead it first.

And technically, since the Triforces, Sages and Twilight Queen were involved, didn't that mean
everything about the last battle against the dark king was outside the mortal realm of justice?

Feeling a new headache forming, he shook his head and continued walking. This was only going to
become more complicated as time wore on.

What was that?

Squinting, he made out a…spinning shape? Confused, he headed towards the dark blur, not sure
what he was doing. Feeling reckless, he continued on. The closer he came, the more he realized it
wasn't one of those Armos Knights he'd heard (and read) so much about. It was a person.

…who was spinning in the snow, apparently trying to catch flakes.

Confusion gave way to amusement as he stopped. Shivering in the cold wind, he watched the
person.

"Evat! Did they release you on good behavior?"

Turning, he smiled at his old friend and clasped hands with the veterinarian. "In a manner of
speaking."

"Ah, so you escaped those books of yours! A runaway, how rebellious of you."

Chuckling, the two men released hands and turned as one to face the still-spinning figure.

No, not a figure…a young woman. Her hood had fallen, revealing locks of lustrous red hair which
hid her face.

"Does my niece amuse you?"

Blinking and shaking his head, Mikal turned to Kaneil. The words cut through the fog which had
suddenly permeated his thoughts. "What? Amuse… No."

Smiling to himself, the Animal Master nodded and turned back to his niece. "Malon, would you
please join us for a moment?"

Bright blue eyes peeked from a curtain of red hair. A hand, tan despite the winter weather, brushed
the locks away. Transfixed, Mikal could do nothing but stare.

"ello. I'm Malon. He's my uncle," she added, nodding to the other man with a grin.

"I…yes, he told me. My name is Mikal Evat."
She laughed softly as his hand appeared between them without a word. Clasping his hand, she shook it, reveling in the warmth.

"Do neither of you possess gloves?" was Kaneil's only exasperated comment.

"I wanted to feel the snow, uncle," Malon explained as she released his hand. Pulling gloves from her inner cloak pocket, she quickly covered her hands.

"I…forgot mine inside," Mikal admitted quietly in a sheepish tone. Rubbing his hands together, he pulled the thick wool around him once more. Fighting the urge to stare, he glanced away.

Gods save him, he was acting like a schoolboy with a crush on the headmistress.

The veterinarian shook his head and sighed once more, more amused than annoyed. "Come, let's return to my office for some warm drinks."

As he followed the two relatives, a sudden thought made his steps falter.

How were Link and Zelda so sure the others had a dead knight's journal? And how were they sure said knight was not merely in hiding?

Troubled, he shook the thought from his head and hurried to keep pace once more.

For a few moments, he wouldn't think about it.

[–]

AN: For everyone I promised Mikal would have a break, there you are! I know it ended a bit abruptly, but that happens sometimes.

Songs:
Clarity by Zedd
Breath of Life

One sennight became a fortnight and then two, time passing at breakneck speed while it also seemed to creep by.

"Eye of the beholder" and all that rot.

Pleasant mood soured, Zelda backed further into the shadows and contemplated the last few minutes.

The library, the singular refuge in which her father and tutors would leave her be, continued to be sacred in her eyes. Here was where she had learned to "think beyond the throne", as her father had put it. Here was where she had learned about her country's (mostly) proud history. One of the castle's largest rooms, it had held enough books to satisfy her curiosity for hours. As she grew, that fact had not changed.

Yet in the years during which she had been elevated to Queen, she had not been able to spend much time within the sacred space. Unless it was a matter of state, her time within the comforting stacks had become sorely limited. She spent more time looking over account books and international treaty scrolls than she did literature and poetry.

Today, she had remedied to change that.

Letters posted, accounts approved, various requests signed (or in some cases, burned), and all other boring paperwork completed, she had fled her office. With Garo at her heels, she'd snuck through the shadows to reach the vast holding. As the public petitions had been cancelled due to an influenza outbreak in the Market (which no doubt had spread into the Providences by now), none could chastise her.

With that thought in mind, and knowing she had an hour at most before Mikal ran her down, she'd slipped up the stairs to the metaphysical tomes. Selecting a thin volume of poems depicting the Goddesses and their Consort-Sons, she and Garo had curled themselves in a niche. With her long cloak wrapped around their still forms, they had blended into the light shadows. Reading easily by the soft sconce light, she had lost herself in the beautiful words.

It was only the semi-quiet, urgent voices which had drawn her attention from the crisp pages. Words indecipherable, she had closed the book and silently made her way towards them. It wasn't until she was able to catch sight of them through the packed shelves that she realized it was the opposing council.

The first thought which had crossed her mind was their foolishness at meeting in a public area. While the castle library was not as active as the public one, it still had frequent visitors. Her second, grudging acknowledgement was that they were wise to choose a place few of those visitors frequented.

Pressing against the stone, she fought with herself. Leave or stay, eavesdrop or have manners? It wasn't proper, but...they were trying to push her off the throne and have her killed. Aside from that, she simply could not abide by the fact that they called her brother a traitor and said she willingly went to Ganondorf.

A shiver ran through her as nausea twisted her stomach.

What a horrible, depraved thought.
She might not have...told...anyone but Link...but she wouldn't have chosen to start what happened. Sure, she followed the orders, and—

No, focus. Listen, Zelda.

*Turning to the gathered men and women, their voices raised ever so slightly in heated debate.*

*Most of their words remained too muffled for her to make out, but those she did spelled a grim picture. Horror and determination left a bitter taste in her mouth.*

*If they had witnesses, then it was time to make sure her defense was solid. The trial was closer than she'd thought.*

Carefully making her way from the library and to the halls, she clung to the shadows once more. Head down, hood up and cloak around her, only the Sheikah who trailed her took notice to her location. When Nabooru had all but dragged Impa to the kitchen for tea and then a deserted room to talk ("You need to spend time with people who aren't Zelda, Impa!")), the Guard had taken their place.

Garo at her heels, she quickly headed for her office, contemplating this new knowledge. The thought of discussing what happened, of hearing it.... Her skin crawled at the notion. But even worse was the fact that they had Creso's journal, and apparently had witnesses who saw her *consorting*. Willingly.

Damn it. Link said he'd cleared out all evidence after the knight's...accident.

Smiling grimly, she acknowledged the *death of her father's murderer* was not something she'd even known about until years later. But...still...Link had *assured her*.

Then again, they'd both sworn to be best friends forever and that nothing would come between them.

Shaking her head to dispel thoughts of her brother, she slipped into her office and headed for the fireplace. Stoking the coals, she carefully layered the kindling and logs, allowing her thoughts to settle. Now was the time for reason, for logic, for Wisdom...not for anger and pain.

"Could someone find Mikal, please?" she whispered without turning from the hearth. Her fingers curled in Garo's fur as he lay by her feet, watching the growing flames with wary interest.

"Of course," was Reyel's equally quiet reply. He slipped from the room, leaving the crouching woman to her thoughts. Nodding to his brethren, he separated the adviser's signature from all others and followed it. It took him but minutes to find the other man and send him to Zelda.

Task completed, he went in search of his tribe sister and the desert dweller. Nabooru was always good for a laugh. And the Gods help him, she could crack through his sister's shields faster than any of them.

A fond smile pulled at his lips as he recalled their antics. Even living as far apart as they did, the two young women had found many opportunities to spend together. Goddesses help them all if they ever decided they were *bored*. Those summer days had been a nightmare.

Although, not as bad as when the two tribes had decided to meet with forest dwellers. With a grimace, he shook his head and tried not to think about it.

How Sarah had let *any* of them back in the trees was still a mystery to him. He supposed it had
something to do with Zelda's then-impending birth.

It would have been rather awkward if the Royal Guard, let alone the Maderone, was unable to enter a vast portion of the nation.

Shaking his head, he rapped softly on the door. The threads of their tribe pulsed behind it, telling him he'd found them and was welcome.

Slipping in, he barely closed the door behind him before mirth overtook him. His own stoicism fell as laughter pulled itself from him in peels.

[-]

"Your Highness?"

The question, equal parts confusion and worry, made her heart hurt. Why could there not be happy news for once?

Standing and turning her back to the flames, she looked at the tired advisor. His clothes were rumpled and ink stained his fingers despite the numerous times he had no doubt scrubbed them. His hair was somewhat disheveled, as if he'd run a hand through it one too many times.

"Mikal. You were interrupted?"

"No, Your Majesty, merely thinking."

She raised a brow at his formality and saw him grimace.

"My apologies, Zelda. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes." She sat on the edge of her desk and stared at him for several moments before sighing softly. "I…overheard a conversation which you may find interesting."

"Oh?" His soft utterance was met with her waving him towards a chair.

"They've found witnesses."

He stared at her for several seconds before confusion slowly faded to realization. Sucking in a breath, he shook his head. "Do you know who they are?"

"No…only that there are witnesses."

"Are you certain?"

"I heard them myself. Mikal…" She trailed off and looked away, uncharacteristically unsure.

"We'll get you through this- I will get you both through this."

"To what end?"

"Would you prefer your head or the throne?"

"Both," came her quiet, serious answer. "I don't trust anyone else to put Hyrule before ambition."

"Then I will make sure you have both. Your Majesty, you do realize…everyone in attendance will know the truth."
"Yes."

"…it's not too late to seek asylum with Queen Midna."

She laughed then, a sad, hoarse sound. "Oh Mikal…you are a dear friend, but not ignorant in the least. No ruler, not even Midna, would grant another ruler asylum while being prosecuted. The only reason she can't be summoned to testify for either side is that she is a Sage in her own realm and recognized by the Sages of our country as such. Though a Queen, she is outside of judicial matters."

"Her wife is not."

"No," she whispered, "Navi is not. Though a magical being, she is formally recognized as a Hyrulean-born citizen within the Woodland Charter. A foreign marriage does not negate that, though few have ever summoned a former citizen. I suspect they will do so with her simply because they can."

"More than likely," he agreed just as quietly. "Are there any you want to avoid testifying?"

"Other than Link?" she asked after another humorless laugh. "Not really."

"I have an idea," he admitted while leaning forward in his chair. "One which may make everyone happy, regarding Link."

Sitting in a chair beside him, she listened silently as he spoke. Despite her resolve, tiny seeds of hope began to sprout within her heart.

Maybe…maybe they both could be saved.

[-]

Heavy leather boots crushed through the thickly packed snow as he paced. In a vain attempt to stave the inevitable, he'd retreated to the training grounds, heedless of the cold.

Hands pressed deep into his pockets, he kept his head bowed as he traced a new path around the perimeter. It wouldn't take them long to figure out where he'd went, but…it would give him time.

There's another way.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he sighed tiredly before pushing the thought away. His sister may be linked to him, but he had no desire for his subconscious to take on her voice. He had enough odd voices "speaking" his thoughts; adding a psychotic female one to the mix was beyond what he could manage.

Warmth wrapped around his heart and spread outward, cocooning his entire spirit and invading his body. A soft smile graced his lips as he felt Nayru's Love extend its shield.

For now, nothing hurt.

The craving in his blood, the tension in his muscles, the whispers in his mind, the memories which tormented his being…none of it mattered. His love for Shad, and even his sister, crazy as they both were, gave him strength to face it all. It was what drove him on.

There's still time to turn away.

But no, there wasn't, and he knew it. Linked to Wisdom as he was (no pun intended),
he couldn't turn away…no matter what it said.

_Not from your family, child, but from this self-destructive path you are so intent on taking. They will support you, my son. They love you as surely as you love them._

Chuckling quietly, he shook his head and looked at the sky. Yet even as he laughed, something within him ached as his conscience continued to speak. The fact that it had switched from his sister to a "mother's" voice just proved he was insane. But then, he'd known that for years. _No one could travel through time repeated, live in a child or adult body and be the opposite spiritual age. It was bound to do damage._

Well…except for maybe his sister, but as the Sage of Time and Queen of Destiny, she was the exception. Her spirit _was_ time.

The ache within him grew as he considered the parents he couldn't remember. Mikal had adopted him and Impa had "raised" him for a few years, but…they weren't his parents. The mother who birthed him, the father who sired him…what happened? Despite wearing Kakariko clothing, he'd learned he'd lived in Ordan for part of his childhood. An orphan at five, they'd told him.

Shivering as the cold wind pulsed against his still form, he continued walking.

What were they like? What did they _look_ like? Did they have a relationship or did they barely know one another? The cynic in him acknowledged that given everyone's _lack_ of knowledge and/or response to his inquiries, the second possibility was more likely. But…he could deal with that. Was he even wanted, or did his mother cast him away at birth?

Morose, he stopped and looked at the sky again. Nayru's Love flared a second time, forcing his eyes to close as the unnatural warmth filled and surrounded him. The feel of ethereal arms wrapping around him was too hard to ignore.

Rarely had he cursed the blue jewel as he did now. To taunt him was not love. It was cruelty.

Exhaling roughly, he reluctantly glanced at the castle. Trading one cage for the other, he turned towards the massive structure and retraced his steps. Even Nayru's Love couldn't mask the desire for long. It was too strong, too deeply rooted into his body and spirit for that.

But…for all he felt it, it didn't _hurt._

The only thing that hurt was the memory of ghostly arms.

Hugging himself, he lowered his head and allowed his thoughts to drift elsewhere.

By the time he entered the warm castle, he was numb. From the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes, the mindless trek around the vast fortress had made it nigh impossible to feel anything.

Not even the _need_ that invaded through every cell of his body. The hunger which normally pulled him incessantly back to his rooms was hidden behind the icicles in his veins.

It felt…nice.

As long as he didn't think about what had happened. That was just…_

_Not worth the effort_, he admitted to himself. Rubbing snow from his hair, he turned towards the kitchen, wondering if there was any cider left.
Who knew Impa could drink a whole pitcher without stopping to breathe? Meant there was rarely any left for anyone else though. Except Zelda, who got a first glass…

But then, once upon a time, Zelda used to give him the first taste of "her" beloved treat because she knew she wouldn't share if she didn't.

His sister really did love nougat. And mousse. And chocolate.

Idly wondering if there was any of that chewy candy hidden somewhere in the kitchen, he hastened his steps. Pain radiated through his hands and feet as warmth returned, but he paid it no mind.

Nutty, sugary solid cream was calling his name. Ok, it wasn't cream, but it was creamy…ish. Barring that, there was always brittle.

Mmm…brittle.

Stomach growling, he stuck his head in the mostly-empty kitchen and headed for the pantry.

[-]

Heart aflutter, emerald eyes met ruby and carnelian in turn. Words lodged in a dry throat as hands drifted through the air in silent apology.

"You can stay."

"I…don't want to impose…"

"You aren't," came the firm assurance.

"Stay, Zelda…please."

The quiet request made her nod. Carefully shutting the door behind her, she closed the space between her and Impa to take the offered seat beside the older woman. Everything she had planned to say vanished as she tried not to stare at the Gerudo woman sitting feet away from her. She knew the Sage of Spirit had to suspect something, what with all the inquiries and rumors flying around.

It also didn't help to see Reyel sitting there. She knew the other Sheikahs had lives outside guarding her. She was technically part of the tribe, and as such, had been witness to a few snatches of their "down time". But those rare glimpses couldn't compare to see him lounging in a chair, with what she suspected were cookie crumbs on his fingers, and half-smiling from something that was said before she came in.

Nabooru felt her lips twitch and carefully swallowed a chuckle as she watched the younger woman's composed expression shatter into one of confusion. She could empathize, as a fellow leader…but that didn't make it any less amusing. Allowing her half-smile to fall away, she acknowledged that seeing the Hylian show something other than her usual-as-of-late "anger-sadness-pain-confusion-love" expression was a nice change.

Dear Din she was rambling. Must be all the honeyed tea…too much sugar.

Shaking her head, she looked between the three comrades

She could see the glowing bonds tying them together. Some were thin as silk and others wide enough to nearly eclipse their bodies. It was nice to see the family links between Impa and Reyel were stronger. They'd grown weak, dark from atrophy at one point.
She wondered if Zelda had discovered that ability. Probably not, if she judged the insecurity in her eyes correctly. The Sage of Time could, in theory, see the strands of time and reality which created the universe. Everything within their world was connected in some way. A butterfly and sandstorm was the classical example.

Time, Light, Shadows and Spirit were interwoven far more than the elemental Sages knew. Rauru's position was more one of respect at this point, and he knew it. None of them dared ask Rauru's age, but they all knew the transference of Light to Zelda, alongside her own powers of Time, was not accidental. He may be strict and sometimes cynical, but he was wise enough to know he would not be around much longer.

It made her head hurt to think about anyone having two Sage powers. One was more than enough, thank you very much.

As she returned her attention to the people talking quietly beside her, she knew she was missing something.

But right now…it didn't matter.

Carefully sorting through a handful of bean-shaped flavored candies, she picked three.

They flew through the air with a flick of her fingers, hitting each person in the forehead.

Mentally patting herself on the back (hitting two Sheikah and a fellow Sage was impressive, even for the leader of all Gerudo), she ate the rest of the candies and just stared at them.

All three blinked several times, as if trying to figure out what happened.

Then Impa threw a pillow at her head.

[-]

[-]

**Songs:**

Breath of Life by Florence and the Machine
Chapter Forty

Mirrors

Light.
Blood.
Screams.
Pain.
Fear.

"I am free of you."

"You will never be free. I am inside you."

Raspy breath. Lungs, desperately gasping for sooty air. Fluttering pulse. Heart, struggling to pump tainted blood.

"I can kiss it better if you like."

"Never. Never again."


Hidden faces, glowing eyes.

Hands. Scarred, smooth, bloody, clean.

Suddenly, there was fire.

Then...white.

Soft.

Warm.

Warm, soft hands ran over her, comforting.

Pleasing.

Pulling.

Clear red eyes stared back at her, bright with emotion.

Loving.

Caring.

Lips met hers, seeking and teaching.
Wanting.
Taking.

And then there was pain.

Red and orange became a dizzying mixture as everything spun together, everything lost in the haze of pain and betrayal.

Love became the sword on which she fell.

A husky voice whispering, "You are mine."

[-]

A strangled scream rebounded inside a heaving chest. Eyes snapped open, instantly adjusting to the darkness as shaking hands yanked at curtains.

Scrambling, Zelda fell from her bed and ran across the room. Her breath came in broken gasps as she fumbled for the hidden door. She barely felt Garo dart into the room seconds after she found the handle.

It took but moments to close the door and cross the space, pressing close to the mumbling figure.

Desperation thrummed through her, pounded every cell in her body until she was nothing but action. Everything, anything to escape the pain, the lies, the hate.

She needed no light to find the lips, to press a bruising kiss to them. Her hands tugged, pulling, seeking a way beyond the cloth around them.

Why, why couldn't she- why wasn't it easy- there had to be a way-

Cold.

Why was she cold?

She reached blindly, but the warm covers beside her were empty.

The struck match was blinding, even once it was touched to a single candle.

"Zelda."

She whimpered then. Pushed away, scrambled back, pressing into the corner. Terror heated her from the inside, making her kick the covers and pillows away, to create whatever fragile barrier she could between them. Her arms covered her head as she buried her face in her knees, seeking safety, shelter, protection.

A cry tore itself from her lips as she shook, lost, confused.

Nothing made sense. None of it.

They had all been sitting there, sitting there, laughing, talking, eating, enjoying the time. Reyel. Impa. Nabooru. Zelda. It was good. They had fun.

Then she had asked. She had asked, "Why won't you look me in the eye anymore, Zelda?" She'd had to look at her then, to prove her wrong. Nabooru was her friend, trusted, worthy, safe.
But when she had looked, she had remembered why.

Spirits were Timeless. They existed always and never at once. It was always easier to see the past compared to the future.

Spirits not yet born were still potentials, still possibilities, could still be changed. Souls born and dead were done, cemented. There was a chance of change for those alive, for those to be reborn… but they had and did exist already.

The past was never forgotten.

Never changed.

When she'd met those eyes, Spirit had stared back at her. All spirits, but also tribe spirit. Ancestors, relatives. Mostly women, a few men.

She'd seen the echo.

It could not be avoided.

She'd run then, mindless, heedless, without destination. Sought the refuge of the Temple, where the outbreak had not touched due to avoidance, where the priests and priestesses were absent, where it was silent.

Before the altar, before the three tokens of the Mothers, she had wept.

She could not meet those eyes again.

One more thing taken from her.

And here she found herself, remembering, reliving.

What was true, lie, past, present? What was future, what was maybe, what was definite?

The bed under her sagged and she choked on a scream.

Cold, firm wetness touched her hand and she moved once more without thought.

Pull him to her, wrap around him, hold him. Garo, her pup, her lifeline, her sanity. Always safe, she'd saved him, he'd saved her.

Her hands shook as she ran them through his fur, rocking slightly, creating a tap tap as her spine hit the wall behind her.

"Zelda."

Quieter now. No anger. No shock.

Pleading?

Look up. Don't stare. Just glance.

Look up.

Yes, pleading.

Back down.
Eyes on the ground.
On the feet.
Anywhere but above the knees.
Never on the eyes.
Not without pain.

"You're asking for this. How dare you!"

A hand, on hers.
Don't whimper, don't cry, don't speak, don't scream, don't make a single sound if you value your life and—

"Zelda. Look at me."

Firmer now.
An order.
Look up.
Barely. At the chin, at the mouth.

"My eyes, Zelda."

Eyes…eyes…worth it? Worth the pain?

Eyes.
Red eyes.

Red eyes…

Not orange.
No fire, no pain, no hate, no lust, no malice.

Why fear?

"Because I don't know what caused this."

Had she said that out loud?
She must have.
What caused it?
Him.
He caused it.
He caused all of it.
He was still inside her.

_In_ her.
Her heart
spirit
mind
body.
He owned her.

Then arms wrapped around her.

She flinched. Automatic. It was a response, couldn't control it.

Cowered.
Whimpered.
Begged.

Then it was silent.

White.
Gold.
Lavender.
Peace filled her.

_Impa._

[−]

Carefully cradling the younger woman, Impa shifted so she leant against the wall. For once, Garo remained still and quiet, allowing Zelda to clutch him. His eyes were wide, seeming almost solemn as he looked up at her.

She scratched his head lightly before hugging Zelda tighter.

She kept the bond wrapped tightly around the Hylian, knowing it was the only thing that would bring her peace. She didn't know _how_ or _why_, just that…it would.

A quiet sigh, her name, reached her ears.

It had worked.
Closing her eyes, she searched furiously for the trigger.

This wasn't a normal nightmare. The bond had stirred, had *started* waking her, but hadn't. Not completely.

Which told her it wasn't a normal nightmare.

So why…

Sighing, she understood.

Nabooru's comment made sense.

Or rather, her actions.

Her annoyance at Zelda's lack of eye contact made sense. It was bad manners at best, a diplomatic slight at worst.

A sound she could not describe had wrenched itself from Zelda's mouth seconds later as all color had left her face. She had run then.

Impa had nearly followed, but Nabooru's reaction had made her pause.

The older woman had worn an expression of pain and absolute devastation before looking away.

It looked as if her heart had broken.

Or rather…if her world had broken.

Whatever had happened, Nabooru had known. Instantly. Everything. Things Impa herself probably hadn't been aware of.

"Spirits never truly leave us, do they?" the Gerudo had whispered.

She had left shortly after, claiming a long ride back to the desert.

Reyel had followed her to the stables, presumably. But only after assuring her to trust Zelda.

And so she'd left her keta, her *sesha*, to do as she pleased. Trusting her, trusting her instincts.

She had returned for dinner.

Quiet, startled, but *there*. Coherent, if muted.

She had seen *his* spirit within Nabooru's power.

Barely resisting the urge to tighten her hold further, she swallowed.

What must it be like, to *finally* get a taste of hope, of freedom, and have it all ripped away in an instant?

Was Fate truly so cruel? Was Destiny so heartless? Were the Goddesses laughing and the Gods howling?

Her thoughts fell silent as a single question filtered through the bond.

Not a true question, there was no intent to *ask* it. It simply came from contact with the core of the
spirit, with the subconscious mind.

There were no words, only emotions and images.

"No," she whispered. The truth lanced her heart as she barely kept the quiver from her voice. "No, never like that, never between us."

Another then. Another image, another emotion.

"Not now. Not like this."

Everything settled as they fell into silence.

Once the sun rose, they would talk.

[-]

They never had a chance. They woke when Shad sent a message via the Guard, asking if they wanted to join himself, Link and Mikal for breakfast.

Considering they had discussed Mikal's plan before retiring the night before, neither turned down the invitation.

The brief journey was made in strained silence, both women lost in a dizzying whirlwind of thoughts. It wasn't until the meal had ended and the group had retired to Shad and Link's chambers to continue trading stories of their travels that they truly began to focus.

Each took their own seat, all noting the sudden strain in their conversation but never commenting on it.

Their words sputtered and finally fell into a nervous silence. The slight shuffling of their bodies was nearly deafening in the otherwise quiet sitting room. A clock ticked away on the mantle, mocking them.

The burning logs popped, sending sparks up the chimney.

Zelda's breath caught as she looked at Mikal in question.

Who would speak first?

Shad simply closed his eyes and fought to remain in control of his emotions.

Link narrowed his eyes, taking in their various expressions, the words unspoken. Apprehension filled him, fighting the annoyance that soured his mouth.

Rising, he made his way to the food they'd left beside the door.

The cool wine quenched his thirst and doused his anger. He took his seat once more, placing the cup on the table. Recalling Shad's confession of how he struggled, he fought the urge to down the drink in one swallow.

The thought of being denied a drink at all….

He shuddered at the thought.

Mikal's expression hardened. He spoke softly, drawing the room's attention. "Link…we need to
Worry tore through him once more as Link registered his father's words. His eyes darted to the people around him, instantly knowing he would not like what they had to say.

Defiance burned in his heart.

"About what?"

"We feel you have...a problem...with alcohol and medications."

Shad swallowed harshly as he opened his eyes again. He didn't need to look at his lover to know anger had twisted his face into a hideous mask. The tension radiating off of him made that clear enough.

A quiet sigh escaped him. *He* should have spoken first, rather than Mikal. Mikal cared...but he was going about this the wrong way.

"Excuse me?"

Both Impa and Zelda tensed as Link hissed the words, hands clenching as everything within them prepared for battle.

Link's eyes snapped from Mikal to Zelda. "You!"

"No, Link," Impa said quietly, "Zelda had nothing to do with this. It is all Mikal and myself."

"I don't need your help," he sneered.

Staring at his "family" with disgust, he rose to his feet and headed for the door. His thoughts were a chaotic tornado of *anger, pain, of betrayal and hatred.*

They knew *nothing!*

Embracing the reassurance which whispered so calmly through his mind, he reached for the doorknob.

Magic shimmered before him, blocking him.

He spun, roaring with anger. "IMPA!"

She neared him, meeting his eyes without hesitation. "We can discuss this like adults...or I can bind you, throw you back in rehab and do everything within my power to ensure you never come out. Or kill you, I'm not adverse to that solution either. It would solve a lot of problems rather quickly."

Shad's moan of pain matched Zelda's gasp of shock. Mikal ignored them both, staring at the Sage and Hero. He hoped, prayed and begged his son would see reason.

None of them could afford for this to continue. Even without the trial, Link's determination to drown in a bottle (again) was slowly killing them all. He *would not* lose another family because of one stubborn teenager.

"I don't need help."

Shad spoke before Impa could, drawing their hostile gazes to him. His voice floated across the
"That's what we all say. That we don't need help. That we have it under control. That we can stop. And then we end up...where? An alley, a pub, a cell. Sleeping in the dirt, behind buildings, wherever we can so we can seek that next high.

"I remember when I first met you. I remember how I nudged you from depending on potions to actually needing them. I remember how I crashed after our ways parted, and then we saw each other again in the hospital. They'd brought you in for injuries...and made you stay to dry out. I'd been in there a while, you know that. Halfway through the program.

"We left at the same time. I was a bit early for good behavior. But you...you weren't ready to leave. You told me that, as we were walking down the drive. You said you weren't sure you could do this alone, not yet.

"And what did I say to you?"

Link whispered, focused so completely on his memories that he barely noticed Impa lead him to the couch.

"You said 'you're not alone though. You have me, your sister and your father.'"

Their eyes met when Shad turned Link's face towards him.

"We're your family, Link. Let us help you...please."

"I don't need help!"

The instantaneous switch from confused recollection to white-hot rage made them all flinch.

Impa stepped forward a second time, prepared to draw his focus away from the others.

He ignored her, lifting the goblet from where he'd set it. He sneered at the sloshing liquid before hurling the metal cup at the wall with all his strength.

It crashed into the stone with such force the rebound sent it tumbling through the air. Metal hit glass, shattering tabletop and sending everything on it to the floor.

Shad's cry of pain drew his attention before the goblet even met the wall.

Lying on the floor, the brunette stared up at the blonde. Bright red stood out against pale flesh from where Link's elbow had connected with his cheek. Blood tricked from his mouth, the impact so great he bit his cheek, tongue and probably cracked a tooth.

A choked sound of horror tore itself from Link's mouth as he backed away. Images flashed through his mind, fragmented memories of trials, battle, war. Blood dripped from his hands, unseen by any but him as time blurred. Child, adult, savior, destroyer, hero, conquer.

He was no better than Ganondorf.

Had he learned nothing? Nothing from fighting that monster, his army, his supporters? Hadn't he seen enough brutality, bloodshed and terror?

He stared at his scarred hands before his eyes darted between Shad and Zelda.

"Get away from me Link!"
"Make me. C'mon, it'll be fun. But after you tell me who searched my chambers."

"I don't know anything about it! You're crazy! The drugs have addled your brain!"

"If I thought you would tell me anything, they must have. As secretive as ever."

"As devious as ever. Get away from me before I make you."

"Take your best shot."

He stumbled away from the couch, from Shad, from Zelda, from his crimes. Away and away until his back hit the wall.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like you took...took..."

"We're all adults here, aren't we? Let's say it for what it is: I was taking a potion...an illegal drug."

He slid down the wall, hands grabbing fistfuls of his own hair.

I don't...I don't need help. I don't need help, I don't.

No, you don't.

But...he did. He understood now. The guilt made everything so clear, separated the anger, the pain, the love, the confusion. He could look at everything.

He needed help.

His sister heard voices because she'd been driven insane by torture.

He heard voices because he was hallucinating.

How long had he been hallucinating?

He didn't remember anything. He couldn't remember when it started, when the voice in the back of his head was more than the links to his sister and Ganondorf. That was bad enough, but it had never really been a voice.

Until...one day it was.

Bile rose in his throat as the annoying muttering in the back of his mind became louder.

His conscience had sounded so angry the last few years, but it had always be reassuring him that he was right. Because...he was...right?

That wasn't his conscience though.

It was a hallucination.

Why did his hallucinations sound like Ganondorf?

Terror made him raise his eyes. He looked between his bruised lover, scared sister, worried father and angry comrade. His voice broke as he shook, hugging himself, feeling so very much like the
lost child he'd been so many years ago.

…the same lost child he still was, truth be told.

"Help me…please…"

[ - ]

[ - ]

**AN:** Well…it didn't go as planned…but when does it ever?

**Songs:**

Delerium (ft. Jael) by After All

Life Is Fragile by Crimson Mourn
"My Lord, another missive has arrived."

Turning, he faced the bowing servant and took the offered letter. A murmured "thank you" slipped from him in habit as he broke the seal.

His eyes skimmed the report before he focused on one particular passage.

A smile turned his lips upward as he threw the scroll into the fire.

He had a trip to prepare.

Exhaustion finally pulled Zelda from her office. She shuffled to her chambers, Garo trailing behind her. She couldn't help but smile as he also yawned, still tired from spending the day with Ben and Kaneil.

At least he had been safe.

Fresh tears burned her eyes and she blinked them away. Locking the doors behind her, she stumbled from the sitting room to her bedroom. So pervading was her tiredness that she only shed her outermost gown after her nightly ritual. Curling atop the bed in her underclothes, she hugged her pillow and closed her eyes.

And yet, despite the exhaustion which radiated from the core of her being, she did not sleep.

Her thoughts would not quiet enough for rest.

Burying a hand in Garo's fur when he licked her cheek, she stared at the dying flames. Shadows stretched across the room as the fading light defiantly clung to whatever surface it could touch. Distorted, the illumination became a silent story across her floor and wall.

Tension radiated through her when the soft sound of a door gliding across carpet broke the comforting silence.

"Zelda."

Quiet, gentle, her name was both a request and plea.

Swallowing, she touched the bond. Her acceptance, her allowance, flowed free between them. Reluctant, but present none the less.

The bed shifted, dipping to one side as another body perched on the edge. Garo growled softly as she tensed a second time. "Easy, shh," she whispered while her hand ran through his fur.

"May I hold you?"

Neither spoke as they both considered the question, the implications.
Finally, a nearly silent "yes" came in reply.

She flinched as a warm body lay beside her, swallowing a whine when strong arms wrapped loosely around her.

It was different than when she had run under the cover of darkness. The other bed was small, warm, soft. The other room was hidden, defendable.

"I won't hurt you."

Shame filled her at those words. They should not have to be uttered.

Warmth wrapped around her spirit, brushing the cold memories away for just a moment.

"Impa, I—"

"Don't apologize. Please. Tell me why."

Were there words for something so insubstantial?

"I…I…"

Her fingers tightened in Garo's fur as her other hand skimmed the warm arms wrapped around her.

"Words, Zelda. Not action."

Calloused fingers wrapped gently around her wrist before lacing their fingers.

"I…I…if I…do…then… Then it will…go away," she said in a choked whisper.

"What will go away?"

"E-everything."

She sipped the air, hugging her pup to her as her heart raced.

"What do you mean?"

"Ev-everything. M'mories. Thoughts."

"Thoughts. About him…or about us?"

"Both. None. All."

Taking a deep breath, Impa gently pushed her frustration down. Not burying it, but moving it to a place where she could examine it later. It would help neither of them now.

"What about us? What worries you?"

"…the future," came her eventual reply.

"What about the future?"

A hand trailed up her arm again in response. She wrapped her fingers around the other woman's, stilling her touch.

"Words, Zelda."
"Y-you…want to touch me?"

"Yes."

A quiet whimper met her admission as hands pulled away, burying within the dog's thick winter fur once more.

"I won't lie. You asked me if I wanted to touch you. Yes. Right now I am hugging you. That is touching it. Holding your hand is touching you."

"Touch me…differently. Now."

"Eventually I would like to show you why it should not be feared, yes. But no…not now. Not like this. It would not be out of love."

Confused silence met her words.

The longer they thought, the harder she could feel Zelda try to make sense of her words.

She buried her face in the younger woman's hair and admitted the truth to herself. Sad though it was, it wasn't something Zelda could understand. With time, yes. But not now. Not when safe, platonic contact was still so foreign to her.

Words so tortured they could only have been screamed, never spoken, echoed through her mind. A vile taste filled her mouth as she closed her eyes, recalling their utterance.

"You weren't there, no one was there! No one but ME! Not you, not Link, not any one! Me, me and still me! Me and Ganondorf and his minions, the people he let use his toy! But not you, you were never there!"

No one else had been there. But…but someone, some others, had been there before and after. A plan began to form in her mind, one involving Healer Eldric Deaso, Animal Master Kaneil…and Garo.

"Can we talk about this tomorrow?"

Nodding, she hugged the blonde tighter, whispering in return. "Tomorrow, love. Rest for now."

She pressed a soft kiss to the top of Zelda's head, barely resisting the urge to kiss her lips instead.

As she pulled away, preparing to seek her own bed, fingers curled in her sleeve.

Heart in her throat, she swallowed harshly. Licking her suddenly dry lips, she waited, barely breathing.

"S…stay…please?"

Fragile, hesitant allowance and acceptance trickled through the bond once more. Carefully, slowly, she laid down once more.

Garo raised his head, glancing over his shaking beta-omega's shoulder. His nose itched from the scent of her fear, but the…what was the word…determination made him stop. It was hazy, but he remembered when momma smelt like that, when she was injured but hunted anyway. She was scared of getting hurt more, of leaving him all alone, but she knew she had to hunt.

He guessed having the shadow-tree—…Impa in her nest was something mistress had to do. He
didn't know why. He liked their nest to themselves. It was warm, soft and all theirs. Not as well-hidden as Impa's den, but she had a small nest.

This one was big!

Licking her cheek, he whined softly at his beta-omega-mistress two-legger. He would keep watch. They could rest. He'd protect them. Just like he had when they'd went to Impa's nest.

Nuzzling the two hands that stroked his fur, he curled against her heart. It was a long time, long after the dancing tiny fire (candles, they called them) went out, that she fell asleep.

It wasn't until after she fell asleep that Impa finally did.

Restless, he waited until they were both breathing slow. Only once he was sure they were warm did he wiggle from under the nestings (covers, not nestings) and go to the door. Staring at the moon, he listened to the outside. It was muffled, but he heard it.

Weak. Unsure. But there.

The bad alpha was sick, but not like before. If he understood the two-leggers, now he was sick like when you eat bad meat.

He wouldn't forgive bad alpha. He'd hurt his pack, and then hurt his own beta. The scared-smelling beta was part of his pack now. You didn't just give a bad alpha their pack back!

But…one day…maybe he would howl in the wind. Return the call. Tell him the packs were…ok. Not great, but they were ok. Alive. Unhurt.

Snorting, he turned away and jumped back on the nest. Nosing under the covers, he found a warm spot between their lower legs (two-leggers had odd-shaped paws) and laid there. Happy the four weird-shaped legs wouldn't kick him, he licked his beta-omega's bottom paw before resting his muzzle on it. Yawning, he closed his eyes.

He'd keep watch and protect them all night. He could do that and rest to. Just…to close his eyes…for a moment.

Morning would find him snoring as they struggled to move around him. So late did he stay up, even Zelda leaving the bed did not rouse him.

[-]

Chuckling as she recalled Garo's frantic struggles to emerge from her covers hours earlier, Zelda shook her head. Glancing fondly at the pup resting by her feet (gnawing on a bone half his size, no less, thanks to the cook) she couldn't help but smile.

She hadn't realized just how important that ragged little mutt would be to her when she found him.

"Zelda?"

Grimacing, she guiltily returned her attention to the man sitting on the other side of the desk.

"Sorry."

Eldric smiled, seeing the embarrassment in her eyes. "I understand," he murmured. "But we're not here to watch Garo eat his lunch."
She grimaced a second time and slouched in her chair ever so slightly. Recent years had stripped her down before him, formality having quickly been dispersed between them. Propriety had fallen away, given the various…injuries…he had been asked to treat.

Although there was that one time she'd had to call for Link, rather than the other way around. She hadn't expected to see him in his night clothes, however. *Best leave that thought alone,* she told herself silently, her cheeks warming. Glancing at him through her lashes, she thanked the Gods he couldn't read her mind.

Judging by the smile dancing on his lips, he could guess, however.

"No, it's not," she finally muttered, feeling very much like a petulant child.

"Impa did not tell me why she wished us to talk, though I can guess. The fact that you're here tells me *you* want to discuss something," he added gently at her sudden change in expression.

"I…" She twisted her fingers before wrapping her hands around the offered tea cup, refusing to look at him. Confusion, anger and fear collided within her heart, blossoming outward like the dried leaves within her cup. Sipping the bitter brew he favored, she traced the wood grain of his desk with her eyes.

He watched her, silent, patient. Trial and error had taught him to let her speak in her own time. Stirring a slice of licorice root in his cup, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the bittersweet scent. Relaxing into his chair, he savored the warmth in his hands before lifting the cup to his lips.

The sound of porcelain touching wood made him open his eyes and look at her once more. Having given her respectful silence in which to think, now he waited with full attention.

"I don't…understand," she whispered plaintively, staring at the wall with unfocused eyes, "Why…what does it mean?"

"It?"

She made a vague gesture, one he had to study for several moments as her hands lingered in the air. It took several seconds before she repeated the gesture, a faint blush staining her cheeks.

Taking another swallow of his tea, he considered the question.

"Do you mean sex, lust, passion or intimacy?" When she flinched, he continued, though his quizzical tone became one of gentle inquiry. "The four are intricately connected, but are not the same. Your crude hand sign is made by adolescents, Zelda, who have little knowledge of the differences between the subjects."

"All? None? I'm…not sure," she admitted, frustration leaking from her words as she exhaled sharply, lifting her saucer.

"Would you like to tell me why this is plaguing you?"

She cut her eyes to him over the rim of her cup, despite knowing her glare was useless. "Are you my therapist or my friend?"

"Both," he told her honestly. "You've known that from the beginning. Officially, I am your Healer of Record. This *includes* your mental health. Unofficially, I've considered you a friend for many years. But right now, you *clearly* aren't here for idle chatter and banter. You're here because you have questions you want answered. That falls under my role as Healer."
She muttered what sounded suspiciously like "semantics are a pain in my ass" and he chuckled softly. Most couldn't see it, but he knew the true Zelda- the warrior; the strong, proud woman who held her head high- lived within her. Truth be told, Zelda herself couldn't see it. But he could…and Impa could.

"If you wish to speak of semantics, the law-"

"Stop!" she cried, amusement shining in her eyes. "Please, I beg you, I get enough dissection of the law from Mikal and my remaining Council."

"And to make me stop-"

"I have to answer the questions." She sighed and shook her head. "Here I thought the investigation was difficult to deal with."

"Zelda…have you ever wondered why I never spoke of the truth to your Guardian, to others?"

Slowly, she rested her tea on the desk, everything within her thrumming as her full focus turned to him.

"Aside from being ordered and threatened not to? Truthfully…I figured it had to do with your Oaths."

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But once it became clear you were in danger, my Oaths also obligated me to speak to your protectors. As a minor, you had little say in your medical privacy."

He met her eyes as she stared at him, equal parts curious and assessing. He could see her thoughts spinning as she sought his motivation. He let her think for a few moments before leaning forward, resting his elbows on the desk. When she sat straighter, pulling away under guise of etiquette, he shook his head.

"I kept silent because I trusted your judgment. I know very little about how magic, the Goddesses and all that works. What little I do understand makes me very content to not learn more. Let others have their powers and destinies, I am pleased enough being a simple, mortal Healer."

"The Gods and Goddesses may have given you the Triforce of Wisdom, but I believe that only enhances your natural wisdom. You've always been an intelligent girl. Always full of questions and never satisfied until you've found every answer possible. I don't believe the Triforce, magic, or anything else made you that way. That's simply…who you are. The rest of it may have enhanced your mental age, may have given you a 'boost' so you could contend with the world around you…but the fact is that you are a naturally intelligent, inquisitive, creative person.

"When Link first brought you to me, I was horrified. My Princess was unconscious, badly beaten and baring other injuries I could not rightfully explain away. By law, I should have reported your state that first night. But my Oaths allowed me to circumvent that…because until I knew your true state of health, my focus had to be on helping you. Holistically, your true state of health also involved the people around you. I had to know who was hurting you before I said anything. I refuse to endanger anyone, child or adult, I know is being abused. If that means withholding the truth from the proper authorities while I find out who is hurting them, so be it.

"But once I knew, I realized there was nothing I could do. This wasn't something our law enforcement could take care of. This wasn't a person, this was a monster. A monster marked by the Divine, yes, and unfortunately imbued with magic.

"You told me one night that sacrificing one was never worth saving many, unless the singular
person was willing to make that sacrifice on their own, without intervention. You told me free will was given to us, and that we must honor it...in all situations. I thought you were mad! There you were, I thought, justifying the abuse you were suffering and giving me a reason why I shouldn't say anything.

"I almost did speak up that night, simply out of spite. But I thought about it, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized you were right. Not about sacrificing yourself—that I will argue against until the end of time—and apparently Impa has joined my team on this matter. But about free will.

"The thing was, you were a child. Free will or not, I was Oath bound- and moral enough- to protect you. No child can make such a decision, their brains and minds are not developed enough. But I kept silent anyway.

"Why? Why would I? Can you guess?"

She shook her head, mute, transfixed by his raw words and naked expression.

He blinked away tears and took a shuddering breath, looking away from her vivid eyes. Remembering the pain, the terror, that had shined in those depths, he continued.

"You told me that one night of peace was not worth the agony you would endure the next. If it had been any other person, I would have spoken up. But I knew, even then, that no one could stop him. I did not and do not understand magic...but I understood that. The look in your eyes, the solemn acceptance in Link's, told me that.

"As for why I didn't tell Impa, your Guardian...the simple answer is that I couldn't. At that time, your father was alive, creating a real dilemma among several legal offices. Your father was your sire, he was the only full-blood custodial family you had. Titles aside, his legal rights as your father could not be removed. He might have ruled a country, but you were still his daughter.

"On the other hand, the Sheikah Guardian is well documented...both in history and in our laws. Their rights extend far beyond that any parent could ever have. In fact, Impa stood above your father in many ways in regards to your care as a minor. Which is why, if you have not yet realized, everyone spoke to her regarding your supplemental schooling...and your father about your formal education. Languages, mathematics, history were all influenced by his words. But others, such as the arts and literature, were Impa's.

"I had a conundrum to deal with. While you were a minor and your father had the legal right to know what abuse you were suffering, the situation demanded discretion. On the other hand, your Guardian was possibly the only one who could know the truth and actually protect you.

"My final decision not to tell her wasn't due to you, actually, but to Impa herself. I overheard a discussion she was having with your father regarding the war. He mentioned that, eventually, the invading forces would reach the Market. Considering this was after a section of the castle had already been destroyed by Ganondorf's sabotage, I could not fault his logic. It had been a few years since that bombing, and your time away from the castle had given you vital lessons...but the country could not take another direct attack to our capital. Luck had spared many lives that day.

"But in the course of their discussion, Impa said something I will never repeat. Essentially, she swore to meet anyone who harmed you and destroy them. Your father reminded her that the demon king held a Triforce, and that she was 'merely' a Sage. Her voice had dropped, becoming a cold growl, and she told him it didn't matter if she had no magic, she would destroy anyone who hurt you...even if it meant killing herself in the process.
"I knew when I heard that, that she was telling the honest truth. I also knew I could not tell her what you were enduring. It might be possible for her to hurt or even kill him, but I knew you would need her. She could not help you, could not protect you, if she was dead. So I…said nothing to her."

He fell silent, turning away to look at the window. His chest heaved as he sought breath, his heart writhing in protest to his memories. The decisions he had made…he would never be sure if they were right. But he had done the best he could. Yet looking back, would it have been better to tell?

He didn't know, and the Mothers help him, it damn well hurt that he didn't know. The guilt, the pain, continued to plague him to this day.

In attempting to save his patient, had he condemned her to a fate worse than death?

Silence reined long enough that Garo eventually fell asleep. She spoke quietly, honoring his honesty with the same openness.

"I don't understand…how desire, how touch, is good and safe. I don't understand how and why she wants me, and how or why it won't hurt. It doesn't make sense, because it always hurts."

He turned back to her, smiling sadly at her wounded expression. While he could see the strong woman hidden within her, so too could he see the bleeding child.

It was a definite possibility, from a purely clinical standpoint, that she might have some physical discomfort for the rest of her life. Her physical injuries were too extensive; no potion or magic could heal everything. He wouldn't tell her that, not yet. At this point, it would be a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than medical advisement.

He had no desire to add more fuel to her fear.

"She wants you simply because she loves you. And sexual intimacy does not hurt…because when two partners care for one another, they are gentle. It does not always go smoothly, since lovers are always learning about one another, but it does not hurt."

Mentally, he grimaced and recited all the things he had verbally bitten off. Zelda valued complete, honest truth…but he was not foolish enough to think she wanted or needed to hear how abuse, "regular" sex and sadomasochism were different. If Zelda didn't kill him with a burst of wild magic (the Twilight healers had told him everything) in her fear, Impa would in a fit of rage.

Before or after she ripped his tongue out and castrated him…well, that was a different story.

Clearing his throat, he carefully pushed those thoughts away. Best not dwell on it. Some things were best left unsaid.

Aware the young woman was staring at him, he shook his head and focused on her.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

She frowned, wearing a puzzled and frustrated expression. Her hands fluttered as she spoke, searching for words just outside her grasp. "I… Why does she… Why doesn't it… What…" She fell silent, cheeks burning as embarrassment rushed through her.

"Because you don't know," he answered her muttered question. When her head snapped to him, he
realized she hadn't meant to speak aloud. "It's so difficult for you to put this into words, because you don't know," he repeated. "Your emotions, your desires, make no sense to you. To expect you to be able to understand other people's is ridiculous."

He raised a hand as she began to speak. "I realize you are a compassionate and empathetic person. But in this…you are ignorant, and what knowledge you do have is not correct."

When she sputtered, protesting his observation, he simply waited. Knowing her as well as he did, it took but moments for his prediction to ring true: the word "logical" fell from her lips.

"In the most scientific, analytical way possible, yes, you do possess the logical knowledge. In the same way a child knows a fire is hot, or that a large ball won't fit in a small box. They 'know' the fact, but they don't understand it. Shad can recite exactly how one wields a sword, but if you put one in his hand, he would not know what to do with it. You are the same."

She blinked, mouth agape as she stared. *What...what...no...he...and child...and...*

"I'm not a child."

"I didn't call you one. I said your understanding of these topics we are discussing is similar to a child's understanding. You know the common truth of what it means to be a human, a creature. You know the basic, innate facts. But you don't understand them. They have no application to your life. Your experiences are the exception, Zelda, not the rule.

"You know pain, you know fear, you know violence. This is part of the world, yes, but it is not the whole. What you are trying to understand- what you have with Impa- is not something you've ever experienced."

"There's fire in her eyes."

"Which burns from love. It will not hurt you. *She* will not hurt you."

"I..."

Her eyes darted away, focusing on Garo once more as she bit her lip. Frowning, he leant forward once more. Doubt and concern battled within him, though he kept his voice neutral.

"Zelda...has Impa hurt you?"

"No!" The denial of his accusation tore from her in a strong utterance, everything within her tensing from her anger. "No, she has *not* hurt me. How dare you!"

He spread his hands in the universal gesture of surrender. "I have to ask. I meant no harm. Please understand."

She clenched her teeth and dug her fingers into the arms of her chairs. Her muscles shook from the force of her restraint. Ruby and carnelian bled through her psyche, blending and separating as a nearly silent breath of *I love you* caressed her ears.

"Zelda?"

The storm within her mind parted as she looked at him once more. "I...yes, I understand. She...she hasn't hurt me."
"Where were you just now?"

"I don't know. I'm...I'm so confused," she murmured, running a hand through her hair. "Link going to rehabilitation, Impaz moving in, Nabooru visiting, the nightmares, the trial..." She trailed off, not sure what else to say, too overwhelmed by the pressure of it all.

"Would you like to discuss any of it?"

"I don't know what to start with."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"Yes."

"All right. Why don't you take a moment to use the facilities while I refresh our tea. Do you have a preference?" he asked as he stood.

Shaking her head, she gently nudged Garo with her foot before also standing. "No, thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied as she turned from him, all but running for the wash room across the corridor. He glanced at the yawning pup. "You'll have to wait for her."

Garo simply blinked at him before laying his muzzle on the bone again. Eyes half-mast, he yawned again.

He could wait for her to return. He needed to go out, but...it didn't hurt yet. Plus, he thought as he sniffed the bone in front of him, he had something to occupy his time.

Eldric shook his head, closing the office door behind him.

There were days he either hated his job, others he loved it. But some days...just made him so very confused.

Talking to a Wolfo-mutt...yes, today was starting to turn into one of those "what am I doing?" days.

And somehow...that wasn't so bad.

[-]

[-]

AN: Now we can learn some more about the OCs and background characters!

Songs:

Post Harbor - Augustine

AZEDIA - Agony
Chapter Forty-Two

Tightrope

Taking a slow, shaking breath, she raised her head to meet her own eyes. The mirror mocked her, showing her what was yet never would be. Magic and medicine had healed numerous wounds, erasing physical scars. But under her smooth skin was a ravaged soul, broken by the strength of her torment.

Looking away, she washed her arms. The urge to draw her nails over her forearms, to rake them across the white lines of her failure, nearly overwhelmed her. She stumbled from the wash room, trembling. Hugging herself, she darted forward, barely resisting the urge to slam his office door. Looking around the large room, she whimpered softly, remembering her promise.

"Eldric…Eldric?"

Crouching, she hugged Garo when he sat up. Gasping air, she buried her hands in his fur. Confused as to where this came from, why it was so strong, she shook her head.

Why now? Why here?

Yelping at the sudden burning in her hand, she left Garo where he was. Scratching at her hand, she searched for a bug or bite.

There was nothing to be found, save the glowing of her Triforce.

Wait. What?

Looking again, she noticed that was in fact glowing.

Closing her eyes, she shook her head again.

It wasn't her. It was Link.

Dear Gods…

"Zelda?"

Her eyes snapped to Eldric as he entered the office, carrying a tea tray. A gentle kick of his heel shut the door behind him as he quickly moved to his desk. Depositing the tray, he knelt beside her, alarmed by the agony in her eyes.

"Zelda…what is it?"

"Link," she moaned, scratching her hand again. "Normally there are…shields…blocks. But…he hurts so much, it just…crashes through."

Cradling her head, she grimaced as her brother reached out, slashing blindly, too lost in his own madness.
Had it really been mere *hours* since he'd entered the hospital? She'd been told the detoxification would happen immediately, but not this soon.

"Zelda, look at me."

Stubbornly, she clenched her eyes shut.

A half-muffled grunt of pain made her look at him again.

"Garo! Let him go!"

Grabbing the scruff of his neck with one hand, she used the other to pry his jaws open. Eldric pulled his arm back, inspecting the bite.

"Are you ok? What happened?" Glaring at the growling mutt, she swatted his muzzle. "Bad dog!"

"I reached for your hand. You were starting to draw blood from the scratching. And I'm fine. Just needs a rinse." He stood and made his way to the wash basin.

"I'll take him out then let Impaz watch him," she said after a moment's pause. "I'm sorry."

"He's trying to protect you. I can't fault him for that. Though if it happens again, I may not be so forgiving."

"...don't threaten my dog."

"I'm not. I'm stating a fact."

Their eyes met as he dried his hand. She looked away first, knowing he was right.

Glancing at Garo, she pointed to the door. "Go!"

Ears flattened, Garo hesitantly picked up the bone and headed for the door, ears flat.

"Drop it!"

Drop it? Blinking, he dropped the bone. What had he done wrong? Just because the bad alpha was gone didn't mean he stopped protecting her. She was his beta-omega...he wasn't going to let some strange male touch her. He wasn't pack. Wasn't even *Impa's* pack.

"Out! Now!"

Deciding not to fight her, he slunk forward and licked her leg before scampering from the room. Ears pressed back, he clung to the wall, hurt and confused.

What had he done wrong?

He followed her to the den mother. *Impa's* mama *was* den mother. She smelt like it. Even two-leggers who weren't *her* pups respected her as den mother.

Why was he here?

The females spoke. He didn't catch a lot of it, too busy trying to understand. It wasn't until Zelda headed for the door without talking to him that he realized. Whimpering, he ran forward.

"No, Garo. Sit."
Sit?

He whined and looked up at her, *smelling* her sadness.

Surely she *really* wouldn't leave him here.

"Sit."

He sat again, having taken a step forward.

"Stay."

Stay? Why stay?

When she closed the barrier

behind her, he whined. The den mother lifted him, petting his head and back. He started to cry. He was alpha and not supposed to cry, but his beta-omega mistress wasn't supposed to leave him here alone!

The sound of her two paws faded. Squirming, he jumped from the den mother's front paws and ran to the door. Whining, he sniffed under the crack. Her scent was fading!

When it became cold, old, he began to howl.

Maybe if he called her back…

He hadn't meant to make her mad.

He just wanted to protect her!

The bad alpha hurt her. The sleep time hurt her. Her mate scared her. Sour-smelling males and females were yelling at her, not respecting her authority.

He just…wanted to protect her. The other man was going to touch her. She didn't like touch. Only with her mate. Sometimes her mate's mother, but mostly her mate. And sometimes…rarely…from Impa's pack. But no one else.

He was only doing his job. He was alpha. He was protector.

Scratching at the door, he howled again, whimpering at the end.

It didn't make sense!

She was leaving the pack because he tried to keep her safe?

"Oh Garo…"

The den mother lifted him again, hugging him. When she sat, he didn't jump from her lap. Whimpering, he tucked his tail between his legs, pressed his ears as flat as they would go and cried out to all the wolves that would hear.

It *hurt*.

[−]

Sniffing, she sat in her chair again. "I'm sorry he bit you."
"Let it go, Zelda. It's in the past."

"I…I can hear him. I've never disciplined him this severely before."

"I'm sure the Market can hear him. He'll be fine. He's spoiled, but a rather strong pup from what I can see."

"You said you understood he was trying to protect me."

"I do. That doesn't make it right. He needs to learn the difference in protecting you and when to stand down."

"I think he learned that already," she muttered, turning towards the frost-covered window.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Zelda…you said you wanted to talk. We cannot do that if you deny anything is wrong." He paused, noting her stillness. "I see you stopped scratching."

"I was angry. Impa said…the anger enforced the shields."

"You spoke with her in such a short time?"

"Through the bond."

"Oh." Unsure of what else to say, he poured them fresh tea. Rather than his favored black brew, warm honey-colored liquid filled the cups. "Chamomile?"

She nodded, accepting the cup with a weak smile of thanks.

He sat back in his chair once more, laying a pen atop his pad of paper. She glanced at the blank pad, her smile widening. "Most still favor parchment."

"When our local stores sell paper at a lower cost than parchment, and in multiple varieties, it becomes hard to keep such preference. It does not hold up as well as parchment in some cases, but for notes and records, it does a wonderful job."

Her cup raised in a silent salute.

"When did he learn?" he asked after a moment, returning to the previous topic.

She whispered, the memories playing through her mind as if they had just happened. "Link said I'm selfish, that I think I'm the only one who was hurt during the war. He said that I think I'm special, don't listen to anyone and degrade everyone to…his level."

"And this is when Garo learned to stand down?"

She nodded sharply, clutching her cup with white-knuckled fingers. Her feet curled under the chair as she shook. "Impa doesn't know. You won't tell her, will you?"

Her quick, nearly silent plea made lean forward. Resting his clasped hands on his desk, he spoke in the most neutral voice possible. "Tell her what, Zelda? What Link said? It might upset her…but know, I won't tell her. His words don't endanger you."
She flinched ever so slightly. He watched her shoulders curl further, a subconscious attempt to protect herself. Suspicion, clearer compared to that he felt towards Impa, began to snake through him.

"Can you tell me why these words made Garo learn when he should sit?"

"I…it wasn't the words."

"But Garo learned this...when Link said them?"

Her hesitant nod made him frown, worry mixing with suspicion to create a certainty he didn't want to face.

"What else did Link say?"

"That...that I was useless, worthless, weak and that I made him protect me. That it was my fault he had to fight the war and bare the Triforce. I made him do it," she whispered as tears burned her eyes. "I did use the Ocarina, but he said it was ok. We didn't lose that much time!"

"Did he say anything else?"

She nodded once more, but remained silent.

"Anything you tell me stays between us, Zelda. We talked about this earlier. Unless it puts you or someone else in immediate danger, I will not repeat what you say without permission."

"I made him mad…"

"And this is what made him say these things?"

"Yes."

"People say things they don't mean when angry."

"He meant them."

"How do you know?"

Once more, she said nothing. The only sound was their breathing and the crackling fire.

"Zelda...how do you know?"

"I made him mad...he punished me."

Ice ran down his spine, paralyzing everything within him. The image of a bloody, battered teenager laying on a bed flashed through his mind. Ravaged and tortured, the only words which made sense from her mindless rambling was "punish" and "sorry".

"How did he punish you?"

"He...he yelled at me...an-"

She broke off, refusing to incriminate her brother further. It wasn't his fault. Wasn't, wasn't, because she'd made him mad and-

"What else were you going to say?"
"Will you be testifying?"

"We can discuss the investigation and upcoming trial in a moment. There was something you were going to say. If you don't wish to tell me, then state such."

The truth gnawed at her.

"Yes, it is a big deal! I didn't say you could touch me!"

"You've never had a problem with me touching you."

"That was before you decided to choke me, you son of a bitch! Don't think I've forgotten!"

She'd wanted to. Had wanted desperately to forget. To pretend it wasn't true, hadn't happened. That it was a figment, a bad dream. Garo's singed fur, his aggressive behavior, had told her it wasn't. It made sense, now that she knew he was addicted to drugs, and was insane like her, but…but…

She carefully set her cup on the desk and began twisting her fingers, careful of the scratches on the back of her hand. "He...he...he hurt Garo."

"How?"

"Garo bit him. He kicked Garo into a wall. Then surrounded him with fire. He would have killed Garo, but I told Garo to sit and stay. He did. He lived."

"He did. Why did Garo bite him?"

She whimpered softly, the words barely escaping her trembling lips.

"He choked me. Pushed me. Comforted me."

It hurt, it burned to admit the truth, the betrayal, the lies. They had hurt each other, but not like this. But at the same time, wasn't it what she did to him?

No, Wisdom told her. No, it wasn't the same. Link had always been able to say no, to walk away, to seek outside help. She hadn't been. He had backed her into a corner, threatened her family, manipulated her fears and insecurities to the point where she had suppressed her Triforce, her magic.

She was not blameless in their relationship, but this was not her fault, the Triforce assured her. She had made mistakes, as had he...yet this was no mistake.

"When was this?"

"...before the Solstice."

"Has he done this before?"

"I don't know?"

"How did you know this was different than arguments you had in the past?" he asked, switching tactics when he saw her confusion turn to distress.

"He threatened Impa and Garo," was the immediate response.

"Has he threatened them before?"
"No…? He doesn't like Garo, and Garo doesn't like him. They growl at one another," she added while tilting her head, bemused by that single fact.

"They…growl?" Unsure if he heard her correctly, he leant forward slightly.

She nodded. "Link is a wolf. Garo is a canine. Both are alpha territorial males. So…they growl."

"Link…growls…at your puppy?"

"Yes."

While making a quick note to speak to Kaneil and draft a letter to Link's therapists, he shook his head.

Working with Zelda was never boring, that was for sure.

"You never did tell me."

"Pardon?" Startled, he looked up, ignoring the half-written note. He met her inquisitive gaze without hesitation, genuinely confused. "What did I not tell you?"

"Why I'm sane enough to lead a country, but not manage my own life. I asked you…in those dark months," she evaded, wincing at the memory of her silence. "You said you would tell me. I forgot, truthfully. But…well, Mikal brought up the fact that they'll question my sanity."

Considering her request, he never looked away, slowly twirling the pen around his fingers. "I did say that," he admitted slowly. "I left the issue alone in the beginning for fear of what the truth would do. After that…” He shrugged and spread his hands. "I never saw a reason to bring it up."

"Will you tell me now though?"

"Yes."

"Then why?"

"Because," he said with a sigh, "your sanity as a whole is no longer in question. You are, without a doubt, very sane. Your mind is grounded in reality, you comprehend the world around you, you understand abstracts in relation to the world…there is no doubt that you are sane. It's, for lack of better words, your 'strength' of sanity.

"In clinical terms, you exhibit a severe case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Your nightmares, flashbacks, pendulous emotions and other 'abnormal' daily feelings and thoughts have occurred for over six months. They disrupt your daily life, and no conventional coping mechanisms have worked. You also have several unhealthy dependent and co-dependent relationships. There are smaller diagnoses too, but we can discuss those later.

"None of this makes you insane, however. Your mind is not broken. You can run a country because it has very little impact on your personal life. The country takes your focus and applies it to something much larger than yourself. Much of what you do is based in logical arts; mathematics, history, science and communication. These do not have a very large emotional impact upon you.

"A large part of this is due to your upbringing. You were taught from an early age that while your leadership and personal life are very intertwined, and that you are a representation of the country…you and the country operate on an emotionless level. Your 'regal mask' is a state of function, rather than feeling. Your mind operates in an emotionally indifferent, logic-based way when you are
dealing with Hyrule's well-being.

"Your personal life, however, is a different matter. The traumas you have suffered were in part 'for' your country, but they were done in a way which impacted only your 'true' self. They were very close to heart, both in words and deed."

Barely blinking, she considered his words as she stared at him. "So in public I can do my job fine because it has nothing to do with me, but in private I'm a wreck because it's all about me?"

"Not exactly."

She sighed, rubbing her face. "I don't understand."

"I suspect the separation began when you were a child. Your father doted on you, but most of this was done as a ruler. He loved you, please don't mistake me, but his grief over your mother…I don't think he was ever truly able to express his love for you like most fathers would. He could relate to you as a King, not a father.

"Impa helped. But your dependency on her, and her dual nature of protector and care-giver, caused your younger self some confusion. As an adult, you can now understand what she is and why she acted as she did. Then, however, I believe you were rather…lost…in how to regard her.

"Then along came Link. About your age and with no responsibilities, he was able to help you enjoy being a child. Your maturity was rushed, due to your status as the Heir Apparent, and Link provided your mind and spirit the time it needed to simply…be what it was. A child.

"When you were older, though still a child in many ways, Ganondorf broke your world. First by attacking the castle, then with war, and finally by abusing you. He did this, or so he told you, because of Hyrule. The truth is that he was a monster, and wanted to hurt anyone he could. Unfortunately…he could and did hurt you. Repeatedly. For years.

"The harm he caused you was done in private, under cloak of darkness. Away from public eye. All damage was hidden, further reinforcing the separation between 'Princess' and 'Zelda'. There was a clear definition of your roles. This continues today. Your father, Nayru rest his soul, started the separation. Ganondorf is the one who solidified it."

"So I'm two separate people?"

"No. You had the potential to be." For a moment, his neutrality faltered, revealing the depth of his emotion…of how close she had come to such a fate. "I suspect you were at the point of such a breaking point when you killed him. By killing him in public, you created a subconscious 'bridge' between the two worlds you lived in. They were now connected, however weakly, and this allowed your mind to remain intact.

"Why you can rule a country, but cannot always manage your personal life… It all goes back to persona. You will use formal mannerisms when standing before dignitaries, even if speaking with Impa. But in private, you are casual in your speech in actions."

"Then…it's an extreme difference in mannerism, but on a deeper level?"

"Yes."

He nearly sighed in relief at the understanding dawning on her face. Praise the Gods, he mentally whispered. They could have been circling that for…well…years. It'd taken him a long while to convince her he wanted to clean and heal her wounds, not worsen them.
"I'm tired Eldric," he heard her whisper. "I'm so tired of the games, of the deceit. Have I not already paid for whatever crimes I committed? Was the blood I shed not enough?"

"It was, Zelda…and I believe the jury will agree with me. I do not know what they are charging you with, aside from treason and fraternization, but…the circumstances surrounding your actions more than explain them. I, and many others, are more than willing to admit such."

"They're trying for the death penalty," she confided in a nearly silent voice, "or at the very least deposition."

"They have no reason to rule in favor of these charges," he replied, keeping his tone as soothing as possible even as his heart threatened to break through his ribs. "You've done nothing wrong."

"I was caught in compromising positions with my pseudo-brother. Witnesses will attest to seeing me leave and enter the castle at odd hours of the night. Link and Mikal say it is impossible, but I believe they have proof of my dalliance with…him. I ordered the death of an untold number of beings, rather than granting them trial. I will be lucky if they find deposition to be necessary."

He watched the tears fall from her eyes, one at a time as she struggled to keep her breath even. He spoke with a calm he did not feel, knowing logic could not soothe her this time. "Your mental state requires a type of intensive situational therapy which often requires unorthodox methods. This is not unusual for abuse survivors, nor for warriors suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This disorder also causes an altered state of awareness, focusing your mind more on survival. Often times paranoia and irrational behaviors are witnessed by those around you, and are misinterpreted to being decisions of a sound mind.

"For as many witnesses as they can find attesting to your supposed willing participation—which I assure you, there will be very few due to the legal ramifications on not reporting the abuse of a minor and member of the royal family—we can find three more who believe otherwise. The masses may not have been aware of the truth, nor those closest to you…but there are many in this country who know you were suffering in some way. Even those who do not like your leadership will admit that you have done the best you can.

"And as for your orders after Ganondorf's death…” He took a breath, choosing his words carefully. "I am not a barrister, nor a scholar. But if there is one thing I know for a fact, it is that the law takes extenuating circumstances into account. At the time of the last major battle, martial law had been declared. You, and any you had appointed to act in your stead, were allowed to make immediate, war-related decisions without contacting your Council for approval.

"Mikal and I discussed this at length when you were mourning. If we ignore your mental state at the time- and this is a big 'if'- your actions were understandable. There is a grey area regarding the battle, due to the use of magic. Were you acting as a Queen, Sage or Triforce wielder? Under martial law, you were well within your rights as Queen and General to order the swift execution of his army. They had the advantage of physical strength and magical weaponry. There is also the fact that no court in the land will fairly judge a Boblin.

"If what I've heard is correct, you only ordered the deaths of those on the battle field. All others were granted a trial. Morally, this is another grey area. But…Zelda, you granted them mercy, even if you do not see it. Many of his warriors were not human. Those that were would have been treated worse than the non-humans. You gave them a swift, clean death.

"Many of the soldiers still come to their local physicians, healers, and apothecary seeking sleep aids. Nightmares plague them, and will do so for many more years. They speak to us, those in my profession, about their dreams…about their memories. They tell us of how most of his army would
not surrender, how it was a fight to the death despite the Hyrulian victory. They speak of how those who did surrender, thanked them...how they whispered a quick death was better than more torture.

"War turns people into either monsters or saints. You know this. Unfortunately, for many, they become monsters due to the pain and anger they cannot cope with. There are many others who were treated as you were, a good number of them harmed by their fellow citizens.

"You made the best decision you could for that situation. You will not die, I promise you."

"Losing the crown...would be just as bad."

"Why?"

She stared at him, assessing his inquiry through her blurry vision. His words were in the tone of a therapist, not that of a caring friend. He did not want to know for pleasure's sake, she knew, but rather so he could understand and help her.

"Because," she murmured while looking away, "I gave everything I had to keep this country safe. Blood, body, spirit, mind. All of it, to keep Hyrule from his grips. I do not want to be Queen...but I know no one else understands what this country is worth, how it runs. Anyone they replace me with will never be able to learn the nuances I have known since birth, simply because they will be foreign. The throne of Hyrule must be held by a member of the Nohansen family, by law. I have no children, adopted or by blood, nor any siblings. My closest living relative is a three months' journey away, if the weather is good."

"What will you do if they depose you?"

"It depends on what the country as a whole says," came her eventual reply. "If the people want me, I will fight. If they all agree to see me gone...then I will leave."

"Will you live?"

For a long while, there was no answer. Finally, she spoke, meeting his eyes with the sorrowful expression of one with little hope.

"I don't know."

[-]

There was no surprise when an hour later his door opened. Looking up from his notes, he nodded to the woman and gestured to the now cold seat.

"How did it go?"

Finishing his line, he set the pad aside and folded his hands atop the desk. He regarded the worried woman with calm neutrality, mind still reeling from all they had discussed. Little else had been said after her admission regarding her future.

"I told her we should meet twice weekly and then bi-daily once the trial begins. It's been far too long since she's spoken with me."

A waiting expression met his words, accompanied by expectant silence.

"I cannot tell you what we discussed. Her confidentiality is her right."

"I know."
"Do you? You asked me to speak with her for her sake as much as yours."

"I never hid such."

"I respect you, Impa, but I do not fear you. Do not seek to intimidate me. I will not tell you anything beyond what is allowed."

"I understand that, Healer Deaso. You have my respect as well."

Both regarded the other, gauging, assessing, challenging. With a silent agreement, they both nodded and backed down.

"She is…struggling," he began after a pause. "Far more than I think she realizes. The trial alone strains her inner balance. Link's absence from her life is already a matter of public speculation, even though he has only been gone a day or so. The people have noticed their…strained relationship."

She regarded him with silent contemplation, knowing the razor's edge he walked.

"She needs definition, security. Adopting Garo has renewed her sense of purpose some-what…but she needs more than a pet."

"Are you telling me she's suicidal?" Impa whispered. The words left the sour taste of fear in her mouth, coating her insides as horror and fear slowly spread through her. The sight of blood soaked sand and cloth still haunted her dreams, making her wake many a night with tears in her eyes.

"I can't answer that."

"What can you tell me?"

"Her physical health has improved. She's put on weight, though not nearly as much as I would like. For now I won't push it…she's within the 'healthy' range for her height and age. Continue having group meals at least once a day; even the castle workers are speaking of how much…freer…she appears after them. Calmer, more able to interact.

"I do worry though. She consents to blood tests every few months, but it's nearly time for a full examination."

"Blood tests?"

He stared at her, unsure of how to approach this.

"You are aware of what happened?"

"Yes. Not every last detail…but enough."

He hesitated, licking his lips as he sought words. "I'm not sure how to say this delicately. You are aware of Ganondorf's…system…in regards to Zelda's abuse?"

"I assume you aren't referring to his methods of brutality," she whispered while looking away. "Yes. She…told me of the…the others."

"To be careful, I've been ordering blood tests every two or three months. Initially, regular exams were part of my…treatment of her injuries. I needed to be aware of her injuries to know what to focus on. Now that she is no longer being abused, every six months is efficient."
"Not every three years?"

"Most women were not in her situation," he said quietly. "Those who were victims such as she…we, the healers and physicians, have developed a special routine for. There are several levels of abuse, ranging from isolated occurrences to years and decades. Zelda's abuse spanned over several years, during her physical development. While her health is now stabilized, she will be closely watched for at least another decade in case there is any…latent disease or damage."

"When was her last exam?"

"Eight months ago. I've let it slide due to recent events, but she knows how important this is."

"Would you like me to say something?"

"...I'm not sure," he admitted after a beat. He looked away, his strength fading as she faced him, concerned. "Zelda is not like many survivors I have worked with, do work with. Not only because of her magic or royal status. Her situation, though not rare by any means…is very unique. Abuse happens with or without war, but few survivors I know of have been in something even remotely similar to her.

"Similar in nature, yes. But the nature of her exact abuse…the methods used, circumstances surrounding it…complicates matters. She is also isolated in a way many other survivors are not. They have a support system, even if they do not recognize it. Her immediate system consists of a handful of people, truth be told.

"I do not know how to approach this subject. It most often occurs in the normal course of conversation, as I'm sure she has it written down on some calendar, but lately…it has not. With her avoiding me, it is also difficult to assess how best to mention it. Impa," he pleaded as he turned back to her once more, "I truly do not know how to speak to her on this. But it is imminent that it occur sooner rather than later. The extra two months is enough of a risk, it was part of our calculations. But any later…and the entire reason for the timetable is moot point."

"How soon?" she asked in an equally quiet, nearly strangled tone. By the Goddesses, he wanted her to suggest an answer…when she could barely get Zelda to understand why lying in bed wasn't harmful?

"As soon as possible. I know it is only another stressor, one she cannot afford with the looming trial…but putting it off will only make it worse."

"Why was I never aware?"

"You had no reason to be," he told her simply. "Your initial ignorance kept the knowledge from you, and after you knew, she asked me not to tell you. Your presence is not required."

"…but would be helpful?"

When he didn't answer, his expression spoke for him. She knew he was barely staying within the confines of his Oath. Her own status is the only reason he could speak as freely as he had.

"Isn't it nearly time for your—"

"Yes," she said with a hiss, grimacing at the thought.

"You can always skip it," he told her with a small smile. "Zelda could skip it. You have free will."
"And then next time I have to see someone for my health, their first question will be 'why did you not have the tests done'? I know how you all work."

He spread his hands in surrender, trying not to enjoy the child-like discomfort gracing her features. Something about the mighty Impa pouting about a routine health exam was rather amusing.

"If it helps, no male likes theirs any better. Yours are every three years, ours are yearly."

"No one scrapes metal along your internal organs either," she retorted in a mutter.

"You have free will."

"It's horrible. It's degrading, awkward, uncomfortable and humiliating at best. Now you want me to convince my Charge to go through the same thing every six months."

"I didn't ask you to."

"You didn't have to." With a sigh and another grimace, she promised to visit one of the midwives if he didn't pester her.

"How do you conduct hers?" came her eventual question after a long silence.

"Self-administered sedative," he admitted without preamble. "She wanted to go through them without it…" He shuddered, drawing into himself for a moment as he recalled her bloodcurdling screams and damage she had done to them all within those few minutes. "Through some careful testing we found a mild sedative which allows her to remain coherent but detached. It is not ideal, especially for a survivor…but it was her suggestion and choice."

She nodded silently in understanding. Everything protective within her burned at the thought of anyone touching her Charge, her mate, her keta, especially while she was sedated. But…she could understand it.

He watched her warily, seeing the darkness which spread through her veins. Survival eclipsed his curiosity, instinct and reason telling him this was magic. This was the Shadows that everyone whispered about, that they said she ripped people and herself apart with when Zelda went missing during battle.

First Garo, now Impa. Having Zelda was a patient was hazardous to his health when she wasn't around! Sighing, he rubbed his face and remained silent, giving her time to calm down.

There was nothing else he could do.

Nothing…except wait.

Well, maybe…one thing.

"Impa?" He waited until she turned to him, eyes blazing with rage and pain. "I know many still question you, your relationship. They say it is unnatural, as you basically raised her. Many say you are taking advantage of her.

"I won't say I have my worries. Even Zelda has acknowledged the fact that you were her parental figure is unhealthy in some regard. But...after working with her for the last few years, after seeing all she has been through and watching her grow despite it...I can find no reason to judge either of you."
"She is not your blood relation, nor family by adoption. I can't even begin to fathom what it must be like to be...bonded to another person such as you both are. There are many factors outside my understanding, and that of others. But I watch you, and her, and I see nothing but love. Love, caring, compassion. Grief, pain and anger, yes...but rarely at one another.

"The two of you have a healthy, if rather co-dependent, relationship. As an outsider with no magic, no special powers...I can genuinely say I wish I saw more couples have what you do. You both have your struggles and trials, but you've endured it all and come out stronger. The love you have holds you together. You communicate, talk through things rather than scurry around them.

"At first I did not approve, due to your previous status as her caregiver and her mental state. I am glad I said nothing, now that time has passed. The two of you are good for one another. I hope you continue with what you both have, because it can only get better. It will be hard, for both of you...but you have people willing to help you, if you let us."

Slowly, ever so slowly, the Shadows within her calmed, settling at the sincere honesty pouring from his words. Her anger faded as she felt tears burn her eyes.

"Few have told you they approve," he said quietly. "Most have been judging you both...but mostly you, haven't they?"

"Sometimes I wonder," she whispered, "If I did the right thing by telling her."

"What was it like for you, before you did speak?"

"Pain," was her immediate, garbled response. She choked on the word, everything blurring as her mind drifted back to those days, months. "Agony. To love her, but not speak. To think she might love another, desire another...it killed me slowly."

"Would you have ever told her, if she hadn't pushed you?"

Why was she not surprised he knew? For some reason, it didn't anger or hurt her.

"Probably not," she whispered. "I felt it...inappropriate, for the reasons you mentioned. Though she never was, nor will be, my daughter...at one time, I loved her as such. But as she grew, as it became apparent the age of her mind and spirit did not match the body..." She shuddered, barely able to form the words as the carefully hidden shame tore through her heart.

"You grew to love her."

"Yes."

"You began to desire her."

"Yes."

"That doesn't make you 'wrong'," he told her when she closed her eyes. "It makes you human."

"Human, Hylian and Sheikah are all different races," she murmured without looking at him.

"By environmental adaptation," he replied just as quickly, "Nothing more. Your physical appearance happed over eons of evolution, due to the environment your ancestors lived in. At the end of the day...we're all human."

"It felt wrong."
'"Do you know why?"


"Society, maybe? The royal advisors?"

When she finally looked at him, he shook his head. They could see the strong warrior within Zelda, the same warrior Zelda could see. He and Zelda could see the confused, lost woman within Impa...the same person Impa could not see. Would the mirror ever reflect the full truth? He doubted it. Not when the mind needed such strong denial to function in their current society.

"There are...were many reasons to worry about a romantic relationship between the two of you. Yet Celestial Guardians, Maderones, are well documented. Few of us laypeople understand the magic and spirituality behind it, but we respect it. You were never a normal nurse or governess. You were hers, just as she was yours. Even we, the professionals, the teachers and healers, knew there was something...different between the two of you.

"I have seen and heard much in my time as a Healer. One thing I have learned is that the eyes rarely lie. Even the best liar cannot hide their eyes. Mask them, eyes, but if you know how to look...the truth is there.

"Listen to me, and listen well Impa. You were not, are not and never will be a pedophile.I can see it plain on your face that is your fear. I presume your romantic feelings for her did not begin until she was in her late teens? Yes? Then I am correct. You did not act upon them with disregard for her. You struggled with them, and yourself. Your conscience nearly drove you to places I'm sure you'd rather I not name.

"No, I'm not reading your mind. You can stopped being shocked. I'm a Healer;psychology is my specialization. To do my job, I must understand the mind. I treat the whole person, not just the body...unlike those pompus Physicians," he added in a mutter, missing her small smile of appreciation.

"You did not 'groom' her. You did not isolate her. In fact, you fought for her to interact with others. You are not like Ganondorf.

"She was not a child when you spoke of your feelings. You did not start the conversation, she did. You have not asked her for anything she is not willing, or ready, to give you. You love her. You care for her. And yes, that means you physically desire her.

"Enjoy what you have, Impa, and stop doubting yourself. For all her confusion, for all her moments of madness, she does know the difference between you and him. She may not understand intimacy, but she knows the love you have for her and the obsession he had are very different. She's not ten, she's nearly twenty. You're doing nothing wrong by loving her and being in a relationship with her.

"Until Zelda herself tells you she thinks something is wrong-when she is rational, mind you-stop worrying. Stop listening to the whispers and gossip. Feel free to ignore what I just told you. The only opinions that truly matter...are hers and yours."

She simply nodded and whispered "thank you", closing her eyes as tears began to fall.

He sat back in his chair and stared out the window, heart lighter even as his mind whirled from the last few hours.
Songs

Circus for A Psycho by Skillet
Rumors scored the land as surely as the winter blanketed all greenery. Ears and tongues burned with the whispers of how the throne was corrupt, how their Queen was facing inquisition and trial. Few gave these harsh words any consideration, but those who did added fuel to the fire. Link had been absent from public sight in the last few weeks. Was he killed, imprisoned, exiled?

Voices would lower to hushed, barely present whispers.

It was said that he was in the hospital, in a private ward.

Gasp of shocks and titters of amused glee would escape then, blocking out the sounds of disgusted, righteous anger from those nearby.

Who knew the truth? Many knew it was not them. There had to be more to the story.

Eldric knew there was. As he considered the whispers he had heard in the Market, the uneasy glances his own colleagues had been trading, he fought a disgusted sound of his own.

"Have none of you any shame?" he asked quietly as he regarded the others. Healers, physicians, nurses, orderlies, midwives, aids, care givers, pharmacists, apothecaries...any and all who were free to attend their yearly gathering had done so. Any trained in the professional medical field had been invited, no matter their level of expertise.

Every year he lobbied to invite the herbalists, the medicine men and women of the villages, those with the older and more Earth-bound knowledge. And every year he was turned down, reminded they had no degree. It had become a sad routine over the last decades, one he expected would not change until he was an old, retired man...if even then.

The midwives were the exception, they told him. Not all of them had formal training, but a truce had long since been called between the groups. Midwives were specialists, the gap between the healers using nature, and the healers using science.

"Eldric," started one of their most esteemed physicians, "there is no need-
"There is too!" he roared as he slammed his fist on the table. "We are gathered here to discuss medicine, to share our discoveries and innovations. And yet over the last three days I have heard little except filibusters and gossip! I am ashamed to call many of you my colleagues! Have none of you a scrap a decency?"

"We're only human," was his mentor's soothing words, "Will you fault us for such?"

"No," he said sharply as he rose. "I won't fault anyone here for their curiosity. I will fault them, however, for their impunity of self. All of us gathered are aware that Queen Zelda and Sir Link are also human. That they have their moments of weakness, of humility and anger. They are just as prone to illness, temptation and mistakes as the rest of the planet. And yet many of you sit here and
judge them—judge your own patients, even!- for their human nature.

"They are not divine. Chosen by the Goddesses though they may be, they still bleed red like the rest of us. Their bodies and minds function as ours do. And yet you insist on putting them on pedestals. I long ago questioned why they would suffer hours of agony after battling that despot and his army rather than seek treatment. I now know why—my own profession has turned against them!"

Fury burned his face and shook his frame as he marched to the door, ignoring the collective shock staring back at him. It wasn't until his hand rested on the doorknob that he spoke once more.

"Some of you work with me in the castle, and know the damage of these rumors. Many of you do not. I ask you to consider something, before you release your hideous words once more.

"How would you like to be in their place? Your husbands, wives, children? How would you feel if it was your children being slaughtered by lies?"

Without another word, he left, slamming the heavy wooden doors behind him.

As he trudged through the February snow, hands shoved deep in his pockets, he smiled.

_That felt good._

[-]

"Impa?"

Her quiet voice broke the nervous silence which hung between them. The fire crackled as a log burst, sparks flying up the chimney. Garo snorted in his sleep and rolled onto his back, snoring softly.

Red eyes lifted as a towel lowered, releasing locks still damp from showering.

"Yes?"

Biting her lip, she stood from her chair. This late at night, without the armor and formal wear which defined them, without the hidden weapons and status symbols which encased them, it was easier. With the heavy cotton pajamas covered by a flannel robe, with her shoulder-length hair loose and dark from moisture, it was possible.

In the darkness, once the moon had risen, but before the hour was so late madness began to take hold, she could approach her. Before they rested for the night, before the whispers and dreams began, before they had even moved to their separate rooms…they were just Impa and just Zelda.

Two women fighting the world together, seeking aid from the battles which threatened to consume them.

She stopped once her own dressing gown brushed the couch cushions. Twisting the hem of one sleeve, she bit her lip harder before releasing it.

She could do this. She could. Would.

Patient eyes watched her, an expression of calm attention soothed her. Something had changed in Impa over the last few weeks. She was still her usual alert (paranoid) self, but not as tightly wound. Not as…reserved. In private she was softer, more affectionate.
Never asking, never pushing, never taking.

But not as hesitant.

More willing to touch hands, to linger after a hug.

At first it had confused her, had worried and even frightened her. After a few days, she had asked "What changed?".

The question had hung between them for a moment, the past echoing into the present.

And then Impa had smiled a slow, soft smile, one which reached her eyes and engulfed the bond.

"I did," was her recalled reply. "I changed, somewhat, as a person. Someone told me something I…desperately needed to hear. I realized there was one less demon to fight. It was no demon, merely a heavy shadow cast by inadequate light."

Her own words ran through her mind as she watched Zelda. She'd known her instigation of affection would be a startling change at first, especially considering her previous behavior had been rather…guarded and protective.

Obsessive, if she admitted the truth to herself.

Nabooru, Eldric, Reyel and Impaz had all told her similar things. It wasn't until her grandmother had broken off mid-sentence and regarded her with narrow, searching eyes that the last realization had occurred.

"If you treat something normal as something fearful," the older woman had told her with complete disregard to their previous conversation, "it will eventually become so. The unknown is fearful because it is just that: unknown. But, my child, we Sheikah are born from shadows…we ARE Shadows. Why fear the dark, why condemn and taint it, when it is part of who you are?"

She hadn't asked, and Impaz hadn't told her. The only thing she could assume was that it had either filtered through her mind and then the tribal link…or that Impaz, being a mother, simply knew.

Both were definite, legitimate possibilities.

She'd considered those words to be true. Caution was needed, yes, even warranted. One did not run headlong into complete darkness and not expect to be hurt. But neither should it be shied away from.

In attempting to protect Zelda, she had inadvertently worsened her fears.

And so she had simply…stopped thinking about it. Not completely, but no longer did she obsess and analyze. The only way to show the younger woman that affection was safe was to believe it herself.

Silently, she watched her love as she fidgeted. She wouldn't push, wouldn't ask. Zelda needed to find her voice, her courage within their relationship. She had done so, weeks previous by asking Impa to stay with her. As if that one brave act had scared her, she had not made any other "new" requests.

With the same mixture of fear, determination, curiosity and love pulsing through the bond, she could only assume the younger woman was about to make one now.
After what felt like an eternity, her quiet, hesitant words sounded. "Will... will you... will you k-kiss me?"

She smiled and dropped her towel to the floor before standing. Carefully, she wrapped her arms around the younger woman and brushed their lips. Once, twice before she repeated the action a third time. A bit firmer, she lingered before also pressing a kiss to her cheek. "I will kiss you anytime you wish," she said just as softly.

"No," came Zelda's mental whisper, "Will... will you kiss me... like you do in your dreams?"

For a moment, her heart stopped. For just a moment, her mind raced, tearing through her memories and hazy recollections of nighttime fantasy. And then she stillled, exhaling softly as she forced herself to react. Not to obsess, not to analyze, not to worry.

"Can you show me? I don't remember all my dreams, nor which one you saw."

The image flickered through her mind as the bond opened fuller. Golden-white light tinged her vision, a sign of the soul hovering just beside hers.

For all she had vowed not to give more worry than was due, something within her sighed in relief at the recollection which was presented to her. There were some things, such as affection, that she could give out more freely. And there were others, such as the knowledge of experience and desire, that she could not. One was progress, the other damage. There was a line to what Zelda would and could tolerate (and also what she wanted to know, despite all her questions).

Whatever dream she had seen had been a safe one. The fragmented, second-hand emotion told her that. It was one of affection rather than raw lust, possibly influenced by Zelda's proximity to her own mind.

Ruefully, Impa wondered if praying before she slept would help. She hadn't realized that with her new awareness, so too came lowered shields.

"Yes," she murmured as she ran a hand through Zelda's long golden-brown hair. Cupping the base of her skull, she tightened her other arm. The feel of a soft body pressed against hers sent heat scorching through her. The weak scents of flowers, ink and steel reached her nose as she inhaled deeply, taking in her natural perfume.

Gently, she brushed their lips again as their minds touched. Without words, she requested honest truth, asked to be told if it was too much. A flutter of agreement and anticipation met her plea.

Warm, dry lips met hers as she brushed them yet again before lingering. Slowly she increased the pressure, her thumb tracing the other woman's spine from where it rested. Her lips parted slightly, capturing the quick exhale of surprise at her touch. She kept her movements slow, gentle, even when they were repeated.

Hesitant, unsure, but repeated all the same.

This was the difference, she knew, between knowledge and experience. The hard, demanding mouth which had possessed hers just days ago, the hand which had pulled at her, was done from knowledge. It was done from pain, from reflex and the need to survive. Such self-assurance was heartless, cold despite hot flesh.

This, however, was experience. It was living in the moment, learning the present and all it entailed. When those soft lips pulled away before lowering once more, capturing her bottom lip, she knew it was done from love. The quiet, nervous laugh which followed, teeth scraping that same lip,
vocalized the warmth and the affection which came through the bond.

"Minx," she whispered with amusement before resuming their kiss.

Carefully, thoughtfully, she touched her tongue to the lips pressing against hers. When the body leaning against hers, seeking her warmth, tensed in reply, she stilled.

"Too much?" she asked as quick breath seared her mouth, her chin, her cheeks from its proximity.

A shy, reluctant nod was her only response. Eyes opened, the question clear, the worry stark against a background of love, affection and sensation.

"Thank you for telling me the truth," she said as she nuzzled the pulse beating in the other woman's neck.

Assured, Zelda's hands slid from her arms to rest on her back. Humming softly, she returned the hug, giving her time to process it all.

[-]

"Excuse me?"

Disbelief and confusion barely touched the quiet, calm inquiry. Intelligent, assessing eyes stared at the people standing before her. An uncharacteristic mixture of soldiers and nobleman stood side-by-side as their latest chosen speaker (nominated sacrifice, if anyone asked her opinion) gave their news.

"Queen Zelda Nohansen of Hyrule, you are under arrest for aiding and abiding an enemy of the state; conspiracy against the state; consorting and fraternizing with the aforementioned enemy of state; multiple counts of larceny and treason against the state; corruption of a governmental office; corruption of a minor; murder; and multiple crimes of war."

They knew this would come. They had expected it to come last month. What they had not expected, Zelda admitted to herself, was for the charges to be so vague.

And vague they were. There were no explicit details to account for arresting her.

Which Mikal, bless his soul, was explaining to the gathered body.

"-which is why," he concluded as he saw their expression begin to close off, "Her Majesty will appear at trial, but can not be formally arrested."

"We have the full charges, Evat," said a man nearly his own age, "it is simply much too long to read off before then!"

"Yet by not reading it, you have violated Her Majesty's lawful rights. She is a Hyrulian citizen, and as such, she has the same rights as all of us. This includes knowing what you are arresting her for. What you have just rattled off are not charges, gentlemen, ladies," he added as he saw the two women in the back. "They are, in fact, categories of laws. Since you have read these categories, twice mind you, rather than actual charges…you cannot arrest Her Majesty."

Anger radiated through those within the legal profession, each of them searching for a loophole and knowing there was none.

Mikal was correct.
While *some* of what they had listed were in fact charges, such as aiding and abiding, the majority of it was not. There was no specification. As such, it was accusation.

They *could*, by rights, arrest her on accusation with proof. They had proof. They *could not*, however, arrest her *without* proof on *all* accusations. It was the law of the land.

All or nothing.

Most often it worked in favor of the innocent, but there were times it allowed criminals to escape unpunished. Over the numerous centuries, many councils and monarchs had tried various methods of instituting how the accused was arrested.

Trial and error, especially during and after several wars, had told them this was the best method. And how he knew that fact burned.

Mikal couldn't help but smile as several of them snarled quietly.

"Since Her Majesty is not under arrest, I ask that you leave her to her work."

"The trial will begin tomorrow," said his one-time colleague. "Tomorrow at eight sharp!"

They turned and left as one, the stoic soldiers following without a word.

It wasn't until the doors closed as the Sheikah Guards created a wall of bodies before it, until the curtains shut out the winter sun, that they allowed their masks to drop.

"Can we do this?" Zelda whispered, hugging herself as she stared at one of the few people on her side.

"We can," Mikal said with confidence. He didn't allow any of his doubt to show, nor his worry. "We can do this. You, I and the others defending you. They won't win."

When he moved to the bookshelves, searching for a tome he barely recalled seeing years ago, she closed her eyes and sank into her chair.

The day had started so well…

[-]

Even waking in Impa's arms the next morning could not put a smile on her face. Fear of the proceedings, of the truth, gnawed at her until she bent over her toilet, stomach revolting.

Nor could Impa's hand rubbing her back and a cold cloth wiping her brow could return color to her face.

Yet none of this showed as she sat in the hard, unyielding chair they had given her. The vast chamber was crowded with council on both sides, the jury in the middle. Witnesses, she knew, were in separate chambers throughout the courthouse. Impa sat on one side, Mikal on the other, with Eldric beside him. There had been frantic whispered discussion followed by a heated argument between the opposing head advisors.

Maderone Impa should not be allowed to witness the trial, as she was biased and unable to give testimony.

It was only Eldric's quick, hushed reassurances when he'd moved to sit beside her that had kept her
silent. Them both silent, actually.

A compromise had been reached, more from grudging acknowledgement of the law than mutual agreement. They couldn't bar her from the room without cause. But if she caused disruption, she would not be allowed to remain.

A vast, collective breath was held until she nodded, not a single one of them wanting to point out she could come and go as she pleased, with or without their say.

Magic could do that.

Power could do that.

And if they admitted the truth...legally, she did not have to follow their orders.

The fact that she had agreed to do so, however, had shaken the opposing council. When they'd conversed, huddled amongst themselves, Mikal and Deaso had traded places.

And so now they sat, watching a purple-eyed, black-haired man as he stood.

Listening.

Waiting.

"...begins the trial of Her Sovereign Majesty Queen Zelda Nohansen of Hyrule. She stands trial of her own free will. As a natural-born adult citizen of the country of Hyrule, she has consented to a trial by jury with council on both sides. Witness will be called as relevant to the proceedings. All witnesses and evidence have been vetted and cataloged; any other witnesses and/or evidence are not permissible. All charges have been given to both councils with adequate time to prepare a defense, and no other charges are permissible.

"The charges are as followed:

"Treason against the state of Hyrule in the form of aiding and abiding an enemy of state known herein as Ganondorf et al and those who followed him. This includes having foreknowledge of attacks against the state and not acting on this knowledge; consorting and fraternizing with Ganondorf et al; levying war against the state; knowingly committing murder by association of Hyrule citizens.

"Consortion with men and women who are Hyrule and foreign born. This includes infidelity; corruption of a minor; fornication with an enemy of the state.

"Conspiracy of invasion. This includes plotting the invasion of Hyrule for the purpose of seating Ganondorf et al upon the throne; inciting riot and panic for the purpose of sedation through these planned invasions; misinforming the army and militia of Hyrule.

"Crimes of war. This includes the mass execution of prisoners of war without trial; torture through knowingly allowing ReDead and other creatures to infect citizens; torture of citizens and war prisoners with the aid of magic.

"Corruption. This includes fornicating with a minor; giving a minor tasks specified for an adult; influencing a minor to consume mind-altering substances; the use of illegal, inhumane magic on a minor; using status as Princess and Queen for personal gain.

"How do you plead?"
"Not guilty," she said quietly but firmly, even while everything within her said he was right.

"Very well. The trial will proceed."

"Objection," Mikal said as he glanced at the notes before him.

The room's occupants stirred. It was unheard of for objections to occur before the trial had even begun.

"On what grounds, Advisor Mikal," the man asked in a slow tone, purple eyes never looking away from the defense.

"Irrelevance, your Honor. Some of the charges against my client, Her Majesty Queen Zelda, cannot be solely applied to her. Some of them are also irrelevant as they are part of her title and status as Sage of Time. The titles, duties and scope of her positions as Queen and Sage are distinct. While she is one person carrying both titles, the Court of Hyrule cannot try a Sage without the Circle of Sages present. To my knowledge, they have not agreed to such a trial, nor have given permission for Zelda to be tried by the Court of Hyrule on their behalf."

Once more silence reigned as all look between the two men. Slowly, Judge Herashi sat and considered the request.

"You are correct. As of eight o'clock this morning, the Circle of Sages had not contacted myself or any other representative of the Court with any such permission. List the charges you deem irrelevant on both counts, Adviser Mikal."

Mikal stood and took a deep breath, list in hand.

"My client cannot be charged with acts of war, via mass execution of war prisoners, due to state of martial law. She had the legal right to make immediate war-related decisions without seeking Council approval. Since the Council did not try her for this decision during the statute of limitations, she cannot be tried for it now. Unless you are willing to try the entire Council for not specifying the limits of her decisions under martial law and for not censoring her after the decision was made. If she is guilty of this crime, so is the Council.

"As for her status as Sage of Time, anything dealing with magic cannot be tried in this Court. This includes the supposed crimes of magical torture, giving a minor tasks specified for an adult, anything to do with ReDeads and similar creatures, and using magic on a minor. The supposed 'adult tasks' were detailed by the accusing party in documents Three-A. I have a sworn, notarized statement from Sir Link, witnesses by the Sage Rauru, which affirms that all tasks undertaken were done with free will in full knowledge of what they would entail. It also explains how many of these tasks were performed outside of Her Majesty's knowledge, and in fact, went against her explicit orders.

"She also cannot be charged with anything related to Sir Link since she herself was a minor at the time. It cannot be proved that his use of mind-altering substances is due to any behavior on her part. In fact, it is documented by Sir Link and a witness-"

"Careful Advisor, you tread on thin ice," the judge warned in a firm voice. "The trial as not begun, and a mistrial will not help your client in any way."

"I understand your Honor. It is documented by Sir Link and several witnesses on both sides that he made all decisions regarding Her Majesty of his own free will. This includes using mind-altering substances. He sent a signed, notarized and witnessed letter to myself and the head of the accusing
party detailing how he obtained such substances. In no way did it have anything to do with Her Majesty, and as such, should be dismissed as irrelevant."

Judge Herashi regarded the accusing party, noting the anger seething just under the reddening faces, to the defense. He had been nominated and agreed to judge the proceedings for numerous reasons, the foremost being his fierce, logical application of the law.

And he could find no legal reason Advisor Mikal's objection should be rejected. He had been informed by both parties of their evidence and witnesses. While there was some gray area regarding the fraternization of Link and Zelda while she was an adult and he a minor, neither side had proof it occurred. Both had evidence of happenings when they were minors and adults, but never that year in-between.

Unless Link himself accused her of corruption, which he solely doubted considering such charges (and more) could also be leveled at him, they could not allow any charges regarding Link. It was simply…too involved with her status as Sage of Time.

"So be it. The mentioned charges are dropped and shall be struck from the record. The jury will disregard their mention."

The opposition could only stare at the proceedings, too shocked and horrified to even speak in objection.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Uh-oh. Rumors, a kiss and then the trial begins. This is probably one of the few times I will deviate from my research. Simply because I did enough of that in high school and laws STILL make my head hurt!

Thanks to StoryTellerLore for detailing the charges and hashing out all the details with me. It would've been a lot less...um...detailed and interesting without her. And rather confusing.
Chapter Forty-Four

The days passed with stories, questions and cross-examinations. With each day, hour, minute, second during which another truth was told, fresh blood dripped from a barely healing soul. Every new lie and accusation created another wound until the scabs were nothing but memories. For every flinch there was a crack.

It wasn't until Healer Eldric Deaso was called by the defense, until he was examined by the accusing party, until the words he'd told her just a month before rang through the room that she felt the last of her control slipping.

"And yet you just said she was mentally unstable."

"What I said, Barrister, was that Her Highness struggles with very real mental health issues. Everyone who was on the front-line of the war does. The statistics alone show a warrior of higher rank will be exposed to trauma more than one of lower rank. She is the highest ranking soldier in the country and the one who defeated the usurper. Medical research alone tells us she would be affected by these facts."

"But she is healthy enough to lead a country?"

"Without a doubt. Her mental health is stable; she is in full touch with reality. The fact that she was a victim, and is now a survivor, of the trauma I've previously listed only, does not make her unsuitable to rule."

"Just ten minutes ago you said she suffers from delusions and hallucinations."

"What I said," Eldric clarified through clenched teeth, tired of the word games, "Is that like any warrior, any trauma survivor, she may experience delusions or hallucinations. I did not say she experiences them, however."

"Does she?"

"I am unable to answer any questions regarding the specifics of her health."

"You agreed to answer all questions to the full extent of your knowledge."

"Within reason, within my Oaths. She is being tried for past actions, not current; because of this, her current state is something I cannot specifically comment on. There was no subpoena for her medical records, and as such, I am not able to comment on her current state."

"And her past mental state?"

"If it is something she knows, then yes, I can tell you. Since she is currently a patient of mine, there are some things I can't tell you about her past state."
"What can you tell us?"

Eldric turned away from the Barrister, grinding his teeth. He looked around the room, holding multiple gazes until they looked away, intimidated and ashamed. It wasn't until he found her eyes, the same eyes that once stared at him with such terror and horror, which now stared at him with a fleeting grip on reality, that he began to relax.

"I will tell you what I can," he said with a sigh, "but after a break."

"Your Honor, this is contempt!"

"I must agree with Healer Deaso," Herashi said as he wiped his brow with a damp cloth. "It's three in the afternoon, Barrister. We are meant to break at noon. We have not. I am declaring a recess."

"Your Honor, I beg you-

Purple eyes narrowed as the sharp crack of the gavel sliced through his blustering words. "Enough! This is a trial, and serious though it is, protocol will be followed! We have not left this court room in over six hours, sir. Your witness will remain isolated from the defense by a Court appointed guard. We will resume in forty-five minutes."

[-]

"I have a request, Your Honor."

"Yes, Healer Deaso?"

"The Court wishes to hear my patient's past state of health. While I understand the procedure is to ask and answer questions, this will be faster and easier if I am simply allowed to speak."

"An unusual request, Healer. But…not unreasonable. Do you have a direction?"

"Yes. The Barrister asked what I could tell him. I can tell him how I came to know of her situation, of the trauma she suffered. I can attest to her injuries, both physical and mental. To do this, I must start in the beginning…I must tell the full story."

"Your Honor, surely you won't allow-

"Do be silent, Counselor! I am the Judge here, not you." He turned to the jury, ignoring the fuming accusing party, knowing they considered him biased. "The jury will listen to Healer Deaso's words while disregarding all interruptions.

"You may begin, Healer."

[-]

"You're a soldier, right Nathan?"

"Yes sir."

"And you'd do anything your commanding officer told you?"

"Yes sir…no sir."

"Which is it, yes or no?"
"No sir. I'd do most anything. Not everything."

"Why?"

"Honor, sir, and rules. Some things I just...couldn't do. Others I'm not allowed."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Sure. My CO said raid a village, burn it down. There were women and children there. Didn't matter that they weren't...human...or part of the Hyrulean alliance. None of my troop did it. We trussed him up and turned him in," he added with a grin.

"And that was a matter of honor, an order you wouldn't follow?"

"Yes sir."

"What was an order you couldn't follow due to the rules?"

His smile fell and he looked Mikal in the eyes.

"Besides the same one? When Link told me not to say I saw him dragging the Princess' broken body through the stables. He told me to get the healer sitting right there and then never to say anything."

"You mean Healer Eldric Deaso?"

"Yes sir."

"What part of that couldn't you follow due to the rules? It sounds like you followed it pretty well."

"I told my new CO, right after I got the healer. She looked half-dead. Covered in blood, all ripped up, clothes in tatters. I knew what happened. She was our Princess...is our Queen. Anything I see about her, like that, I have to report."

"And what happened?"

"I don't know. Knight Creso said he'd take care of it. As far as I knew...he reported it."

[-]

"For the record, this witness was granted anonymity for her testimony."

"This is highly irregular!"

"I'm warning you, Advisor Mikal."

"Your Honor, the Court should at least know why she and no others were granted anonymity."

"Because," the veiled woman said before any other could speak, "My death is imminent any other way. I cannot pay for my own crimes if dead."

Zelda sucked in a harsh breath, unable to stop her heart from pounding. Under the table, her hand clenched Impa's as she trembled. Darkness crept along the edge of her vision as terror and hatred coiled within her, choking her.

"Keta?"
Love wrapped around her, swiftly pulling her inward. Soft white enveloped her mind, silencing the whispers, the memories, the madness which loomed, fueled by the voice of one she'd thought dead.

As her mind relaxed, regaining its composed, attentive expression and posture, only Impa and Eldric were aware that Zelda…wasn't there.

"You're telling me, Madam, that the defendant willingly consorted with Ganondorf?"

"Him and many others. She promised him the country. Used her body to get what she wanted, and when she realized she couldn't control him by spreading her legs…she killed him."

"Objection, speculation."

"Sustained. The jury will disregard the last statement. Advise your witness, Counselor."

"Madam, please speak of the facts."

"I am. She told me all about this. I heard her offer him the country. Saw her in his bed, with him and others. She told me after she killed him that she did it because she couldn't control him anymore."

"For the record, state your name and relation to the defendant."

"Jard'n Fewa. I… served him…Ganondorf…'fore I realized what a monster what 'e was."

"And why did you serve him, Mr. Fewa?"

"No other choice. Could feed me an' m'sister wh'n wit' him."

"Did you not seek aid from the local offices?"

"Sure did. Turned us 'way."

"Mr. Fewa, you mentioned the local social service offices turned you away. Why was that?"

"I…don' 'member."

"I'd like to remind you that you are under oath, and perjury is a mandatory two-year prison sentence."

"I…"

His beady eyes darted around before landing on the Queen. Swallowing, he looked at her, realizing just how young she was. He'd heard whispers from the others about her, what she was doing in the camp. He'd seen her many times with her head down, limping, smelling like blood, pain and sex. He hadn't been sure it was her, not until today.

Not under all the bruises, with the broken bones and torn skin.
How easily it could have been his sister…

"Mr. Fewa?"

"I stole," he muttered, turning back to the other man. "Stole lots. Had t'feed her. Mighta beat up s'me peop'e…"

"How often did you steal from others, Mr. Fewa?"

"Coup'e time a w'k."

"And the service agencies turned you away anyway?"

"No. Said…said they'd hel' me, hel' m'sister. I…didn' like d'rules."

"So you broke their rules?"

"Yes."

"How often?"

"Lots."

"At how many agencies?"

"…ev'one I cou'd walk ta."

"Dr. Yera, what do you do?"

"I study psychology, primarily the psychology of war and war's effect on a person's psyche."

"And what can you tell me about those effects?"

"That war does hideous things to the mind. Aside from the violence, and trauma from that violence, the act of war itself gives against the very nature of the being- to protect and continue the species. War kills needlessly, and causes a person to betray not only themselves, but the species as the whole. Killing in self-defense is hard enough, but killing simply because a person is ordered to… there is no simple way to explain it.

"Animals do not normally kill one of their own species. All creatures have developed protective instincts. These can range from submission in face of threat to aggressive defense. An aggressive attack, war and terrorism, will spark the instinct to defend one's territory, be that a family home or entire country.

"People, however, are not animals. Even the 'non-humans' I have studied cannot be classified as animals. People, meaning non-animals, lack the adequate inhibitions against killing our own kind. While our natural reaction- for the whole of the species- is to submit or flee, we will also attack and kill far more than other animals.

"War, from my research, turns people into something worse than animals. Animals do not mindlessly attack, but war can drive a person to extreme ferocity and a deep feral nature. While most soldiers will try not to kill a member of the opposing force, they will still do so. Agitation and aggression becomes a state of being, rather than a response to threatening stimuli, and can contort a person's psyche until they are unrecognizable. Over time, the attempts to not kill stop, since killing
becomes part of their life.

"Averse conditioning is a major part of war training and war itself. If you pull a lever to inhibit a painful burn, over time, you will continue to pull the level even if the delivery system is dismantled. Rather than risk the pain of burn, you will continue to pull the lever in desperation. This type of conditioning is why many soldiers display paranoid and fearful behaviors; even if they are considered 'mentally healthy'...they are attempting to escape pain, despite there being no threat."

"Why would a soldier kill if ordered to?"

"Indoctrination and 'dehumanization'. Soldiers are isolated, pushed to their physical and mental limits, and are given a new set of rules and guidelines to live by. Their worlds are redefined, making routine and authority the focus. Punishment and reward are heavy incentives for any creature. Soldiers are indoctrinated into the group mindset so thoroughly that betraying the group is impossible...extenuating circumstances aside.

"The 'enemy' of the soldier's group would, over time, be 'dehumanized'. This would assist in not only killing their opponents, but to also instigate those killings. The longer the soldier is indoctrinated, the longer they begin to see the world in 'them' and 'us' terms. In some circumstances, indoctrination is so great the individual soldier becomes 'dehumanized', responding only to the group mindset and well-being."

"Can you give us an example of indoctrination?"

"Well...the most obvious is an order which conflicts with the group. If a leader is part of the group, or at least understands it, he or she will not order the group to do something beyond the parameters of their training. Since war removes moral reasoning, these parameters must be understood from a military standpoint rather than that of a civilian. A group of civilians would not, under normal circumstances, raid a country village. In war however, such a raid can be seen as acceptable."

"How would this effect an individual soldier?"

"They would still have the group mentality, but it depends on their military rank. The higher the status, the more differences you find in their mindset. At any rank, defeat during battle would be worse than death, causing the soldier to fight until they expended all resources. This could be anything from a simple argument to a battle for one's life."

"Would a soldier sacrifice everything they had for the good of their country?"

"In theory. There are those who aren't indoctrinated as strongly...but those who are, would and do."

"So if someone is raised from birth as a soldier, to be the best leader possible for their nation, to give everything they had to keep their country safe, what would happen?"

"Leaders are often placed upon pedestals and seen as infallible, especially within a war. This has a large influence on the personality and coping mechanisms of the soldier in question. They are also placed in a position in which they cannot appear to be anything but self-assure. Self-assurance is sometimes overcompensation for self-doubt. As a leader, they cannot appear to doubt themselves.

"Ideally, this person would be an adult by the time they were a leader of the country. As with the military, they would have a strong support system. The higher the rank, the stronger the support."
However, if the support system was inadequate...the individual soldier would sacrifice everything for the group. In this case, the group is their country.

"The support system filters and condenses information which comes to the leader's attention, and also shields them from the pressure of their station. An inadequate support system would, at best, affect the leader's self-image to the point of excessive self-negativity. In contrast, a support system which is in constant agreement and deference will cause the leader to have an exaggerated opinion of themselves and their capabilities. The spectrum of effects a support system has is rather numerous.

"Because an inadequate support system would lead to negative self-views, this would enhance the leader's belief that they must give everything they have. Since there would be few, if any, advisors and delegates to assist in the numerous tasks of being a national leader, the stress of their responsibilities would overwhelm them. There is only so much a single person can do in a given day, especially when it comes to leading a nation. Without help, they would be doing far more than the mind could handle.

"In essence...a soldier trained from birth to be the best possible leader for their country would be shaped to 'give their all'. They would be told from a very young age to sacrifice their wants and desires for the nation. Regardless of their support system, this would alter a person's mind over time. They would eventually see their self-sacrifice as normal, despite the fact that it goes against the survival instinct.

"There would be a very small percentage in which the leader could effectively deviate from this self-sacrifice by the time they were the leader. Assuming they took the role of national leader at eighteen, and have been trained for such a role since they were a toddler, the percentage becomes even smaller. Only the most extreme circumstances would they deviate...and only then if it had a positive impact on the country."

"In your scientific opinion, would you say Her Majesty is such a person?"

"From a medical, scientific standpoint, I would say that war, and the effects the war has had on the Queen's upbringing, has made it impossible for her to do anything but sacrifice herself for Hyrule. What I have seen during my research, and from her own files, only confirms this. Data rarely lies."

"No further questions, Your Honor."

[-]

"Dr. Yera, if a leader is trained and indoctrinated from birth as you described, would they listen to a strong support system?"

"Yes. Strong or weak, the support system would have been part of their indoctrination. They could no more ignore it than they could ignore the country they led."

"And would this leader be capable of ignoring information benefiting the country?"

"I believe so. Military leaders show an extraordinary ability to ignore, and reject, information which would change their plans. A national leader is usually a military leader."

[-]

"Your Honor this is ridiculous! We've heard every witness on the list! It's time for us to make our cases!"
"Your Honor, Advisor Evat is merely trying to rush the trial-"

"I have no intention of-"

"Silence, both of you! We didn't come to my chambers for your childish arguing!"

[ -]

Anxiety consumed all thought. Unable to eat, unable to sleep, unable to work, Zelda could do nothing but pace. Garo watched her from the bed, eyes tracing every nervous step she took. Every noise made her jump, every flicker of shadow set her teeth on edge until there was nothing but agitation.

A strong arm loosely wrapped around her waist, stalling her movements as it pulled her against a warm body.

"Enough, Zelda, enough," Impa murmured quietly. Tightening her arm slightly, she pressed a kiss to the younger woman's hair.

"I can't stop thinking about it."

"Pacing won't help anything. Let's go to the sitting room."

With a nod, the worried Queen pulled away and left her chambers without a backwards glance. It wasn't until they were seated on the couch before the fire, Garo on the floor near the hearth, that Impa spoke once more.

"Would you go on another date with me?"

"…a date?"

"Yes. It's been a while since our last one."

Their eyes slid to the dozing mutt in recollection.

"I…you're assuming they will let me live."

"No, I have no doubt they will."

"Then yes," Zelda whispered after a long pause, "If they let me live…if they let me remain here, in Hyrule…I would love to go on another date with you."

Impa pressed another kiss to the top of her head and hugged her tighter, secure in the knowledge everything would be all right.

She could believe nothing less.

Chapter End Notes

AN: First: Happy Fourth Year Anniversary on FFN to Lotus Jewel! This story was started before 2/25/10, but it's close enough. I honestly though I'd have it finished by
now...shows what I know.

This was not the original plan for the chapter, but as we've all learned by now, this story is horrible about following my "plans".

Also, so no one yells at me, the disclaimers. I am not a doctor, professional, medical researcher or soldier. I've never been in a war, nor do I ever want to be. War, however, is part of this story. Everything "Dr. Yera" stated was paraphrased research from a variety of sources. I meant no offense to anyone by those statements. They were the consensus of my research and a necessary part of the trial.
Chapter Forty-Five

The Price of Ignorance

TW: Graphic discussion of assault, torture and rape

"What is your sentence?"

"Death."

The sound of a sword slicing through the air made her turn her head. Her breath caught as she saw the glowing blade, her blood dripping from Evil's Bane. As it neared her neck, refusing to allow her a chance to leave the table, the world melted away.

Green eyes met blue, taking in the hatred, the fury which pulled lips back in a silent snarl.

The second that blessed metal met her neck, it changed. All air left her as metal became flesh, calloused fingers digging into her throat. Azure slowly gave way to gold.

Words escaped her even as she struggled for air, nails tearing into his unyielding arms.

"You've never had a problem with me touching you."

"That was before you decided to choke me, you son of a bitch! Don't think I've forgotten!"

"If you'd been a good girl, I wouldn't have had to. If you hadn't compared me to that sadistic sociopath, you never would have been hurt. Don't blame your bad decisions on me, Cess."

"Do not think my trust, my submission, my insanity, is an excuse to abuse me. I ask a lot of you, and accept a lot I don't ask for in return...but not this."

A scream tore itself from her lips as her eyes snapped up. Taking gulps of the precious, life-giving air, she fought the weights which pinned her. Blankets, fur and flesh were pushed aside as she scrambled from the bed.

Heedless of the winter cold, she scurried to the glass doors and pushed them open. The snow burned her feet as she stepped onto the balcony, staring at the pre-dawn sky.

"Zelda?"

She didn't turn, knowing Impa was behind her. Shivering, she struggled to control her frantic heart. Fear stole her voice even as rage made her shake.

"Sesha?"

"Eldric asked me what I would do if Hyrule's judgment for me is exile. I didn't answer him," she said quietly, unable to raise her voice. The bitter February wind nearly stole her words as she leaned into the body behind hers, a blanket wrapping around them both.
"Do you think they will reject you?"

"I think," she said after a long hesitation, "that...that I have to fight. I gave everything, everything I had for Hyrule. My bloody body, sanity...my life," she murmured, remembering those fleeting seconds when merciful death had radiated from his foul hands. Short as they were, the bond had never betrayed her agony during those moments.

"Hope gave me pain, death...and life. You told me if I hadn't wanted to be here, hadn't wanted to live, I would have found a way."

"You would have," Impa whispered, shivering from a cold far worse than the one around them. Despite the chill radiating from her soul, the kindling of hope she'd nurtured over the last few weeks began to grow, seeking fuel.

"I can't...I can't keep living my life like this. Letting others rule me. I know...I know I have my problems. For all Eldric says I'm sane, we all know that it's a tentative sanity at best.

"But...but I didn't give everything, didn't give my very existence, didn't suffer all the pain...to let them have the last laugh.

"She...she got on the stand and lied. I can't prove it...that would require magic. But she lied. I can take my people thinking I betrayed them, but not because of her. Not because of him and them.

"I'm afraid of what the judge, the jury, the people will say. I really am. But...I won't leave without a fight. I didn't give Hyrule everything I had just to die because a few mortal men decided that this was the time to take their anger out on me."

Silence reigned, broken only by the sounds of the unforgiving wind and rattling glass doors. When Garo licked her ankle before worming his way into the blanket, she looked down. Some spark she'd long since thought dead, so recently rekindled by Link's hatred, glowed brighter as it sliced through the darkness within her.

"The country is divided about my rule. But until the people as a whole say they want me gone, until they can explain why and not repeat what they've been told...I refuse to leave."

Only when Garo whined, pawing at her leg and licking her damp toes, did she let Impa guide her back into the warm room. Only once they were dressed in dry clothes and settled under the thick covers did she face the older woman.

The love, hope and pride which shone in her eyes remained in Zelda's mind long after she fell asleep.

[-]

"Your Honor, no further witnesses can be added!"

"This is not a new witness, sir, but the defendant herself. She declined testifying on her own behalf but was not barred from changing her mind. All legal counsel was in agreement that if Her Majesty was called upon to testify, or decided to do such of her own free will, it would be allowed."

"We're preparing for our closing arguments; it was agreed upon last night!"

"That was last night. This is today. We all signed a binding contract, madam, yourself included! Unless you wish to recant and purger yourself?"
Purple eyes looked from one representative to the other until every person in turn had been accounted for.

"I must agree with Advisor Mikal. The contract was signed by all legal parties, including Queen Zelda and myself. It shall be honored. Both sides will be allowed to question and cross-examine her as they would any other witness."

[ ]

Despite the nerves which twisted her stomach and stole her breath, she held her head high. Seated upon the witness stand as if it were her throne, she met every gaze which stared at her. Undeterred, their malice and conviction did nothing but make her sigh.

"Do you so swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"I do," she said as she turned her attention to the clerk once more.

"Please state your name and occupation for the record."

"Zelda Nohansen, Queen of Hyrule and Sage of Time."

"As per verbal and written agreement, you must answer any question posed. The only questions which you may refuse are those protected by law and any pertaining to other individuals. Due to dismissal of all evidence pertaining to the accusations in relation to magic, crimes of war and against Sir Link, you may refuse to answer all questions regarding these subjects.

"Do you understand the unique terms of your testimony?"

"I do."

With a nod, the clerk took his seat once more. Carefully signing his name, he handed a flattened scroll to the judge. Only once the judge scanned the parchment and raised his eyes did everyone release their held breath.

"The witness has been sworn in. You may begin, Advisor Mikal."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Evat said as he stood. Carefully smoothing his robes, he strode towards his sovereign. Calmness permeated his being as he met her eyes.

He could do this.

She could do this.

They had to. Failure…was not an option.

"Your Majesty, may I use your given name?"

"You may, sir."

"Thank you," he said with a soft smile and an incline of his head.

Casual but proper.

As if they were in her office, merely discussing the latest diplomatic drama-erm, crisis.

As if their voices didn't carry in a building that equated to an amphitheater.
As if the avid but somewhat green-faced jury was the Sheikah Guard.

"Thank you, Zelda. Many of the charges you face center around your 'association' with the late Ganondorf. When did you first meet him?"

"When I was five years old."

"How did you meet him?"

"He approached my father to discuss an alliance between the Gerudo and Hyrulean nations."

Succinct. Logical. Emotionless.

Determination burned within her as she met Mikal's eyes.

No legal counsel could draw elaborate answers from her, not by trickery and surely not by force. Their words couldn't compare to his methods.

And in the end, even his methods hadn't been effective. He'd never gotten what he wanted, for all he'd possessed her.

"When did your association with him become more than diplomatic?"

"I do not understand the question."

"Then I will rephrase. When did your association with Ganondorf take a more personal turn?"

"What does 'personal' entail?"

"Your Honor, the defendant is deliberately misunderstanding the questions!" sputtered one of the accusing Barristers.

She turned to the judge without a word, waiting. When he sighed, clearly tired of the childish assembly this trial had become, and told her to answer the questions, she raised an eyebrow.

"I am answering them, Your Honor. However, the definitions and associations one person has with a word or idea is not always shared by another. 'Personal' could mean 'informal' to one individual, and 'affectionate' to another."

"This is true, Your Highness. In the future, answer the questions to the best of your ability."

She turned back to Mikal and waited for his response, looking all the world as if she were a student gazing at her mentor.

"By 'personal' I mean any association with you as an individual person, rather than your noble status as Heir Apparent."

"Our association, for lack of better word, changed when I was twelve."

"How did this occur?"

"He found me one night when I was outside the castle. He manhandled me then threatened me and those I loved."

"How did you react?"
"With anger. I attacked him. He shook and hit me."

"So at the age of twelve, a grown man physically assaulted you before threatening to harm yourself and your family?"

"Yes."

"How long did this continue?"

"Until his death."

"I realize this will be painful for you. Can you tell the court in full chronological detail exactly what occurred between yourself and Ganondorf? Please start at the age of twelve."

Their eyes met once more.

He’d told her he would asked this, if she took the stand. It would not protect her from the plaintiffs, nor their questions, but it would allow her to tell her story first.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded and closed her eyes.

They might not be able to extract the answers they wanted…but she would be more than willing to give them everything they didn't want.

"On a dark night when I was twelve years old, Ganondorf found me. He laughed when I attacked him, grabbed and shook me when I threatened him, then threatened me and my family when I called him a liar. Over time he killed civilians, making me watch as they were finally released from the pain he caused. For every name I called him, for every slur I uttered and attack I attempted, someone else paid the price for it.

"Eventually, before I even turned thirteen, he began to kiss me. To…to touch me in a sexual manner. The taste of his mouth was as foul as his voice, his skin as searing cold as his soul was empty. I fought. I fought long and hard. But by that time, he had control of me. Magic. Manipulation. Coercion. Call it what you will, but I could not escape him.

"He would call me to him during the night. I learned after he attacked Link and killed several others, after he beat me until half the bones in my body were broken, until he shredded my soul with his black magic, not to ignore his calls. I went. I had no choice. For every call I ignored, I suffered twice as much the next time. I quickly learned that unless I was inside the castle perimeter I was not safe. He and his minions could deliver punishment in broad daylight, as long as I was outside the castle.

"After the public battle with him and his army, when I was thirteen, he forced me to perform oral sex." Her jaw clenched as her throat ached, her hands twisting in her shirt behind the wooden box. She stared at the wall, ignoring everyone around her. Twisted, taunting laughter and parodies of a lover's words ghosted through her mind, fueling her rage and fear until a red haze slowly engulfed her vision.

"He wound a hand in my hair and lifted me in the air, laughing as I kicked, bit and punched him. He kissed me hard, his teeth biting into my lips before he licked the blood away. He pulled me to him, hugging me, before forcing me to my knees. His hand stayed in my hair, pushing my head back until my spine hurt, making me stay there. Then he opened his pants, pried my jaw open and shoved himself down my throat.

"He told me he loved me that day and every day after.
"This happened for a while. Just after my fourteenth birthday, he found me swimming. I felt him near and convinced my Guardian to leave me be. He made me touch him. To wrap my hands around him, slide them between his legs, to watch as he 'taught me' how to please him. Then he forced himself in my mouth again.

"When I was fifteen, he called me to him again. It wasn't just about people dying anymore. I couldn't ignore the call. Not unless someone else was around. It was a compulsion. He called me to him and took me to a place of his choosing.

"Wherever it was, it was a cave with a bed. He tied me down and tore my clothes off, scratching me as he went. He bit every inch of skin he could, sometimes drawing blood. Some places, such as my breasts, were black from the numerous bruising bites. Then he stripped. He told me he loved me as he removed every piece of clothing, said that he did what he did because he loved me. Because he needed me, because he couldn't live without me.

"He untied me. I tried to run and scream for help. He became angry. He grabbed my arm and threw me into a wall. I remember hearing and feeling a lot of cracks, as if something wasn't right in anymore inside. He took my mouth and then threw me back on the bed. I scrambled away, despite the pain. I was used to pain. His hands, fists, belt, whips…I'd gotten so used to pain.

"He grabbed his belt, wrapped a hand around my ankle and yanked me hard enough that I laid down. He beat me until I couldn't move, until the leather was dripping with blood and I was cold. He said it was my fault. Then he started licking all the wounds, washing them he said. He licked all the blood away, starting at my feet and working up. He apologized, said if I'd be good, he wouldn't have to punish me. Then he grabbed my legs, put them over his shoulders and raped me.

"I'm not sure how long passed before I passed out. Between the pain and blood loss, it was bound to happen. When I woke up, he raped me several more times, vaginally and anally, until I once more fell unconscious. The next time I woke it was because he was pouring water on me. He told me to wash up before going home. When I was dressed and walking towards the entrance of the cave, he pulled me to him. Gently. Said he was sorry. That he loved me. That he wouldn't do it again.

"Late in my fifteenth year, in the fall, I became pregnant. To celebrate, he used his sword to rape me. I almost died from the loss of blood and physical trauma, or so Healer Deaso said. He was not happy that I lost the child.

"His beatings and rapes became more brutal. He started using sexual and sadistic toys. He physically mutilated me. Tore out parts of my flesh, burned me, drowned me, suffocation…it was all routine very quickly. But the worst part was the others. The men and women he let use me. Some of the women used items on my body which appeared to be, and felt more like, spike-laden weapons of war than sexual instruments.

"The last time he raped me was a few days before his death. He did not break any bones, nor did he draw any blood. He apologized, said he loved me and never wanted to cause me any harm.

"The day of his death, he attempted to rape me once more. When he threatened to rape, torture and kill Impa because she was screaming for my return, I knew he would do it. He told me if I did not silence her that he would do just as he threatened.

"So I killed him.

"Many times over the years, nearly every time I had contact with him, he tried to take something from me. The Triforce, the Ocarina of Time, the throne. Anything of power. With each negative
response I gave him, with each argument and refusal, he escalated the pain caused. When I did not cede Hyrule to him, his happiness over the child turned to anger. Which is possibly why he used his sword first, rather than his body. He said the child made Hyrule his, and I disagreed."

Blood dripped from her curled palms onto her skirt, dampening the material until it clung to her leather under-armor. The forced calm which shrouded her mind and heart kept her from feeling the pain, from registering the fact that she was trembling hard enough to rattle her teeth.

"Thank you, Your Highness…Zelda," came Mikal's eventually husky, horrified reply. He had known, they had told him, but to hear it spoken in such detail…it painted pictures within his mind that he'd never wanted to see.

Something told him if they provoked her, if they pushed her further, she would not spare them. She would unleash the full horrors of her suffering. And as he looked around the courtroom, at the assembled people, at their various nauseated expressions, he also knew they were aware she had spared them. If she had so chosen, she could have added more detail, more instances.

All she had given them was what he asked for. The full, detailed, chronological happenings. He had not asked for references about battles, and she had not given them.

"You're welcome," she said, breaking his thoughts. "Are there any further questions?"

Regaining his control, his stability, he smoothed his expression. "Did you participate in these activities willingly?"

"What is ‘willing’?"

"Having made the informed decision to do so, along with having the desire to agree."

The prosecution did not object, though he had expected them to.

He knew, even as he did not look at them, that even they could not say she deserved impeachment or death any longer. No matter her crimes…she had paid far more than her penance could ever demand.

It was what they were hoping on.

"No," she said after considering the question. "No I did not."

"Then why did you answer his ’calls’?"

"I had no choice."

"Why is that?"

"He was hurting the citizens of Hyrule. Even after the compulsion was set and I needed another person to keep me in the castle, I knew I still had to go. If the abuse of my body kept them safe, kept him distracted enough for our army to train and grow…it was worth it."

"So do you did go willingly?"

The apathy in her eyes gave way to wrath so profound he instinctively took a step back.

"No. I considered the situation and, after many nights of abuse as a lonely twelve year old, realized the best thing to do was comply. He was a grown man, mature in body, mind, spirit and magic. I was not. His army overwhelmed ours many times over. A ruler makes many hard decisions in their
time, Advisor, and this was my first one.

"Over the years, my decision proved correct. When I did not answer his calls, the terrorism against Hyrule increased exponentially. When I answered…the violence was still present, but our forces were able to contain it and retaliate."

"Why did you not kill him sooner?"

"I had no chance."

"What made that day special?"

"Weakness," she whispered, her haunted eyes sliding from his to Impa's. "He made himself vulnerable in his rage. For the very first time I saw fear in his eyes. He hesitated in his attack. Just a second, but enough time for me to notice. I used it to my advantage. I plunged my dagger in his ribs and brought us back to reality."

"The defense rests for now, Your Honor."

"An hour's recess then. Someone open the God-forsaken doors and get some air in here!"

The sound of retching was heard long after Impa and Eldric led Zelda from the chamber.

For once, no one harassed them as they made their way to the Temple of Time.

[-]

"Your witness, Counselor," Herashi said as he regarded the subdued prosecution.

Standing, the Counselor ran a shaking hand through his normally styled hair. The world seemed to wobble as made his way to the witness stand. Only when he was three feet from her did he stop and meet her eyes.

He could see it then. The pain, the anger, the grief which hid behind that polite calmness of her regal expression. Maybe some madness too, but who wouldn't be a bit insane after what he had just heard?

As he held those gray-green eyes, he knew she and the defense had counted on their unbalance. It was a sound prediction, one they had been correct about. He and his fellows were fractured by her words.

How could the hasty scribbles of a dead Knight, one he wasn't even sure had been murdered despite his colleague's assurances, compare to what they had been told?

How could those angry accusations stand against her testimony? Against thedamning words of their witnesses, who had condemned themselves.

Anonymity meant confession.

He'd known then, even when they'd ignored the implications. They could not punish their Queen, not as they'd planned. The jury would rule in favor of her. The jurors had not heard that woman's vile words, the haunting pictures she had painted of her actions, but they had heard the testimony of numerous witnesses.

Shaking his head, he focused on her once more, his words strong and clear despite the guilt which plagued him.
"Your Majesty…why did you never speak to your Guardian about what Ganondorf was doing to you?"

"She could not have stopped him. For all her power, he held a Triforce. He would have killed her. Slowly, painfully, and as violently as possible. Hyrule would have been lost then."

"You did not speak to her because he would have killed her?"

"In part. Mostly because I knew she would not allow it to continue, even if she lived."

"So which is it, to keep her alive, or to save Hyrule?"

For a long while, she said nothing, merely stared into his eyes.

"Everything I did was for Hyrule, sir. Celestial Guardian Impa was—necessary to Hyrule's continued existence. If I died, her knowledge would be necessary. No other advisor knew what she did about the country. And as a Sage, she would be one of the people needed to fight if I died."

"So you did not tell her…because it would endanger Hyrule?"

"Yes. Every decision I made, every drop of blood I shed, every scream I gave…was to keep Hyrule safe and away from him. I believe I succeeded."

"Did you know of his attacks beforehand?"

"No."

"Were you aware of his plans?"

"None which the country itself did not know. He wanted Hyrule, he wanted the Triforce. I knew this."

"So you never happened to see any of his maps, any notes?"

"Counselor," she said in a quiet tone, her calm expression never wavering, "He did not take me to his stronghold. Caves, deserted houses, sometimes random places in nature or the outskirts of his camps. But never where his documents were kept, never where he slept. Any who…who partook in his offerings arrived where we were."

"And he never engaged in 'pillow talk'?"

For a beat, there was only silence. He watched her swallow once, twice, her pupils dilating ever so slightly.

"The only 'pillow talk' which came from his lips were promises of my pain, anger at my refusal, threats to my family and country, and attempts to gain information from me. Never of his plans or his army."

"Did you give him information?"

"No, I did not."

"None at all?"

"Not unless my hatred and pleas for mercy counts as 'information'."
"Were you aware he returned to the Desert?"

"Yes."

"I thought you said you did not discuss anything other than your mutual hatred and pleas of mercy."

"We didn't. It was common knowledge he returned to the Desert and attempted to persuade the Gerudo follow him."

"Did you enjoy his company?"

"No, I hated him."

Hated. How he hated the role he had the play, the questions he had to ask. Until this farce of a trial was over, until the jury had given the verdict, he could not do his duty and turn over the evidence he had found. The evidence his peers wished to keep hidden. It condemned everyone save the Queen herself.

"Then why did you return to him?"

"To keep Hyrule safe."

"Yet you hated him."

"Yes."

"Why would you return to someone you hated, endure such alleged tortures, to save Hyrule?"

"It was the only way. If I hadn't, he would have…" She trailed off, turning away as her eyes closed.

"Would have what, Your Highness?"

"Would have found a way to destroy Hyrule. I would not have lived, nor would Link. He would have won."

"Can you guarantee this?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I am the Sage of Time. This is one possible future which never changed."

"Can you prove it without magic?"

"No."

"So you willingly went to a man you hated, supposedly endured the worst horrors imaginable, and still fought against him?"

"Yes. No. No, I didn't go willingly."

"You just said-"

"Objection Your Honor, the prosecution is badgering the witness!"
"Sustained. Be careful, Counselor."

He wanted to stand down, to apologize and beg her forgiveness. But he couldn't.

He had a job to do.

And truth be told…it would be a dishonor to her, to simply back away.

"Why did you not ask for help?"

"He would have killed anyone I spoke to."

"Then why are Healer Eldric and Sir Link alive?"

"I don't know. I suppose he considered them useful, especially since a healer could...could help me hide the injuries."

"Did you fight?"

"Yes."

"Always?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Every time I fought, a citizen died. It wasn't not worth their death."

"So you returned to him, night after night, year after year, and did not always fight him?"

"Yes," came her nearly silent whisper.

"Please speak louder."

"Yes."

"Did you always tell him 'no'?"

"...no."

"Why?"

"There came a point where I couldn't say 'no' anymore."

"Then you are telling me you returned to him numerous times, without reporting this supposed abuse, and did not fight his 'advances' or say 'no' every time?"

"Yes."

"No further questions, Your Honor. The prosecution rests."

[-]

Judge Herashi stood behind his podium, overlooking the court. Not trusting either the accusing or defending parties to speak, he instead addressed the jury.
"People of the jury, you represent the nation as a whole. Over the course of this trial you have heard testimony for both parties. Hours of evidence, both verbal and written, has been presented to you.

"The accusations against Queen Zelda are many and have been repeated at length. You have been given the facts as she and the witnesses portrayed them. The Court now asks you a further service, one that should be taken with infinite care and patience. You are asked to consider everything you have heard and seen, and reach a verdict.

"For your deliberation, you will be set within a private chamber and removed from all outside contact. Officers of the Court will escort you to and from your lodgings. I, and this Court, ask you to consider this case with an open mind."

When he sat once more, it was with a heavy heart.

For all he upheld the law in an indifferent, logical manner…even he could not be impartial to the regal woman sitting before him.

Nor the agony which had shined within her eyes over the last week.

He couldn't help but wonder, long after the courtroom had been cleared and he was hidden within his home, if justice truly would be served.

[-]

"Well?"

Impatient worry laced her words, making him turn from the window. The woman who stared at him with wide eyes and twisting hands, he knew, was barely holding onto her hope.

"Now…we wait."

"How long?"

"As long as it takes, Zelda," he said softly, "as long as it takes."

"Do you think acquittal is possible?"

"I have thought so since the beginning."

Gently, he took her cold hands in his. Meeting her eyes, he spoke as firmly as his quiet words would allow. Conviction rung true as tears threatened to spill from her sorrowful eyes.

"Ignorance is bliss, but never is it truthful. They are now aware of that. Acquittal is certain, because they know why they are safe, why they live.

"The price of their ignorance was paid with your blood. If ever they believed you guilty of any crime…what you have suffered for their safety, for our safety, is more than punishment enough."

When she closed her eyes, a single tear running down her cheek, he knew she believed him.

He only hoped his words proved correct.
Chapter End Notes

Songs
Again by Flyleaf
Green Heart by Flyleaf
Chapter Forty-Six

Justice and Mercy

I stared, entranced. Unable (nay, unwilling) to look away. It was a sight of beauty, inspiring rapture so profound I felt my eyes burn from the pleasure of it all. Closing them for just a moment, I whispered my thanks to Din.

She had granted my request on that fateful night.

I knew now, as I opened my eyes again, that She favored me. How could She not, with the vision before me?

Sprawled across my sheets, her lovely chest rising and falling with each slow breath…there was no better sight in the world. Her hair fanned the pillows, glowing in the candle and mage-light despite its semi-tangled state.

Licking my lips, I let my eyes travel from that porcelain face down her body. My blood stirred and quickly pooled in my lower body. I couldn't help but moan at the knowledge that she would wear my mark for all eternity.

Liquid rubies, the color of her kiss-swollen lips, coated her skin and the cloth beneath her. Bruises dotted her small frame, creating a palette of paint I wanted to recreate for years.

Zelda Nohansen was mine.

Choking on her scream of horror, Nabooru's eyes snapped open. With a pounding heart, she struggled for air as she shot from the bed. Her hands trembled as tears poured down her cheeks.

Through the cracked curtains, she could only watch as Din illuminated Her desert with burning sunlight. Shivering, she hugged herself.

Knowing there was a lesson to be gained from the Spirits circling around her, she swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Panting for air, she wrenched the thick curtains open and stared at the rising ball of fire.

She fell to her knees moments later, a hand pressed to her mouth to stifle her sobs.

She had known, the moment Zelda had met her eyes. But to experience such blasphemy, for the soul of one so corrupt to invade her dreams…

How could justice ever be given to one who was dead? How could mercy even be granted for the one who lived?

What could be done to banish the demon which haunted them all, staring at them in the mirror?

Biting her hand, she muffled her wail of agony as best as she could. So lost in her grief, in the horror of what the Spirits had shown her, she never felt her sisters wrap themselves around her in
comfort.

The Gerudo had been disgraced. And the Goddesses Themselves help her, she did not know how they could ever make up for the wrongs committed.

Restitution of war caused by one man were negotiable.

But this…

This could never be forgiven.

And by the Gods, as long as she remembered, so would the Gerudo. She would never tell them the truth, out of respect for the living. But…her tribe would never allow such atrocities to occur by any of their blood again.

Not as long as she could help it.

[-]

Three days of agony. Three days of fear. Three days of anxiety.

It all came to an end shortly after breakfast.

The jury had decided.

After three days of deliberation, of being a prisoner to her traitorous thoughts, they had all come to an agreement.

The courtroom hadn't changed much. For some reason, she had expected there be…a difference. Something to signify how tremulous the world had become over the last few days.

Then again, maybe it was only her and those around her.

A hand lay atop hers, squeezing gently to still the fingers twisting in her skirt.

She hated this. The waiting. The watching.

As the seats within the box began to fill, the people behind her began to quiet.

This was meant to be a closed trial. And so it was, after a fashion. Only a select number had been allowed to watch, despite having no connection to the judicial parties or testifying witnesses.

Most of the public would never know, Mikal had told her. So great was his faith in her innocence that he had spoken with the judge about having the records sealed.

She hadn't responded.

The hand around hers squeezed a bit tighter as the last juror took their seat.

Impa.

She watched the Hylian woman beside her. Worry ate at her heart, slowly bleeding her dry.

Did any of them know the cost of what these "few days" had been? Yes, she had made progress, had professed her willingness to fight and live.

And yet, how much weight did that carry when thick potions and subtle magic were the only ways
she could sleep?

How much did such a revelation, a confession, mean when her torment had become so great that there was no escaping the nightmares?

The memories.

Oh, the memories. The things she saw, had taken through the bond in the wee hours as the other woman cried in her sleep. As she curled in a tight ball as if trying to match Garo's size.

Zelda never asked and she never spoke of it.

She knew, once the trial was over, once things calmed down, she would never again be allowed to take those memories into herself.

Not even to spare her Charge- her mate- the insanity she had fought so hard to keep at bay.

Impaz has merely stared at her during their shared supper. While Zelda hid herself in Eldric's office, waiting for the bittersweet concoction to give her rest, they had eaten in silence.

She hadn't asked how her grandmother knew, and Impaz hadn't volunteered to tell her.

The sound of shuffling feet returned her attention to the amphitheater.

…erm, courtroom.

They rose when the judge entered and sat when bade to.

Much like well trained dogs.

Her eye twitched at the thought as she pressed her lips together.

One way or another, this would be over today.

[-]

Judge Herashi scanned the quiet courtroom. The pressure of the day weighed upon them all, draining them despite the pre-noon hours.

"Members of the jury, you indicated you have reached a decision. Is this true?"

A country woman, identified by her simple, patched clothing, stood from the front row.

"It is, your Honor."

"On the charges of treason, what is your verdict?"

"We find the defendant not guilty."

"On the charges of consortion, what is your verdict?"

"We find the defendant not guilty."

"On the charges of conspiracy of invasion, what is your verdict?"

"We find the defendant not guilty."
"On the charges of crimes of war, what is your verdict?"

"We find the defendant not guilty."

"And on the charges of corruption, what is your verdict?"

"We find the defendant not guilty."

All eyes turned to the regal woman staring at the jury.

She merely nodded, a small smile playing on her lips.

"The Court of Hyrule thanks you for your service. Queen Zelda Nohansen of Hyrule has been found innocent of all charges against her.

"The case of the Country of Hyrule versus Zelda Nohansen has ended. Due to the sensitive nature of this case, the records of these proceedings shall be sealed. Counsel is ordered to adjourn to my chambers. All present are asked to review the non-disclosure contracts you will be given as you leave. You have forty-eight hours to seek legal counsel and return them to the Court, though you may not discuss the proceedings of this trial."

Judge Herashi paused then, looking from the various groups around the room before settling on the defendant.

"As this case is now over, I can say this freely and without repercussion.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I would not wish such pain upon my worst enemy. I have little doubt you spoke the truth, and my conviction will no doubt be proved correct in the coming days." He glanced at the prosecution, knowing the price of anonymity.

Turning back to the young woman, he met her sparkling eyes, watching as her tears began to fall. "Thank you, for fighting a battle that ought have been left to the adults. Children should not be fighting our wars, yet you and Sir Link did so for years. Thank you, for leading our country amidst that war.

"Thank you, for not giving up." He smiling sadly at the shock in her eyes. For just a moment, the image of his brother's brown eyes, opaque and lifeless, surfaced from his memories.

He stood when she did, bowing low. The others copied him, some hesitant, but all deferring in the end. The trial was over, her throne was secure, and none could claim otherwise.

"Please rise, all of you," came her soft words. When he rose, he saw her nod to her companions before heading for the door.

They never looked back.

Ten minutes later, surrounded by the defense and prosecution, he began to consider retirement before any of them spoke.

Three hours later, his desk littered with scrolls and books filled with damning evidence, he decided it was time.

…after these loose ends were taken care of.

[-]
It wasn't until the innermost doors to their chambers were closed and the curtains were pulled across the balcony that she allowed her mask to fall. Strength drained from her like water through a sieve. With trembling knees, she fell to the ground, the world spinning around her.

Arms wrapped around her as a wet nose pushed against her hand. Wracking sobs shook her before she even registered the burn in her eyes. Her breath came in ragged gasps as her heart struggled to maintain a calm rhythm.

"You can let go now," came Impa's husky voice in her ears. "I've got you."

Burying her face in the older woman's shoulder, Zelda bit her thick shirt and let her screams free.

The Guards never flinched from their position in the corridor, the turmoil of their tribe-sisters having echoed through their family since it all began.

The other workers continued on, blissfully ignorant to their muffled agony.

Minutes passed before she fell silent, her body slumping against the other woman. Her sobs faded to silent tears, her flushed cheeks burning.

A calloused hand ran through her hair as her own arms wrapped around the whining mass of fur.

"You won, Zelda," Impa said quietly as she rocked the exhausted Hylian.

"You won and it's over. There will be no fighting for the throne, no petty discipline to endure. They saw the truth of your innocence."

Gray-green eyes rose to meet ruby red, hot tears blurring the room around them. Ever so slowly did awareness trickle through the soul-deep shock.

Like a snapped band, the weeks of tension had broken in a single instant, leaving behind nothing but fog.

Like the late winter sun creeping through the heavy curtains, she saw as her love began to process the day's events.

This wasn't another recess.

The trial was over.

Finished.

"When do we go?"

"What?" Startled, she shook her head and focused on those imploring eyes once more.

"You asked me…if I wanted to go on another date. I said yes. So…when do we go?"

Her first impulse was to smile. Given everything that had happened, her mate's first observation was about a pre-dawn, post-nightmare conversation.

Her second was to press a kiss to the other woman's forehead. Who could fault her for focusing on the mundane when the last weeks (months, even, if Link was included) had consumed all she had left?

"I…whenever you would like to go."
Zelda looked away, combing her fingers through Garo's fur as she stared at the wall in thought. "Soon. This weekend.

"Would…would that be possible?" she added in a whisper.

"Yes," Impa said in the same soft tone. Her arms wrapped tighter around the younger woman as she pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Yes, we can go out this weekend. Is there anywhere particular you wanted to go…or to avoid?"

She heard the smile in Zelda's voice as she spoke.

"Four Seasons. I liked it there."

"Then Four Seasons is where we will go."

They stayed on the floor for nearly an hour, wrapped around one another in a mass of comfort. Until Garo decided he wanted out.

It was with lighter hearts and quieter minds that they followed him through the snow-covered courtyard

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Justice and Mercy by Flyleaf
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Accumulation (I)

Parchment crinkled between a firm two-fingered grip. Blowing out a gentle breath, he shook his head, smiling. Her words seemed shocked, as if she couldn't believe in her own innocence.

Oh Zelda. Shaking his head once more, he folded her letter and placed it with the others. Not many, but they...their family, his family, had sent him at least one apiece.

Excluding Impa.

He couldn't blame her, truth be told. Some part of him was relieved not to see her words. For all he was improving, he knew there was still much work to be done.

"Link? Good news?"

Looking up, he nodded to the nurse, smiling once more. "I'd heard the rumors, but...confirmation is nice. That she won."

As she walked away, speaking to a hurried orderly running from the lunch room, he felt his smile slip.

Just weeks ago he had been the one saying those accusations to her.

Morose, he turned to stare out the window, ignoring them all.

[-]

"Is it time to go?"

For just a moment, the sight of bouncing brunette curls and a wide smile stripped over a decade from her mind. The sound of pure excitement and joy brought forth the image of a young girl eager for their trip to the circus.

"Yes," Impa said softly as she blinked, forcing the memories to fade. Recalling Eldric's words, she shook her head and returned Zelda's smile with one of her own. "Are you ready?"

A hand landed on the crook of her arm, a heavy cloak brushing her own. "Yes. Cloak, boots, purse, dagger...anything I forgot?"

Feeling the lightness within the Hylian's spirit, her Sheikah counterpart could do nothing but laugh.

"Doesn't sound like it."

"Then let's go!"

With a chuckle, she laced her fingers through the other woman's, halting her hasty steps. "Calm
down love. The restaurant isn't going anywhere. Our reservation isn't for over an hour."

The lithe body swung to stand before her, gray-green eyes meeting hers imploringly. A soft voice caressed her ears as their bond thrummed with unspoken truth. "I need to leave the castle."

She nodded and brushed her lips over Zelda's, understanding.

"I'll race you."

She barely had time to see the younger woman's radiant smile before she took off, a blur of heavy fabric as she sprinted through the corridors. Shaking her head, Impa followed.

Laughter trailed behind them, long after they'd saddled and mounted their horses.

[-]

Once free of the city, they plowed through the land with ease. Their high speeds slowed as they chased and raced one another, their mares' ears flickering with excitement. Despite the cold wind against their faces, they had nothing but smiles for one another.

The time passed in a blur of color and breathless laughter. They finally arrived at the restaurant only after stopping a few miles back to straighten their clothes and hair.

Nothing, however, could remove the windburn from their cheeks or sparkle from their eyes.

"Good evening Your Royal Highness, Maderone Impa," came the genteel words from behind them. Turning from the groom leading their horses, they faced their host. There was little change to him since their last dinner at his establishment.

Nor, Zelda suspected, from the restaurant itself. She inclined her head as he bowed, holding the door for them. He led them through the building, speaking with ease as he had all those months before. Once more they were led to a private room, this one painted in reds, oranges and grays.

*Embers*, she thought as they sat. Accepting the menus with a smile and quiet thanks. Hylian eyes met Sheikah's once they were alone.

"Embers?"

"I thought it was fitting," Impa said as she glanced around the room. "Rebirth by fire is spoken of so often it has lost all impact. Embers are different. Embers have a potential that burns until every iota of the molecule is destroyed, and even then it continues to give off heat."

Zelda nodded and opened her menu without another word. Unlike the stream in which they'd previously dined, the cushions they now sat upon were far more comfortable. As she glanced over the offerings, she wondered if—

No, best not go down that route.

"What route?" Impa asked.

The folding screen rattled softly as a waitress darted through, resting a pitcher of ice water and two glasses on the table. Only once she retreated did their eyes meet once more.

"Just a thought."

Neither pushed the subject
"I'm surprised you didn't bring Garo."

"I almost did, but...he'll survive a few hours without me."

They shared a smile, knowing how lonesome the growing mutt would be without her.

They fell into a pattern of light conversation as their orders were taken, prepared and then left on their table. Only once they were sure of privacy did they meet eyes. Their fingers laced as they ate, enjoying the closeness.

"I sent Eldric a letter."

"You did, hm?"

"Oh yes," Zelda confirmed happily as she speared an olive with her fork. "I informed him that unless there was an indication of illness, his schedule would no longer be necessary."

"How did he take that?" Impa asked between bites, fighting a smile.

"I'm not sure. I know it was delivered when he was in office yesterday, but I have yet to receive a reply."

"How articulate was this letter of yours?"

"Very denotative. Nearly half a page."

"Half...a page." A silver eyebrow rose as ruby lips twitched in amusement. "What else did you tell him? Half a page is a bit much for what two sentences would say."

"I might have...possibly...suggested some new uses for the schedule and associated instruments."

Several rooms away, their host shook his head and smiled as Impa's roaring laughter reached his ears.

[-]

The rest of their meal passed with more laughter and happiness, and they left the restaurant with as much fuss as they'd arrived. Reins in hand, they walked from the building.

Cool evening air burned her lungs as she breathed deep. Shaking hair from her face, Zelda allowed her chest to collapse as the air rushed from her.

It was...freeing, to be outdoors. To not have to rush back to the castle or courthouse.

Feeling as if she was made of air, she threw herself atop her mare and bolted, laughing all the while. She heard Impa behind her and was rewarded moments later by the sight of her.

"What are you doing?" came the loud words. The wind nearly stole them, but she knew the expression on the other woman's face well.

"I'm running free!" fluttered through the bond as she spurred her mare over a log.

For the second time that day, they raced. Heedless of the wind burning their faces, their horses carried them through the land without protest. Free from the stables, they too embraced the rightness of a simple run.
And then the blur of colors around them began to separate. Shapes and definition took the place of illusion as, without a word, they slowed. Trees loomed before them as the mares' even pace became a steady trot.

"Shall we walk, m'Lady?"

Laughing softly at Impa's obsequious tone, Zelda nodded and slid from her saddle. Only once they had tended to the horses did they head into the forest.

It took several minutes for her to register their path. By rights, it looked the same as the rest of the forest. And yet…she recognized it.

"This is the way we came…that day."

"Yes," Impa replied softly as she wrapped an arm around Zelda's waist. Pressing a kiss to those golden-brown curls, she felt her heart slam against her ribs. Swallowing hard, she smiled once more. "It is."

Once more the same journey was made in silence. Yet unlike the last time they had trekked this particular path, their quiet was one of content rather than contempt.

As it was still too cold to sit upon the forest floor for long, they simply continued to walk. Passing the clearing where their love had been spoken, they moved forward without hesitation. One arm around the other's waists, they never missed a step.

As she watched the ever thickening forest grow that much darker with each passing minute, Impa sought to control her pounding heart and struggling lungs.

Anxiety shook her from the inside, pushing faint tremors through her limbs. Her mouth dried, sticking her tongue to her palate. With immense effort, she swallowed, forcing the clog in her throat to move.

"I…"

She stumbled as the world around her darkened for a moment. Black static danced around the edge of her vision, lingering even as she righted her stance.

"Impa?"

Concern dominated Zelda's expression as she stopped. Laying a hand atop Impa's heart, she met those dilated ruby eyes. "Impa…what's wrong?"

Everything she had planned to say, all the memories and experiences she had hoped to share, failed her. Words as a whole failed her as she felt that golden-white soul brush hers.

Warmth filled her, pushing past the nervous chill which had crept through her. With a broken chuckle, she acknowledged the irony of their positions.

How quickly their roles had reversed.

"Impa?"

The fear hanging on the edges of Zelda's voice made her shake her head.

Once more her mind became blank as everything she had planned to say vanished.
"Will you marry me?"

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Lowercase Noises by Rushes
Accumulation (II)

The jarring rattle of cart upon stone and mud broke his meditation. Blinking, he opened the curtains only to curse as the bright, early spring sun rendered him sightless.

"My Lord?" came a loud male voice from above his seat. Closing the heavy velvet, he grimaced. Placing a gloved hand above his eyes, he sought air in small sips as the world spun.

"Continue on, sir," he called after several moments' rest.

"Aye."

The slowing carriage gathered speed once more, slicing through the rugged terrain.

This journey had been impossibly shortened as it was, and he refused to regain those shaved days.

Carefully opening the curtains once more, he stared at the distant mountains.

Soon... soon.

[]

Light and dark fought for control of the world around her. The pounding of her heart consumed her form the inside out, deafening her to everything around her.

She felt, rather than heard, the words tumble from her lips. Confusion and shock shook her voice, the tightness in her throat telling her it was a higher pitch than normal.

"Marry you?"

Their eyes met.

The vulnerability and hurt she saw within those crimson discs nearly shattered her heart. Shaking her head, she laced her fingers through the other woman's. Desperate for her mind, heart and body to all catch up with one another, she sighed softly before chuckling nervously.

"I'm not- I mean- this isn't- I hadn't- not rejection!" she sputtered before the older female could pull away.

There was a silence as their eyes met once more, budding hope matching the blossoming pain.

Chapped red lips pulled into a sheepish smile as strong arms wrapped around her. "You're rather shocked, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"I didn't mean to... blurt it out. To spring my question on you."

"Proposal."
"Yes, proposal."

Indistinct emotion bubbled within her, churning her rushing blood until her stomach threatened to sour. Pushing it away, down, ignoring it as much as possible, Zelda took a shaking breath.

Later, later she could analyze and dissect and lose what little rational thought remained after the shock wore off.

But right now…

"Yes, Impa. I will marry you."

Shaking once more, Impa tightened her arms. Relief and joy fought for control as she blinked back tears, staring in those gray-green eyes.

"Yes?" she breathed, not daring to believe her ears.

"Yes."

When Zelda smiled, her eyes lighting with love and glee, her restraint threatened to crumble. She kissed the Hylian with everything she had, even as she remained within their boundaries.

Well…*Zelda's* boundaries anyway.

It was not explorative or intrusive, almost platonic. It was not the brush or lingering of their lips which expressed her heart, but rather the surge of consuming *love* and *joy* and *pleasure* and *passion* and *freedom* which flooded the bond.

"Mine," she whispered as she buried her face in Zelda's neck while the other woman's tinkling, happy laughter tickled her ears. "My sesha, my keta, my mate…mine."

"Yours, Impa; I am yours," she heard Zelda whisper in return. "Just as you are mine."

"I was yours before you were born, silly girl," was her guff reply.

The word "semantics" barely brushed her ears before lithe arms tightened all the more.

Ignorant of the cool forest around them, unaware of the light with radiated from them, their tears and laughter fell unhindered as they sunk to their knees.

[-]

"Link, you have a visitor."

Lifting his head, he nodded and yawned. He stretched as he stood, wiping his eyes to clear the blur.

He'd fallen asleep by the window. Again.

It was, he had to admit within the secret recesses of his mind, probably because he didn't sleep at night. Hadn't in a long time.

The healers said it was his body re-adjusting to sobriety.

The therapists agreed, and added he had "problems with anxiety".

The nurses and other aides only smiled understandingly when they saw him huddled in a chair
before the community room fire.

The other patients, however, were the only ones who truly understood. It wasn't about the "relearning" or anxiety or loneliness (well, maybe a little).

It was the nightmares and the isolation.

_Completely._ Different.

Sighing, he entered the visiting room the nurse indicated and slumped in a chair. Mind fuzzy with exhaustion, he yawned again and fought the urge to close his eyes. They'd told him he was well enough for visitors. He had simply… _neglected_ to tell his family that. Or let the administration do so. He couldn't take more bad news, he really couldn't. And considering everything he'd put them through, bad news was the _only_ reason they'd willingly set foot-

"Link?"

His head snapped up and to the side fast enough to make the room spin. Crying out, he closed his eyes and heaved a deep breath. Merciful Din, he'd thought he was past getting whiplash….

The door shut with a nearly silent click. The sound of soft steps reached his ears as he forced his eyes open. Blinking, he forced his eyes to focus. His ears hadn't lied. She…she was here.

Hope, joy and love broke whatever composure he had. Sliding from the chair, he bowed his head as his knees hit the ground, great sobs wrenching themselves from deep within his soul.

"Oh Link."

He wrapped his arms around her legs before she could crouch next to him, burying his face in the side of her knee. The child within him howled in agony at how things between them had changed…and sobbed in relief at how much they _hadn't._

She was here. _That_ he could always count on.

"Zelda, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said between choked gasps.

He didn't know if she responded, nor for how long he repeated those words. It wasn't until his throat clogged and his chest hurt, until his eyes itched and were swollen, until the last tear had dried and he shook from emotional exhaustion, that he released her legs.

She sat in the chair with careful maneuvering, her limbs half-numb and unsteady from their prolonged, awkward position. She wiped her own eyes as she pressed a fresh handkerchief into his hand.

"How long was I crying like a ninny?" came his hoarse voice.
"You're not a ninny," she said with a small smile, "and the clock says I've been here half an hour."

"A change in positions. Me being on my knees to you," he added with a weak chuckle when he saw her perplexed expression.

He swallowed hard when she flinched, looking away. "I'm sorry."

"We both messed up," she replied after a pause. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her pants before shaking her head. "Sit in the other chair already, this is…weird."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Brat."

He took his seat as suggested and looked at her. Really looked at her. Not too long—he knew how upset perusals made her—but long enough to see it.


Emotion swirled in her eyes, radiated from her oh-so-proper posture. Most people wouldn't see it, but then…he wasn't most people.

"Is something wrong?" he asked as he met her eyes.

"No."

He raised an eyebrow. "I've made my fair share of mistakes and have a lot of regrets…but Zelda…I know you well enough to know you're upset."

"I'm not upset. I just…wanted to come see you."

It sounded weak to her own ears. Especially when her voice faltered and she looked away, twisting the sleeves of her shirt.

"You don't have to tell me."

"I don't have to do anything with or for you," she snarled as she faced him.

He hid a flinch, nodding to redirect the painful motion. "I know. I'm sorry, wrong choice of words."

She hugged herself, staring at the door. "Sorry."

"What a mess we both are," he said quietly after a few minutes. "Every other statement is an apology."

When she cracked a smile, he sighed in relief.

Maybe…maybe "they" weren't beyond repair.

"What've you been doing?"

"Same things I'm sure you've heard from the others. Therapy, detox, sleeping, eating, pleading for some sort of exercise, trying to ditch group therapy..." he added in a muffled tone.
She chuckled, enjoying the mischievous child that suddenly appeared in his eyes. "I understand that."

"So why'd you come?"

"I haven't seen you since you left. Wanted to talk to you."

"Sure. But why now?"

"Can't we talk about you?"

He met her challenging gaze before nodding and shrugging. "Sure. But don't think I don't know you're hiding something from me."

She rolled her eyes and scoffed. "Link…I've been hiding things from you since the day we met."

He gasped in a mockery of pain, pressing a hand to his chest. "You lied to me for all these years?"

"By omission," she confirmed in a chipper tone.

He started to speak before frowning. Something caught his vision, though he wasn't sure what. It took several glances around the otherwise empty room to realize what that something was.

Shadows.

"How many Sheikah?" he asked quietly, slowly returning his gaze to her.

She tensed, returning his stare and analyzing it before forcing herself to breathe. This wasn't her cruel Master…either of them. It was simply…Link…asking a question.

"Reyel is in the room. The rest of the Guard is…around."

"They're right to worry for your safety," he admitted softly as he considered her words. "I'm assuming Impa is…not here?"

"Much to her displeasure."

"She wants to kill me."

"Yes."

"Why hasn't she?"

The silence which hung between them for several minutes answered him better than words ever could.

[-]

Reyel watched.

He watched and he fumed.

She was tribe, and as such, they had all expressed their displeasure at this visit. If he knew his tribe sisters well, Impa had only remained silent when Zelda had called the Guard to her because they'd already discussed it.

Impaz was the only one who agreed with their adopted sister, though she too had venomously
protested the Queen staying in the room alone.

It had taken them all the better part of three hours to realize the Hylian woman had never suggested it.

When they'd all calmed enough to speak like rational adults (her words), the Guard had reconvened in her office like contrite children (Impaz's words).

None of them trusted Impa not to kill Link. Not even Impa herself. And so it had been agreed that the Guard alone would accompany Zelda. Outsiders were normally not allowed to the hospital, but...she was the Queen, and Link had listed herself, Mikal and Shad as next-of-kin.

Though not in that specific order.

And wherever the Queen went, so did the Sheikah. Be they one (Impa) or many (the Guard).

It did not, however, mean Reyel liked or approved of this visit.

He'd been against it from the moment she'd mentioned it. Better to wait until he could have a day pass. Better yet, until he was discharged all together.

However, considering the couldn't actually lock her in her room...they'd agreed.

Reluctantly, but they had agreed.

Which was why he now leant against the wall in the tiny ass room, watching his sister's fianceé talking with him. After nearly an hour and a delivery of tea, he was ready to leave.

Or at least shove her from the room, throttle the boy and put them all out of their misery.

At least the boy had good sense not to touch her. Other than the initial hug of her lower legs. He couldn't begrudge the other male his emotions, but...

He'd seen what those hands could do to her. He had no desire to ever see it repeated.

His nails dug into his palms, the sharp pain drawing his attention back to the present. Shaking his head, he took steady breaths and forced his emotions to calm.

Besides...he had no desire to prove Zelda right. Having a tribe of protective warriors, who had embraced her as their little sister, compared to a mutt was...rather humiliating.

They were not as single minded or "clingy" as Garo, and he refused to give her a reason to say such again.

His focus turned to the door as he registered the sound of determined steps. Within moments, the door opened to reveal the same nurse who had led the boy to the room.

She apologized sincerely, but the visiting hour was over and could not be extended due to his schedule.


Within the shadows, he watched as they said their goodbyes. She made mention of seeing him again; he promised to write. They parted with an awkward handshake and uncomfortable smiles.

He started to follow her, never removing the cloaking shadows as he felt their tribe brothers
surround her.

"Reyel?"

He paused and turned to face the boy. Nudging the door shut with his foot, he shed the magic and met those azure eyes without flinching.

The guilt and shame, coupled with tentative hope, made him curse within his own mind. He despised the other man's actions…but he couldn't truly hate someone who looked like a broken puppy.

Until you remembered that broken puppy jumped off the cliff willingly after disemboweling your sister.

"Yes?"

Quiet, cordial, and without a single trace of emotion.

"Is…is she all right?"

"Better," he admitted after a long consideration. Succinct but truthful. He turned to the door, refusing to continue the conversation.

"Can you tell me…what's wrong?"

Closing his eyes, he laid his hand on the doorknob. "Her state, her life, is none of your business. Not anymore."

"I know," came the quiet admission. "I just…I worry."

He hummed quietly and left without responding. It was cruel, he knew, but right now…he didn't care.

Besides, as amusing as the boy's shocked reaction would be to the news of their engagement, the women would…not be happy.

He rather liked his head attached to his shoulders.

Impaz had a rather annoying habit of trying to pull it off by his ears when he (or the others) did something wrong…

[-]

A streak of dark color crossed the room, stopping at the heavy wooden door. Excited yet pained whining filled the space, cutting through their quiet talk. As one, two sets of eyes faced the closed door before both women chuckled.

"I believe she's returned."

"As do I." Quick steps and even quicker hands brought the excited animal back to its perch.

Garo growled softly and laid his head between his paws. Ignoring the fingers scratching his ears, he stared at the barrier. Waiting, waiting...yes!

Dodging the hands grabbing for him a second time, he darted around the other barriers and threw his weight into the air. New hands caught him before he could collide with long legs, pulling him
up to a cold muzzle.

He panted happily as he bathed her cold face. She'd returned! Bless the Great Wolf she'd returned!

"...what happened to his fur?"

Uh-oh. Slowing his licks, he glanced at her, hearing and smelling her not-happy-anymore-ness. But she was looking at the other two leggers, so he squirmed. Once she set him down, he started sniffing her paw coverings (boots, that's right) and the removable fur.

Where'd so go, what'd she do, where's his treat-

Why did she smell like the bad alpha?

Stumbling, he hastily followed her as she neared the other two females.

The small den mother and the long-strong-leg smeller. Horses, they called them. She smelled like horses.

Except right now she smelled like soap.

Grimacing, he went back to smelling Zelda, ignoring all the words he didn't recognize. He was much more interested in why she smelled like the bad alpha.

Malon smiled despite Zelda's quickly increasing temper. "Hello, Majesty. Garo somehow managed to knock a candle from the table. While it didn't burn him, the wax coated his fur....and since it is so coarse, it was easier and faster to simply cut him down."

"My dog...is down...to a fourth of an inch of hair. In early spring."

Impaz shook her head, chuckling softly, knowing that anger shielded worry. "He's quite all right, my child. As you can see for yourself. Between myself, Malon and Kaneil, we were able to manage the task. He received a bath and flea treatment at the same time."

"He's bald."

They only laughed as she turned her incredulous expression to the mutt at her feet.

Apparently no one had told her he would need shaving anyway come the last thaw.

Malon smiled again and shook her head as she stood. "A haircut, bath, nail clipping and flea treatment means he'll avoid the rest of us for a while. He's fine."

"I...yes, I realize that now. I'm sorry. It was...a shock."

When the redhaired woman left, the door floating shut behind her, Impaz faced the younger woman once more. Watching as she knelt to cuddle the affectionate, energized mutt, she waited. Zelda had quickly become a child of her heart, and while she had grown to know her, she couldn't help but be concerned.

She knew they had only just returned to the castle. No doubt Reyel had cornered Impa and dragged her somewhere to calm her need to inspect her mate. She also knew by the soft, barely present strokes she was currently running over Garo's back, that...something was not right. Not necessarily "wrong", but not good.

And Zelda, no matter her state, would never come to Impaz first. She and Impa were much too
bonded (dependent) for either of them to deviate. They met, assured one another the other was fine, and then separated.

"What is it, child?"

"I didn't tell him. Is that wrong?"

Green eyes filled with a child's plea of assurance met steady ruby.

"No, it's not wrong. You may tell whomever you wish. If you did not desire to tell him, it is neither right nor wrong."

"I didn't not want to," came the quiet admission. "I just…didn't."

She smiled sadly. "Go find Impa, Zelda. Go find her, hug her, calm yourself. Spend time with her and don't think about it. No one said you had to tell anyone about your engagement."

"It's a matter of state. It must be announced."

"So put a notice in the paper and go about your life," Impaz said with a scuff and wave of her hand. "Now shoo. And take Garo with you."

She couldn't help but laugh when they all but fled her chambers. Shaking her head once more, she followed and made her way to the library.

Only to halt her steps as voices drifted from a half-hidden staircase. She knew from her own explorations that it led to the ground floor, exiting near the stables. As she turned her focus into the small alcove, she could only smile. It did her heart good to see such a sight.

Continuing on her way, she considered Mikal's obvious adoration and Malon's blatant affection. The glove he held in his hand was no doubt the young woman's, dropped when they probably ran into one another- quite literally in fact, if she knew the two of them. They would make a cute couple…

Once they worked through their shyness.

Several corridors across the floor, the same could not be said for Zelda and Impa.

Not "cute". Both detested the word unless the other said it. They did make for a cute (or handsome) couple. Unlike Mikal and Malon, however, there was no shyness as their eyes met. Without words, their arms wrapped around one another.

Only to be pulled away as they both looked down, staring at the dog pulling on their pants.

"I think he's jealous," Impa said after a moment.

As if to agree, he shook the material fiercely, tugging her leg to the side before letting go.

Zelda could only chuckle as she knelt, shaking a finger in his face. "No. Bad Garo. You know better."

When he licked her finger, even Impa could not restrain her laughter.

"How should we announce…us?" the Hylian asked as she stood. Wrapping her arms around her Sheikah mate a second time, she waited for an answer.
Grimacing at the thought, Impa shook her head. "Put a notice in the paper and get it over with. A formal announcement…is not necessary."

"But, tradition-"

"Zelda, you've been changing tradition since you were born. Don't bow to it now."

The next morning, their announcement graced the front page of every paper, newsletter, magazine and notice board across the land.

Soft white fingers wrapped around those large sheets of paper, crumbling them, crushing all evidence of the bold words.

Eyes closed as a mind whirled, lips pulling back in a quiet laugh of realization.

A ploy.

A lie.

A way to turn focus away from the recent trials and rumors which had spread.

There was no other explanation.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Let It Go by Demi Lovato (more of a precursor song)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Eight

Destination

"Is there anything to report, Treasurer?"

"The national coffers are due for repair, Your Majesty. The harsh winter cracked the foundation of the main vault. As for the state of ledgers, our revenue of export has already risen ten percent from last year. With the increase in paper production, the Merchant Guild has expressed an interest in trading with foreign nations. They've submitted a five year projection, estimated by past parchment sales, which is awaiting approval.

"Relations within the Hyrule Alliance continue to improve, in terms of loaned funds. We have paid for the latest shipment of raw metals from the Goron, and the Zora are making their first payment on their bi-yearly supply of Deku sticks."

"Why are we involved with the Zora buying Deku sticks?"

All eyes turned to the Queen as she looked between the Treasurer and the reports before her. Polite inquiry masked her face as she made a note on a page already filled with ink.

"During the war, they discovered Deku wood to be sturdier than what resided along their waterways."

"Understandable. Yet it does not explain why the national treasury is involved."

Clearing his throat, the bespectacled man shifted his weight from one foot to another before speaking. "The national treasury is not directly involved, Your Majesty, but the Bank of Hyrule is. As this agreement crosses multiple provinces and both accounts are held within the Bank, I thought it prudent to...watch these transactions."

"Do you believe the Zora and forest representatives to be incompetent, sir?"

"No, but-"

"Then leave them be. This is a trade agreement which has very little impact on the treasury as a whole. You are not a representative of either people, nor of the Alliance Committee."

"I-of course, your Majesty." With a hard swallow, he looked at his notice once more.

"The defense accounts have finally begun to recover from the war. Emergency funds still stand at twenty-one thousand silver rupees and remain entrusted to the State, without interest. The castle's accounts continue to balance at the end of every week."

Without another word, he sat. None spared him a single glance as he pat his red face with a handkerchief.

"As for our foreign affairs, how-"
The heavy doors of the council chamber broke through her words. All eyes turned to face the widening gap. Even the Sheikah, covered by the shadows from where they lined the wall, couldn't help but face the soldier.

"My apologies, Your Majesty, ladies and sirs. Your Majesty, there is a gentleman proclaiming he has an urgent message for your person."

Wiggling her half-numb toes within her shoes, Zelda surveyed the assembly around her. With the trial behind them, her Council had become smaller.

Smaller, yet far more efficient.

"How urgent, Commander Beliznor?"

"Very, Your Majesty," he replied quickly with another bow. "He is rather insistent that this matter cannot wait, and that he represents a foreign monarchy."

With a silent sigh, she closed her eyes and nodded briefly. She spoke as she shifted her legs, bracing her body for motion. "Very well. I shall be there within the next few minutes."

With another bow, the lone soldier retreated. As the doors closed behind him, she bade Mikal to collect any remaining reports on her behalf. When she stood, so too did they, the sound of scraping chairs and ruffling cloth filling the air.

The needling numbness in her legs barely registered in her thoughts as she left the room. Head held high and eyes straight ahead, her pace was determined as she strode from one corridor to another.

The reason of such a summons in her own home reduced her focus to rest solely upon several unpleasant possibilities.

A penetrating, comforting warmth wrapped around her as she neared the main staircase. The fierce pounding of her heart began to calm as quiet humming overtook the worried speculations running rampant through her.

With a slow, shuddering breath, she allowed her steps to falter…and then stop. Hidden within the threshold shadows, a warm hand rested upon the small of her back.

Drawing strength from the presence behind her, she continued on her path once more.

Her appearance and subsequent descent were rather anti-climatic, all things considered. With the urgent state of such a response, she had expected panic.

And yet standing off to the side in a waiting chamber was a single man. He turned from the window as her steps reached his ears.

He gave nary a single reaction to the warriors behind her, despite their unusual appearance.

"Your Majesty," he greeted as he bowed low. "My apologies for this interruption."

"Rise, sir, and state your business."

Her tone was cool, she knew, yet as emotionless as he had expected. As he rose, she read the knowledge within his eyes and the stateliness of his appearance.

The colored sash crossing his breast did not go unnoticed, nor the pin which held it securely to his pressed shirt.
Indeed, he represented royalty. Her stomach churned as she met his gaze once more. Carefully, her expression remained one of polite inquiry.

There was only one reason such a representative would stand within her walls, would dare summon her.

"Your Majesty, I apologize for the intrusion. I am Advisor Orchi Heldon. It was my understanding our missives had been received by your person and responded by the appointed individuals. As this is not the case, I can only express my sincerest apologies and affirm my embarrassment. I will, of course, present the aforementioned letters for your perusal.

"I stand before you on behalf of His Royal Highness, Prince Daltus of Lucrum. He is waiting in your southern province for entrance, having been under the belief you had agreed to meet with him. We have been traveling for two months and would greatly appreciate the audience. His Highness will no doubt understand what an imposition this is, given our miscommunication."

As Advisor Heldon fell silent, she could only watch him in silent contemplation. His apparel and mannerisms marked him as a trusted confidant. She had little doubt to the truth of his tale...though his complete honesty was another matter.

Even Wisdom, so rarely silent, was not needed to tell her something was amiss.

And yet…

With a gentle smile, she nodded. "I understand your plight, Advisor Heldon. This is an unfortunate mistake. Have no doubt that I will look into how such a...miscommunication occurred. His Highness, along with his companions, are welcome to stay within the castle."

Another bow bent him nearly prostrate as he audibly exhaled in relief. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I will relay your generous offer to my prince. The letters will be retrieved at once. To whom should I seek to transfer ownership?"

"I will have Advisor Evat Mikal collect them before you've retired for the night. Now, if you will excuse me, sir, I must alert my household to our unexpected guests."

She tilted her head, inclining it ever so slightly in deference to his manners and a game well played. It wasn't until she left the room as stately as she had arrived and she was two floors higher that her polite mask fell.

Closing her eyes, she shook her head and whispered to herself as she felt Impa rest a hand upon her shoulder.

"When does it end?"

"When do we receive peace?"

[-]

Dinner was a tense affair, though none had expected any different. One of the larger dining rooms had been used, rather than the normal intimate locale. The rectangular table sat two monarchs at one end and various members of their respective counsels between them. Hylian and Lucrumian interwove, the semi-formal meal enough to wear on all of their nerves.

When the last dish had been removed, she looked down the table with a small smile. Let him think the seating was done by a servant, rather than herself.
"Would you care to join me for a nightcap, Your Highness?"

Her quiet voice drifted above the soft hum of forced conversation, silencing the room.

Eyes the color of whiskey met hers as a matching smile graced full lips. "Thank you, Your Majesty, it would be my pleasure."

Widening her smile ever so slightly, she inclined her head and laid her hands atop the armrests. Strong hands pulled the chair away as she stood. The men and women around her stood as one, bowing. She waited until he was mere feet from her before leaving the room.

A quiet hush followed them, animosity forgotten by their own citizens.

The sight of his steel-jawed guards, with their dead stares and clenched muscles, made something within her laugh.

The tribal bond, normally so very still, wrapped around her as surely as Impa's bond warmed her.

Her tribe, her family, was here. These foreign men were of inferior training…and the soldiers knew it. They could not see her adopted tribe following them within the shadows, though their eyes continued to dart to Impa.

"Please, Your Highness, call me Daltus," came the smooth voice of her unwanted guest.

Another smile pulled her lips as she turned to face him. Under the tan, despite the brown eyes and full lips, she could see the truth.

"Thank you, Daltus. The same to you, I beg- my name is Zelda."

The skin around his warm eyes wrinkled as he returned her smile. The doors to her office remained open even once they were seated. His few guards stationed themselves around the room and door as Impa took her place in the corner.

His gaze darted to the lone Sheikah woman in question before turning to Zelda. One of the serving women poured their drinks, wine for him and tea for her. She watched him assess her and their surroundings, waiting patiently.

Expectedly, it came. "I have missed you, cousin."

She laughed softly, unable to stop the sound at his boyish expression. "I confess I cannot say the same. Though no fault of yours, I have been rather preoccupied since our last meeting."

"So I have heard. Between the death of your father, Lord rest his soul, and the war…." He trailed off and looked away as if ashamed. "My apologies, you more than likely do not wish to speak of such things."

"You are correct, I do not. Tell me how you have fared these last years."

As he began to speak of his beloved, flourishing country, she leaned back into her chair. She nodded and replied when necessary, conversing as if she was a riveted audience.

He never commented on the desk-length space between them, nor how she retained her gloves long after he'd removed his.

It was one thing she enjoyed about the gentry, if "enjoy" was the proper word.
They were hard pressed to stray from formality and etiquette without assurance of maintaining their reputation.

It was only when Mikal delivered a stack of letters as the clock chimed eight that he became silent. Startled by the late hour, he begged her pardon and pleaded exhaustion. She watched him leave, his marble-cut guards following.

Without a word, she shook her head at the sympathetic man before her. It took moments to lock the bundle within her desk. She shivered, her stomach rolling from the day's events.

"I am retiring for the night," she told them all in a soft voice, "And I do not wish to be disturbed unless it is an emergency. If it is not, then I will meet you all at breakfast."

Mikal bowed, enacting the formality she had so long ago begged him to cease, and remained silent. He watched her calmly walk away until she turned a corner. Only then did he allow his shoulders to droop, his strength fading quickly.

Unfortunately, his night was not over. With a fortifying breath, he straightened his spine and went in search of the spymaster.

[-]

The cold, dark room met her eyes. Unhindered by the lack of light, she lit a new fire in the hearth with the glowing embers. The sight of Garo sniffing and scratching at a door told her what she needed to know.

"Come, Garo."

He whined softly but did as told.

She bent to scratch his ears before moving to the door. Knocking loudly, she opened it enough to speak and hear clearly.

Steam assailed her, robbing her of air from the shocking change in temperature.

"Zelda?"

Everything within her urged her forward, yet she stayed her steps. There was no cause to interrupt her fiancee's shower.

"Zelda?" Louder. Maybe she hadn't heard the first time.

As if she were speaking through a fog, the hesitant "Impa?" which reached her ears only worried her further.

"Are you...all right?" she questioned softly through their bond.

Zelda's only response was a thrum of chaotic emotions.

She nodded as she closed the door before moving to her own bedroom, lighting candles and sconces as she went. When the door opened a second time, twin fires had warmed both rooms comfortably. The hidden room remained open, something that confused Garo to no end. She laughed softly as he paced from one room to the other.

It wasn't until the door behind her closed that she turned. She said nothing, taking in what little bit of flushed skin she could see. Opening her arms, she offered what comfort she could, knowing
words were useless.

It took several moments before the other woman filled her arms. Heat rolled from her in waves, escaping the thick pajamas and belted dressing gown. Pressing a light kiss to the crown of her head, she sighed softly.

"We can get through this. We've faced worse," she whispered as she hugged the silent queen tighter.

Zelda's fists clenching her dark suit was her only answer.

Minutes later, long after the heat wafting from her had cooled, Impa forced herself to break the silence. "I need to wash and change, sesha. Are you retiring for the night?"

"I think I'll read for a while," Zelda replied softly as she pulled away. Mustering a weak smile, she shook her head before lifting Garo in her arms. "Go, I'll be all right. Today was just...a shock."

The moon had crested before she admitted the folly of her words. Having long since doused the other lights, nothing but her thoughts were keeping her from sleep.

A quiet sigh escaped her lips as she slid from the bed. An equally soft thump reached her ears as Garo landed by her feet. It didn't take long to open the balcony for him, nor to secure it when he was done.

Glancing at the door which was uncharacteristically left open, she bit her lip before making her decision. Scurrying forward, she quickly found herself standing just inside Impa's room.

"I-Impa?"

The shadows around her darkened, writhing for a moment as their mistress stirred. Their eyes met as the magic calmed. Without words, the covers were raised.

She slid between them without a second thought, Garo settling by their feet.

Voices and images and thoughts whirled through her mind, threatening to consume her.

With a deep breath, she pushed it all away. Her head laid against Impa's shoulder as she curled against her side. Strong arms wrapped around her, protective.

Supportive.

Another quiet sigh as she closed her eyes. Lulled by the steady beat under her, sleep greeted her like an old friend.

[-]

For the third morning in a row, the first sight Impa saw was Zelda's eyes. Since the young man's arrival, they had reverted to old behaviors.

She hated it.

The distance between them. The silence.

They went to bed separately, and every night, Zelda would ask to join her. After midnight, never before.
She hated the… the coldness, when they were in public. Though some part of her acknowledged the irony of her current hatred of decorum, she couldn't help it. This wasn't about their love, their comfort, their relationship.

It was about him. The fact that he was here, and spent quite a bit of time with her Charge, was the reason they barely talked. Barely touched.

She had become accustomed to their open affection. Chaste, yes, but more than she'd ever expected.

More than that… she felt like it was the mourning period all over again. The only difference was that Zelda did speak.

Just…not to her. Not truly, not about anything meaningful, and never with honesty.

She was polite, cordial, proper. Even when they were alone.

Except at night, when the cover of darkness and their sanctum hid them from even each other.

"What are you thinking?"

The whispered, trembling inquiry drew her thoughts to the present. Wrapping her arms tighter around the woman before her, she pressed a kiss to the wrinkled forehead.

"You. Us. Have I done something to make you think you can't trust me?"

"No! Why-"

"Then why," she asked, unable to keep the hurt from her tone. "Why have you pulled away since your cousin has arrived? Why are you hiding from me? Is this…revenge…from when I hid from you?"

"No. Impa…no. I…I'm sorry, I…"

Delicate lids hid those grey-green eyes and the tears shimmering atop them.

"I love you, Zelda. I know he has made you nervous, just as I know I am on guard. But…letting him come between us…only hurts us. Please, my love, trust me."

"I do."

A golden-white mind brushed hers, hesitant but open. Emotion flowed between them as the shared bands around their souls eased.

She kissed her softly, gently. Lingering, briefly, for a moment. Sharing a breath. When those eyes opened again, she held their gaze, unflinching.

Questioning.

Silently asking what had been on her mind since the trial.

Conflict replaced the calm within Zelda's eyes. No words were needed, no images, not when the question was transmitted by pure emotion.

A kaleidoscope of thoughts and memories ran through the bond, followed ever so softly by impressions of words.
"I am afraid of what you want, of what I know, of the future may hold. But I could never mistake you for those females, for her. You are too different. They were evil, you aren't."

She knew it was not a simple explanation, but when had their lives-their bond—been simple? The truth, the honesty, of the wordless response was enough.

What was that? Frowning, she pressed her cheek to Zelda's and cooed softly. When she pulled back, she could see it, the fleeting crack in her armor.

When the hand on her shoulder slid down her arm, green eyes lowering to her mouth, she knew.

She'd been waiting, hoping she was wrong and knowing she was right.

Her voice was soft in volume but hard in tone, warning in its octave. "Zelda…"

Eyes met hers, shining with barely hidden guilt and shame, as those fingers stopped dancing.

"Sorry."

Shaking her head, she kept her arms where they were, refusing to end this with a misunderstanding.

"I asked you to marry me because I love you. Because you are my mate, just as I am yours. I want your culture to recognize that, as mine does. I want you to know I will be with you until the end.

"I did not ask you to marry me to…to have you," she added in a quieter tone. "Nothing between us has changed. Nothing."

When Zelda flinched, she loosened her embrace. A deep breath shared between them made their chests brush.

"I…I feel…warm. It comes in waves, as if someone dumped hot water in a cooling bath. And, and the warmth…tingles…and churns my stomach. B-but I'm…I'm afraid…too."

Momentary silence met her confused, nearly silent admission. A blush graced her cheeks as her eyes lowered, even while her heart skipped with worry and fingers tingled with fear.

The world turned as Impa rolled slightly, settling on her back so Zelda was laying atop her. A shocked, nervous chuckle escaped her lips as she took in the change.

"What—"

Another soft kiss stole her words. She licked her lips, suddenly uncomfortable as the warmth within her steadily climbed.

The arms around her loosened. One hand slid over her braided hair as the other rested on her lower back.

"Impa?"

Hearing her name fracture, seeing the numerous emotions upon her love's face, she could only smile in reassurance. Part of her cried with the trembling of her restraint, wishing it was not necessary and refusing to pretend it wasn't.

"The warmth you are feeling is desire, passion. It won't hurt you…I won't hurt you."

She saw the second it all changed. Those luminous green eyes dulled as the warm body above her
seemed to cool. The bond settled, stilling.

She raised her hands to release her hold, not shocked in the least when Zelda fled. Not quickly, nor with obvious discomfort, but there was no mistaking her silent exit with Garo at her heels.

She prayed the other woman's retreat was so she could think.

So she could only think and reason.

Anything else was too painful to consider.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
BN: Clouds by Nevermind the Name
Chapter Forty-Nine

"Reyel?"

Turning away from the bookshelf, he faced the soft-spoken woman.

"Yes?"

"Will... will you tell me about... about our bond?"

Tilting his head, he considered her words while taking in her nervous appearance. Nodding slowly, he carefully moved one of the chairs to rest several feet away from hers before sitting.

"What do you wish to know?" he asked once the doors were closed.

He watched her hands twist, her head ducking to hide the worrying of her lip. He took no offense to her unease, knowing very well the reason. They were tribe, but even he and his brethren were not above the fears which plagued her.

It did seem her trust in them outweighed that of many others, however, since her anxiety only began when she was alone with only one of them.

Understandable, he knew, especially given the unusual... circumstances... of her connection with Link. Such a paradox would taint any other relationship.

"What is it? How does it work? How does it grow?"

He leant back, alternating his gaze between her and the office around them as he gathered his thoughts.

"What do you know already?"

"Some, most of it's... instinct. Can I ask you a question?"

"Other than the one you just asked? Yes," he replied with a teasing smile.

Her head lifted enough to show her rolling eyes, just as he expected.

"What are you and Impa?"

His thoughts skidded to a halt as he registered her words. It took several moments, during which he could only blink stupidly, before he understood.

The need to laugh nearly overwhelmed him.

Swallowing his amusement, he felt his lips twitch and chuckled softly. The insecurity on her face, however, caused it to fall silent quickly.
"We're family," he told her without pause. "She is tribe. My cousin, though she's more like a younger sister most days."

"Were…were you ever…?"

He didn't reply at first, simply watched her agitated motions as the unfinished question hung between them.

"Why do you ask?"

"I… We're…we're getting married, Reyel," she breathed in a broken stream of sound. "She told me about her ex when she was in training…a-and I know there were others…" She trembled as she hugged herself, traitorous tears burning her eyes. "I n-never asked, and she never told, but…I can feel it. Here," she added, touching her chest lightly.

He nodded in understanding before sighing softly. "No, Impa and I were never lovers. You know I do not lie, sister, and I would not begin now. Calm your worries, please. Her heart and eyes see only you."

"She's the last full-blooded female Sheikah of…age," came the agonized truth.

"Just as the others and I are the last full-blooded males. Sheikah are not native to Hyrule, it is entirely possible we have kin in our ancestral land."

"What will happen?"

"To the tribe? I don't know. We let the future determine itself."

When her hands, covered in the now wrinkled gloves, pressed against her stomach, he felt his brows furrow. His tone lowered, becoming ever more gentle.

"It is not your fault that our tribe is so small, if that is your worry."

"I…I love her… I don't want to be the reason…she is the last of her family."

"She loves you, you love her. We are all human, but our tribes have simply chosen different ways of living. We Sheikah adapt well. You are part of your tribe now, sister, and have been for years. I understand your worry…but it's one for another time."

"Does…do you think she wishes…I were…different?"

"I know she loves you as you are. 'Different' in what way?"

"…whole. Healed…male," she added in a nearly soundless whisper.

Speechless, he could only stare.

It was, he decided, the cruelest punishment Fate could have given her. For Wisdom to reside within her spirit, and yet be unable to combat her own fears with it.

"She loves you for you, Zelda. All of you, as you are. You are female, and she fell in love with you knowing that would never change. I have known Impa longer than you've been alive…and I can tell you that she does not try and change who she loves. Nor wish they were someone else."

"The tribe will die though."
"Maybe. Maybe not. Why are you worried about this?"

"I'm…sterile," came the utterance after several long moments. "Eldric always said a pregnancy would kill me…I would bleed out the second a fetus was old enough to weigh anything. But…it's…it's not even a possibility anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear this was taken from you. When did you find out?"

"Two days ago. It was…a confirmation, really. I…I haven't told her."

"Will you?"

"Eventually. There's no choice. She'll…realize it soon anyway."

An awkward silence hung between them.

"Do you still want me to explain your bond?"

"Yes."

"What do you know already?"

[-]

Pale fingers wrapped around shining silver, using the fine metal to stir warm soup. Soft breath escaped parted lips as the spoon rose, a single drop of the thick brew clinging to the dip. A pleased smile pulled those lips up as brown eyes slid from one dining partner to the other.

"Wonderful meal, as always. May I take your cooks with me, Zelda?"

"I fear we are all too fond of them, Daltus."

"Rightly so. Would it be possible to take a ride in the morn?"

Lifting her eyes from her plate, she met his eyes, taking in the charming smile. Under the table, her foot bumped Impa's as she heard her inhale sharply, quiet though it was.

"I believe it would be. Is there any particular area you would like to see?"

"Whatever you wish to show me. I saw much of the countryside while riding in, though I admit I wasn't very interested in the view."

"All things considered, I doubt one could take offense. It must have been a difficult journey, considering the recent weather."

"For which I am grateful. Will you be joining us, Maderone Impa?"

Zelda calmly shifted her gaze from Daltus to Impa, thumping her foot a second time as irritation pulsed through the bond.

"Of course, Your Highness. Her Majesty is my utmost concern."

"Impa!"

The hard silence which met her mental reproach told her everything.

Neither Impa nor the other Sheikah would change their attitude towards her cousin.
In some ways, they were far more prejudiced towards him than to Link.

It was a frightening thought.

"Well," the prince said after a moment of composure, wiping his mouth daintily upon a linen cloth. "I wish you to know I feel the same."

"Noted."

"You do not appear to view me in a positive manner, madam."

"I do not know you well enough, Your Highness, to make any assessment on your character. It is not my place to 'view' you in any sort of manner, other than the presence you play in Her Majesty's life."

When he raised an eyebrow, equal parts amused and calculating, Zelda kicked her a third time.

She didn't miss the narrowing of Impa's eyes, nor the tightening of Daltus' knuckles upon his napkin.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness, Maderone Impa, I apologize for interrupting your meal," Mikal said in a calm rush as he stepped into the dining room. "A matter of state requires Your Majesty's attention."

"Right this moment, sir?" Zelda asked slowly as she lowered her goblet.

"Indeed, My Lady."

With a quiet sigh, she apologized to the understanding prince and rose. Impa remained at her heels the entire way, none of them speaking until they reached her office.

"What is so important, Mikal, that I am unable to remain eating?"

"It was mentioned that my assistance in an…intervention…would be greatly appreciated," he explained as the doors closed.

When she raised an eyebrow, he looked away, shifting uneasily.

"Mikal, I appreciate your concern and discretion, but I am not in the mood."

When he glanced at Impa, who calmly met his gaze, she closed her eyes.

"Please…go."

He nodded, understanding her tone, and slipped from the room without a word.

"Zelda…please-

"I know you don't like him. I'm not overly fond of him either. He's a pompous, conniving, irritating brat and that hasn't changed since we were children. He lied his way into the country and castle, knowing I would investigate yet be unable to call him out.

"But you…you hate him with a passion that rivals your rage at Link. You wanted to snap his neck the moment you saw him. The Guard felt your emotions so strongly they sent Mikal to bring us out. You've lectured me for years about public appearance, about prejudice, about control. So what has gotten into you?"
"I don't like the way he looks at you," Impa mumbled in a petulant tone.

"Are you-" Zelda sighed and shook her head, wrapping her arms around the other woman. Caught between amusement, flattery and annoyance, she could only sigh a second time.

"I love you. I'm marrying you. Nothing can change that."

"He's a stupid boy."

"You're jealous."

"You're mine. I don't like him. I want him gone."

"Impa…are you going to sulk?"

"Yes."

Zelda couldn't help but laugh as she saw the pout etched on Impa's face.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
The Long Shot by Kelly Clarkson (Impa, modified)
"I know the bond connects us. It's...emotion, but spirit. Physical and not. It lives in us, is part of us. It's sentient, for her more than myself. It can be repressed and blocked, and can also be opened so wide it transports us to a place within ourselves that is nothing but love and peace.

"The bond, it...it's hard to explain. It just is. It grew as we did, evolved. It wraps around me like an embrace, but other times it seems to 'stand' next to me.

"Emotions, memories, sensations and thoughts all travel through it. We can influence what we share. I'm not sure if it's our subconscious or the bond itself, but there are times our efforts are negated," she admitted quietly as she met his eyes. Like a shy child, she awaited his reply with baited breath.

[-]

Warm sun kissed their bare faces as a cool wind stung their lips. Thick gloves shielded their hands from the leather reins and stirred dust.

Dressed in their riding finery, just shy of the highest quality of formality, they could not escape the stares. Bows, curtsies and whispers followed them from one end of the land to another.

A fresh smile graced his aching lips as he faced her. The sparkling passion for her people, the unwavering loyalty they had shown her, was something he could not ignore. The sight coiled within his mind and saturated his blood. His stomach tightened, burning with equal measure of pleasure and envy.

The scandal of her trial had carried far, reaching him mere days prior to the letter. Though speculation was rampant, few knew the truth.

Well...in comparison.

He was one of them.

It should disgust him, he knew. As he greeted the subjects deferring to their rank and her loving tone reached his ears, he couldn't give such truth any weight.

The truth should disgust him. Such vile acts were unbefitting a lady of her rank and beauty.

And yet...even he could not believe she would commit such things, given a choice.

Nor did he believe his spies had been incorrect in their findings. The words of destroyed trial notes and sealed records danced through his thoughts.

It reduced her, this truth. How could it not? She was no longer pure, though her breeding remained impeccable.

And yet, at once, he could not help but remain intrigued.
He had traveled to see the truth for himself. To judge by his own eyes.

She was worthy.

He had witnessed no displays of sorcery. Of that particularity, he remained skeptical. Yet her compassion and treatment of the commoners and peasants, her handling of the mount beneath her and the mutt at its heels, could not be ignored.

There could be no denial of her regality. She was a fitting Queen. All royals had a past, though most remained secret. It was no fault of hers that it had come to light.

In truth, it made his plans all the simpler. He need not follow the usual course, though propriety and custom must be maintained.

Save for one thing.

As they left the town, silence falling between them due to their brisk pace, his eyes cut to the silver-haired woman.

He could not believe this. Not until he had seen the notice printed a second time in the Market's paper.

It had been present to him hours within his arrival.

He could not condemn her for submitting to a stronger ruler. Was a man not meant to lead a woman, as was befitting? She had no place on the battlefield, and a king had shown her such.

But this… This *abomination* he could not-nay, would not-condone.

Red eyes met his and he looked away, shuddering in disgust.

God did not allow such acts. No doubt the pain of her life had allowed his cousin to be persuaded by such a vile woman. There was no other explanation for such heinous acts.

A governess may be unmarried, as was befitting. Though female warriors were not permitted within his realm, he could see his uncle's view on the matter. A woman was underestimated and could protect his daughter through shows of weakness.

A woman could never taint the reputation as a man could, nor could she corrupt the inherent purity. A woman could only protect it.

Or so his uncle had thought.

Indeed, there was no other explanation save that this woman, this demon as her red eyes proclaimed her, had tainted his cousin. Not only with her despicable views of matrimony and marital relations, but also a woman's place in the world.

No royal female had need of a sword.

Though…it did stir him to see the blade on her hip. Or across her back, as it was now. The strap across her chest fit as it should, pressing her gown until there was no doubt of her femininity.

"What of your future, Daltus?"

Zelda's melodious voice brought his attention to their ride once more. Clearing his thoughts, he smiled once more as their horses cantered across the flat terrain. He met her emerald eyes and
replied without hesitation.

"I plan to return home and secure the future of my country. As my studies are complete and my reign is nearing the end of its fourth year, I am ready to move forward. I love my country, much as I imagine you do, yet I am lonely. I seek a companion to stand by my side. As a man, I cannot give my people the nurturing they require."

"You intend to marry soon, then?" Impa heard her Charge ask. Though mere feet from the other woman, she trembled with the need to pull her close. Ignoring the men riding around and behind her, she focused on the two monarchs.

The prince’s genteel voice left a sour taste in her mouth. No doubt brought upon by the rage turning her stomach.

"Indeed. I am a single man, a father to a large country. As with any child, Lucrum needs a mother."

"I do hope you find your match, Daltus. One's life is not meant to be spent alone."

Arriving at their destination at the narrow bridge, they slid from their mounts, one after another.

Impa's fingers curled around her knife when she saw Daltus' hands rest upon Zelda's hips, helping her from the saddle.

Only the feel of Zelda's curdling fear and disgust, followed by anger and determination, halted her. Forcing her hand to her side, she led the other guards as she remained just steps behind the prince.

No doubt his eyes were upon the queen's retreating form, rather than his steps or that of his gelding.

"I believe I have found her. It is merely a matter of time, at this point."

"Really? Then you have my congratulations, cousin. Shall this be a match of the heart, do you believe?"

"With time, I can see it developing into such. She is a woman worthy of such, and who inspires it in return."

"Has she spoken of her desires for this marriage?"

"Not as of yet. I have not asked for her hand, though I doubt she is ignorant of my intent to do so. She is a perceptive woman, to say the least."

"She sounds a fine partner for you," the Hylian woman said with a soft laugh.

The Lucrumian male's chuckle was as ominous as his words. "I do believe she is."

[-]

"Why do you think it is sentient?" he asked in the same low voice as she. Though his volume matched hers, his tone was one of gentle, probing inquiry rather than shame.

"The same reason I know I am. It just…is. The bond…lives. It's similar to the Shadows, or Wisdom. It may not have a body or voice, but it lives. It has a conscious, if you will. It is part of us, exists because we do."

"How does that make it sentient?"
"How do you describe living, thinking? The bond is pure energy and emotion. It allows us truth or dishonesty, privacy or dissemination, all, nothing or anything in between. And that's the key: allows.

"It connects us more than heart and mind. I think...I think the reason Impa didn't know wasn't only because I hid it, walled the bond. But...the bond itself. It is our love, right? Even when I was a child, the bond acted in the best interest to keep us alive. Impa never knew, because the bond...wanted her alive. It would have been her death if she'd known. She would have tried to stop me, save me. He would have tortured her, or maybe just killed her outright.

"The bond. It...it works for our happiness, yes. Because it was made in love. But...I think the BOND'S primary goal is to keep us alive and together. Not its purpose, but its goal. The same way Wisdom sometimes speaks to Impa through it. The Triforce can do whatever it wants, within certain limits...so can the bond.

"But...it can't control us. It is capable of influencing the emotions and knowledge we have from one another, but it can't directly impact us. It is part of us, and while it is sentient, we control it."

"...for someone who says they can't explain something, you did so very well."

[ ]

It was another shared meal. While she entertained her unexpected guest as well as she could, none had expected her duties to cease for his pleasure.

Well...none save the man in question. Though even he knew this was an irrational expectation.

Meals, however, were the one time she could focus solely on her guest. Most of their meals were taken privately, with the two of them, Impa and a handful of their guards. Occasionally one of their advisors would join, but most left them in peace.

Or so it was believed.

The dining hall was nearly empty. She didn't ask why he had chosen the semi-formal hall, though the multi-course meal had piqued her suspicions.

It had also infuriated her on the staff's behalf.

She watched his fingers, unnaturally pale when compared to his tan face, twirl his fork to gather the pasta. She knew by the contrasting colors that he so rarely removed his gloves in daylight.

A liberty she indulged regularly. Her gloves were proper, yes, and also for protection. But she would not wear them continuously. If for no other reason than to spare her wardrobe budget the expense when another pair was stained with ink.

Shaking her head, she pushed the idle thoughts from her mind and admitted her boredom. There was no other reason for such speculation.

She was bored, dreadfully so.

"Have you had plans?"

"Plans?" she asked as she rested her goblt atop the table once more. "For what?"

"The future of course. We spoke of my own plans earlier. Will you not tell me yours?"
"My plans are similar to your own, I suppose. To continue the advancement and enrichment of my country."

"That is the plan every ruler has," he told her with a soft smile. His voice lowered a bit as he met her gaze across the table. "Have you no personal goals?"

"As you mentioned, I am a ruler. My country comes first."

"So I have heard," he whispered solemnly. "I do wish there had been another way, a way which would have spared you such agony."

Their distant, polite ease shattered as tense silence rent the air between them. Her knuckles closed around her fork as her breath hitched.

No.

No.

"As do I. Please, I prefer not to speak of such things."

He had no right, no place, no-

"I understand, Zelda. It is the truth. I do wish there had been-"

"Enough, Daltus." Harsh to her own ears, the cold words sliced his words as cleanly as the knives beside their plates.

"My apologies," he said quietly while inclining his head.

Forcing her white knuckles to loosen, she breathed deeply and resumed her meal as if such words had not been spoken.

The rich sauce and tender pasta were ash within her mouth.

"I would like to travel," she admitted after several minutes. "Eventually, I would like to see more of the world beyond the palaces and estates."

"A dream I believe many seek to fulfill. Have you ever traveled?"

"Some, yes. When I was younger. I know the lands adjacent Hyrule, within a fortnight's ride, but no further."

"Have you had particular land in mind?"

"Water," came her instant reply to his harmonious inquiry. Ignorant of the softening expression she wore, of the smile pulling at her lips, she met his eyes a second time. "I would love to see the ocean, to sail among the waves."

"Lucrum rests upon the eastern seaboard. You would be welcome to call upon my estate at any time."

"Thank you, cousin."

Her words belayed her intention to never do so. He merely inclined his head, accepting her parry.

When their dishes were exchanged for the last course of cheese and fruit, he rolled a grape between
his fingers. Regarding her, he spoke in the softest tone possible, weighing his words.

"Would you consider an alliance, Zelda?"

"Our countries are already allies to one another, Daltus, or have you forgotten?"

He all but grit his teeth at the mocking sparkle in her eyes. Many years had passed since he was a young boy running around his nurse's skirts, and he had no desire to be treated as such!

"I meant a more…permanent alliance. A partnership."

"I believe we have the best possible agreement for our separate countries."

Diplomacy.

Taking a deep breath, he rested the warm fruit in his bowl once more before leaning forward. His fingers twined as he rested his chin atop his knuckles, staring at her candle-lit face.

Sometimes the direct approach was necessary.

"And for us?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

When her gaze meet his once more, he saw it. The confusion and denial was writ clear within her eyes, barely covering her fierce determination.

Amused, he lifted a slice of dripping pear to his lips.

"Our alliance and partnership. Would you consider something more…committed than our current state of affairs?"

"Whatever are you implying?"

She knew. He knew by the way her eyes lit with fire, shining brighter than the candles around them, and how her cheeks reddened with emotion.

Good.

"A union, Zelda," he explained softly. "One which would far outweigh the contract we have now."

"It is with no offense meant that I say this. I have not and will not be considering such a union. Not now or within the future."

Her hands shook as she poured fresh water in her goblet. So focused on controlling her rage, she couldn't spare a single thought to calm Impa.

The poor woman practically vibrated beside her, so great was her wrath.

"If this is due to what befell-"

"I do not wish to speak any further on the matter!"

"-you during the war, you need not worry. Considerations would be made, such events taken into account."

The howling within her mind became silent, as if a midnight storm had cleared without a trace.
"Excuse me?" she whispered. Gall, rather than interest, made her look upon the twisted compassion and blatant arrogance covering his face.

"Heirs would not be necessary for a time, and-"

"Enough! Be silent!"

She hissed with each breath, her nails digging into her palm as she took in the shock spreading through his self-assurance.

"I will not marry you. Nor will I consider such a prospect. This topic is to never be spoken of again, do you understand?"

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why would you not consider my proposal?"

Incredulous, she could only laugh.

"I am already engaged, Daltus. You know this as well as the rest of my country. Surely you don’t think me a fool?"

"I think you to be…misguided," he said carefully, his deliberate tone hinting at a fragility she did not possess. "I can understand how such…events…such…brutality can make females susceptible to the unnatural attentions of others, but…” He trailed off, glancing slyly at Impa as if she were beneath his notice.

"They are, as I said, unnatural. There are many things God allows within the world, and this is not one of them. It takes a…patient man to show a woman how such frightening things are not the nature of marital relations."

Zelda could only stare at the arrogant, patronizing man before her.

There was…so many things wrong with his words that she wasn’t sure which to address first. Emotion and memory swirled her thoughts in a dizzying spiral. Etiquette, history and religious lessons created a whirlwind around indignation, fury and hurt only to be coated by mocking laughter and unconditional acceptance.

Heart aching from the force of her feelings, mind spinning from the weight of her reality, she could only lay a hand on Impa’s leg when she felt the older woman prepare to stand.

"And you believe yourself such a man?"

"I do, yes."

"Then you are a fool. You are no more patient than my dog. In fact, he has far more patience than you could ever hope to understand, let alone possess. To assist any person in the manner of which you speak, you must possess not only patience…but tolerance. Understanding. Humility. Self-sacrifice. Traits you have yet to display."

His pleasant smile gave way to white-pressed lips.

"You have been deluded and misguided by vileness for so long, I scarce know what to say."
"Then say nothing."

"This…this engagement you proclaim is but an immoral attempt for safety and comfort. What manner of befouled woman would lay with another, uncaring of an important loss?"

"You cross the line!" Zelda snarled as she slammed her fist against the heavy wooden table. Roaring filled her ears as buzzing, creeping needles spread across her skin. "Be silent, sir!"

"Nay, I shall not. This abomination has turned you away from your God-given path of matrimony, something which can only occur with another man! She is a demon in her desires and teachings!

"God attempted to teach your place, and so I had thought you listened. You belong to a man, Zelda, and with a man so shall your country prosper as you wish it to!" came his forceful declaration, fire burning in his eyes.

Darkness eclipsed everything save the flames dancing within his eyes, swallowing the world around her. His warm, honey-lacquered voice was so distorted to her ringing ears she nearly missed the harsh undertone.

"The beauty of love, my dear queen, will forever elude you. You will never be free if you continue upon this path!"

His words reached her as if through a tunnel, echoing through her until every syllable shook within the cells of her body. The emotion glowing within his brown eyes looked so similar to that within discs of carnelian that she nearly lost herself.

"You never learned to, my beautiful Queen. You shall always be mine, my pet. You will never be free."

Joints screaming from the restraint she called upon, Impa quickly considered the situation. She could remain silent, as if she was not a party of this dreadful parody of a conversation. Or she could act, as was her place as Guardian and mate.

Choosing the latter, she felt her tense muscles coil in a different way as she prepared to leap across the table.

The laden air stole her breath as a wave of heat poured from her side, scorching her. The room around them became awash with rolling, gentle light. Snapping her attention from one figure to another, she could only stare as Zelda rose.

The heavy chair she had been seated in slid backwards, slamming into the wall several feet away from the force of her ascent. Her lithe frame stood tall, golden-white waves of power seething from her. Grey-green eyes burning with emotion, even the Triforce could not match their intense luminosity.

"I belong to no man!" the trembling woman roared. Where conflict had torn through their bond moments before, only determination and strength now stood.

"Never again will a man claim any such right to my person, and that includes you. There is but one queen here, and no king!"

When the prince stood, challenge leaking from his stiff posture, once more did Impa restrain herself.

She could—would—protect Zelda.
But…this was not her fight.

This time…Zelda did not need her protection.

"You are-

"Be silent, Prince Daltus!" she snapped. The command rang around the room even as the doors swung open. Panicked guards and frightened countrymen poured across the threshold. Several of them tripped over their own feet, stumbling to a shocked halt as those behind them tried to avoid the same fate.

"I am to be married, and not to you. Never to you. I would not marry you or any other man if my life depended upon it. For at one time, such it did! What my intended and I do, or not, is none of your concern."

"Zelda-

"I have not given you right to speak!"

A harsh swallow tore itself so slowly through Daltus' throat, even Impa reconsidered Zelda's fragile appearance.

"Lucrum is under Hyrule's order and shall remain so. There is no need to thank your Matriarch, it is not for your benefit.

"You will leave this castle with the dawn, and not return until you are summoned. Do you understand?" she added in a hard tone, staring at him long after he had looked away.

"Yes, Nohansen Queen-Mother," came his soft reply.

"Then leave my sight."

Though his head was held high as left the hall, all knew he bowed low before the Mother of his family.

Impa never looked away from the Hylian's glowing form, chest aching from the strength of her love and pride.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Rise by Skillet
Lost and Found (I)

Chapter Fifty

Lost and Found (I)

Tense silence hung between them, crackling with power and emotion. Their normally silent steps echoed through the long halls. Staff fled from the sound and ethereal warmth which foreshadowed their arrival.

It was only once they were in their rooms, sheltered from the world and its prying eyes, that their stoic masks shattered.

The rippling aura of opulent golden-white magic had faded until it was a mere glow upon her skin. Impa watched as Zelda shed her boots with violent kicks, nearly tearing her gloves as she pulled them off. The younger woman paced, unbound hair floating behind her, only to whip around as she turned.

"I'm proud of you," she said without hesitation as she laid a hand on the Hylian's arm, stilling her.

Grey-green eyes met hers, betraying the rage which continued to boil under their skin.

"Thank you," came Zelda's clipped reply. "I'm sorry, I'm not very good company right now."

A smile pulled at Impa's lips as she stepped closer. Anger, sadness, pride, love, joy and numerous unnamed emotions swirled within her. Her muscles quivered from repressed rage as her skin tingled from the warm caress of Zelda's power. Taking in a deep breath, she pulled the complex scent of woman, magic and emotion into herself until she trembled.

"Neither am I," she admitted as she traced the glowing lines of energy through the Hylian's sleeve. Her thoughts spun as the bond wrapped around her like a lover, pulling and coiling at once. Her lips brushed Zelda's as their eyes met, the other woman's breath hot against her mouth.

Instantly, those soft lips met hers as hands rested on her arms. Her free hand slid through that silky golden-brown hair before sliding down a strong back to rest upon the cloth-clad hip. Her thumb stroked the concealed bone, fire roaring through her as the hands on her biceps tightened.

The younger woman's lips parted to grant her access. A heart beat against her chest as soft breasts and firm legs pressed closer. Skirts clung to her pants as one hand slid down her arm before resting on her back.

She meant to stay her course, meant to keep things as they were. Yet the feel of fingers resting over her spine and the sound of a soft, appreciative mewl were the last straw.

Raw, possessive need decimated her crumbling restraint. The need to claim and possess, to protect and mark, was born from her rage and fueled her passion. A surge of strength, hot and quick through her muscles, burned her veins before pooling in her stomach.

Desire shredded her reason as laughing brown eyes and taunting words filtered through her mind,
stoking the fire in her blood. Lungs aching for breath, she sucked in great gulps of air.

When those soft lips captured her bottom lip, ever so gentle in their touch, her fingers cupped the hip under them.

Her arm tightened as her hand pressed low on Zelda's back, hugging her close. Legs brushed hers as she stepped forward, desperate for contact. Her lips pressed hard against the ones under hers, her tongue running over smooth flesh and teeth as she swallowed a growl of pleasure.

The feel of hot skin sliding against hers, of a body beside hers, haunted her from the recesses of her memory. Sounds of pleasure, of gasps and whispered pleas, echoed through her ears. The heat within her stomach flared, coiling outward like snakes until it engulfed her, stirring a hunger she had thought long forgotten.

The mouth under hers wrenched away as hands pressed into her shoulders, a distant, harsh cry reaching her traitorous thoughts. The world tumbled as twin pressures shoved her backwards, chilling her from the sudden lack of shared body heat.

Stumbling, she reached forward to right herself. She saw, rather than heard, Zelda's shout of "No!" as her hand was slapped away.

Extending a hand behind her, she could only stare as a new sort of pain consumed her. Fire became ice as her heart writhed.

Confused, hurt, rejected, nothing could stop the trembling question which fell from her lips. "Zelda…?"

Burning emerald eyes met hers as she blinked, struggling to comprehend what had happened. Her hand began to rise again, only to drop as she saw the other woman snarl. Tears burned her eyes as she saw the Hylian woman shake with rage.

"Don't touch me!" came the hissed words.

The sight before her blurred as she fought the hot liquid gathering in her eyes. "What-

"I don't belong to you! Not to you, not anyone!"

"If I explained it well," she said in an amused tone, his praise bolstering her courage, "then what can you tell me?"

"Words can't really describe a mate bond, unfortunately. They are all so…very different. The fact that you are Guardian and Charge only complicates your bonded souls."

"So…you can't tell me anything?"

"I didn't say that."

She knew even before the first errant tear that she was being irrational. Her rage at Daltus, at the memories he had brought forth with agonizing clarity, was being transferred to Impa.

And yet she could not stop the angry words even as she spoke them. Fear and rage collided within her stomach and heart until she feared collapse. Her body shook as her nails dug into her palms.
"You said nothing changed. But jealousy is getting the better of you. My body isn't a prize, not anymore, never again! Not for Daltus, not for Hyrule, and certainly not for you!"

As Impa's shoulders began to shake, tears falling as she barely swallowed her sobs, she knew it was unfair. She knew, logically, that the seconds those arms had been locked around her were not meant to be dangerous. Or frightening.

And yet they had been.

"If you want me, want to fuck me, then be honest about it! But don't try to trick me, don't dance around it. You said you were honest, that you wouldn't hide, so prove it."

Her chest heaved as her heart beat a fierce rhythm, threatening to break free. She struggled to calm herself, to see and think past it all, to apologize and explain.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"To what?" she snarled, stalking closer.

The sight of Impa's red eyes filled with sorrow and shame, of her face covered in tears, gave her a twisted sense of victorious pleasure.

When they were inches from one another, she moved closer still. In a parody of their previous embrace, she waited until their noses were about to touch before speaking.

"You didn't mean to. Why should I believe that? You clearly wanted to, long before Daltus came along. He was the excuse. It's convenient, isn't it, this anger at him? You can be angry and possessive about Link and Garo…but can't act on it. But him, you can. He gives you a reason to slip up."

"That's not-"

"Isn't it? He's a threat to you, what you've worked so hard to get. Patience, love, trust," she listed in a mocking tone, "how hard that must have been. How tortured you must feel, to cater to a-"

"Enough!" A sob escaped her even as she grabbed Zelda's hands. Sickened, she could only shudder as fingers skimmed her stomach and breasts. This was not what she had wanted, never.

"I…my emotions got the better of me," she admitted in an agonized whisper, her voice cracking. "I acted rashly on those emotions. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I hurt you, I'm sorry I scared you. That was not my intention."

"Then what was?" came the same angry tone.

"To…to kiss you. Hug you. Tell you…how proud I was-am. That you spoke up and defended yourself. That you've realized you don't belong to anyone."

"What do you want to know?" he asked after a moment.

He chuckled when she huffed in exasperation, muttering.

"You're impossible."

"No, I am Sheikah."
"Same difference." Shaking her head, she considered her curiosity. "Is it true there are...stages?"

"To a mate bond? Yes."

"How many?"

"There are four."

Stepping back, Zelda felt something within her begin to loosen.

Why did her pride hurt so much? Rather...why did pride at her "realization" hurt? It was a natural course of action, wasn't it?

Except, despite her anger, she began to doubt her conviction.

Annoyed at her doubt, at the worry and weakness threading through her, she glared at the other woman.

"We're done talking."

"No," Impa said quietly but firmly, "we aren't."

When a hand wrapped around her wrist, stopping her retreat, she knew she couldn't ignore the older woman.

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, against the tears still threatening to fall, she shook her head.

"I...made a mistake. And I am sorry. You have a right to be angry at me. And we will, at times, take our emotions out on one another. But that doesn't mean you can dismiss me like one of your staff.

"I answer to you. I love you. I am your mate, your fiancé, and your Guardian. I don't care if you're angry. With me, in these rooms, there is no queen and her subject. We are equals and you will treat me as such.

"I accept that I have to earn your trust back. Just like I understand you are struggling with your past. But do not compare me with him. I have no desire to dominate you, to abuse and rape you. I made a mistake," she added in a soft tone when Zelda flinched, "and you know it was a mistake."

Zelda pulled on her wrist, cursing Impa's ability to talk her anger away. She'd always been able to do that, for as long as she could remember.

"Will you let me go?"

"Not yet."

Slowly, finally, she turned to face the Sheikah female.

"The first state is friendship, companionship. It is about becoming familiar with one another.

"The second is the evolution of love. At this point, the bond is formed regardless of the relationship. Friend, sibling, partner...it does not matter. As long as the souls recognize one another as true companions, they are considered a 'mate' of that soul.
"The third bond is when the heart and minds are able to touch. This can be sharing thoughts and emotions. Most often it is an…alignment of the core beings. Life-long relationships are made at this state of strong love, since it comes with acceptance of change.

"The fourth…the fourth is a merging of spirits."

[-]

Pain continued to gnaw at her heart as she met those smoldering green eyes once more.

"I love you," she whispered. "Nothing will change that." Her hand opened and fell to her side a third time.

"We're going to fight, Zelda. This was our first major fight. When you're calmer, I want you to remember that I love you."

Without another word, she retreated to her own room, shutting the door silently behind her.

Only then did she allow the fresh tears to fall.

Long after her burning eyes had dried, exhaustion claimed her. Atop her sheets, she hugged herself, curled tightly upon herself.

…curled tight, as if to protect her heart.

[-]

Dawn saw them gathered in the entrance hall. With her back to the main stairs, Zelda watched her cousin fasten his cloak and don his riding gloves. The pleasant, polite smile she wore hurt her cheeks as much as her heart.

She hated this game as surely as she hated the stately dress she wore. Clad in decorative false armor and the Hylian banner, even the subtle changes of colors could not stop her skin from crawling. The fact that his stiff posture betrayed his anger did nothing to help.

She hated the dress and everything it symbolized. She hated the fact that she always seemed to be wearing the traditional attire when men were enraged by her.

Maybe it was a sign to change another tradition…

Swallowing a yawn, she extended her gloved hand. He grasped her fingers loosely as he brushed his lips over her knuckles. "I bid you farewell, Your Majesty."

"A safe journey, Your Highness," she said in an equally cool tone. Her smile widened as irritation flickered through his eyes, followed by grudging admiration.

Yes, she could play a man's game. And play them well, as he had learned.

Now was not the time to consider such things, however. With another bow, he backed away before leaving the castle all together. He kept his thoughts clear of everything save the market and nearing field until the city became a distant speck.

Only when the sun had risen to its noon position did he allow his meditative state to fall away.

Then, and only then once he was out of the magician's reach, did he begin to consider all that had happened.
One thing was for certain.

He needed to talk to the Church.

[-]

"Reyel?"

A subtle pressure under his skin woke him even as the question sunk through his dreams. Blinking, he yawned softly and squinted in the darkness.

Of course.

Some things would never change.

Shifting further towards the wall, he yawned a second time and pat the bed beside him.

He loved his cousin dearly, but why on the Goddess' green Earth did she have to wake him on his day off?

When she laid next to him in the darkness, her weight above the covers pinning him in place, he slung an arm around her. As if they were children again, he blew her hair from his face.

Closing his eyes, he nuzzled his warm pillow and sought the comforting sleep hovering just on the edge of his thoughts. It had been many years, decades even, since storms and nightmares had made her seek him.

Always him, never the others. Not Torna, who was born days after her, nor Keji who'd trailed behind her like a puppy as she'd followed him. No, always him.

Never mind the fact that they'd lived in different houses and Impaz would have welcomed her any time of night.

In some ways, it was comforting to know she still wanted his protection.

In others, it was a pain of numerous sorts.

Especially when he realized the buzzing of the tribal bond meant he wasn't going to go back to sleep anytime soon.

He loved his cousin, he truly did…but there were times he wished she'd latched onto someone else when she was a toddler.

Then again, that's what he got for defending her from his elder brother's taunts.

Weren't good deeds meant to be rewarded, rather than punished?

"You're a pest, you know that?" he mumbled quietly.

"It's why you love me," Impa said just as softly.

She hugged his arm as if it was the stuffed bear she'd used to carry around.

Thank Gods this wasn't happening...a while ago. Best not to think about that timeframe.

"I love you because you're tribe and I have to, not because you plague me on my day off."
yawn broke his words, sending cursed alertness through his body.

Damn it…he didn't want to wake up, even if it was past breakfast.

When she didn't reply, he opened his bleary eyes a second time.

"What is wrong, sister-mine?"

When she turned to face them, their noses almost touching, he couldn't help but smile.

It was time like that he knew that no matter where they found themselves, they would always be the children they once were. Various members of their tribe, of the remaining Guard, had formed their own connections. It was...simply the Sheikah way.

"I kissed her in a fit of passion, lost myself and scared her."

"Last night?"

"Yes."

"After you left the dining room?"

"Yes."

He ruffled her loose curls, far too content in his half-awake state to share her serious demeanor.

"Did you hurt her?"

"Emotionally."

"Did she hurt you?"

"…not physically."

"Give her time."

"That's not helpful."

"It is rarely helpful to seeking advice from someone who has only slept three hours." Swallowing another yawn, he touched his nose to hers.

"She asked me about us."

"Us?"

He hummed, nodding, knowing she could see the motion. "Yes. If we'd ever been together."

He laughed as a sound of disgust wrenched itself from her mouth.

"At one time you didn't feel-"

"That we were both lonely and grieving. And a bit drunk. Nothing came of it, except sore heads and a few laughs."

He didn't reply.

Sometimes…the past was best left alone.
Long after the day had ended, the late hour found her staring into the flames. Even in mid-spring, they kept the fire blazing once dusk came. Most nights it was to keep their rooms warm.

Tonight, it was to chase the chill from her spirit.

Hugging herself, she shivered. Lost and confused by the depth of the pain which plagued her, she could only fight tears. It crashed into her, covering her as if she was a beached sea creature. Just when she thought the tide had retreated, it threatened to drag her down once more.

Except…this sea was not her home, nor was it comfortable.

Flinching at the heat of a nearing aura, she hugged herself tighter. Exposed by the previous night's events, she could only protect her heart for so long. Her world had tilted and had yet to right itself.

"Impa?"

Ignoring the whispered question in vain hope the speaker would leave, she continued to watch the dance of light and shadow.

A single tear slid down her cheek as her shoulders shook.

Letting it fall, she merely blinked as several others followed. She'd thought her tears had dried. Clearly, she'd been wrong.

*It's not the first time,* she whispered softly within her own mind.

The hand which so hesitantly lay upon her arm burned. Love which had previously been so comfortably warm was now a fire threatening to char her soul until there was nothing but ash.

The light touch was lifted. Her eyes remained on the dancing, crackling fire. Refusing to look, to speak, to acknowledge.

She was not invincible. Nor was her heart made of stone.

There was only…so much she could take before she broke.

Idly, as the quiet repetition of her name reached her ears, she wondered if that point had come.

Chapter End Notes

---

*Songs:*
- Lost by Within Temptation
- Lost in the Echo by Linkin Park (metaphorical)
Lost and Found (II)

Guilt ate at her conscience and dominated her thoughts until there was only darkness. Battling away the depression threatening to pull her into maddening depths of her mind, she spoke without restraint.

"I'm sorry I took my anger out on you. It was not fair to you, nor did you deserve it. It was... startled and...frightened, yes. But...that's no excuse for how I treated you. You've done nothing but support and love me, and when you needed me to do the same, I pushed you away.

"I'm sorry. I know...I know that's not enough, that an apology can't make everything better. I just wanted you to know I do understand what I've done."

The popping of luminous timber met her words, breaking the silence after her confession.

Swallowing against the emotions choking her, she backed away.

Silence was a worthy punishment. No less than she deserved.

Not that such a truth helped, however. It still hurt.

"Why?"

A hoarse voice, breaking on the single syllable, halted her retreat.

"Why what?"

"Why do you continue to think I only love you for your body?"

"I-"

"Why...why do you still not trust me?"

"I do trust you."

Their words ghosted across the dark room. Barely spoken, they were nearly deafening in the silence.

A choked, bitter chuckle tore itself from bite-swollen lips. "You don't, Zelda. I'm not sure you can, not truly. And it hurts. It tears at me, every minute of every day. Nothing I do, nothing I say, will ever change that.

"And the saddest thing is...is that it's not your fault. His methods were so complete that the pain you suffered...encompasses every response I could have. Every interaction we have. Even our bond can't dispel his taint, because he used love as a weapon."

"Impa..." she breathed, unable to form any other word.

"What do I have to do to be worthy of your trust?"
"You are!"

"Then why don't you trust me?"

Finally looking away from the merry flames, she turned her head to the side. Red eyes met green as her mind reached out.

The feel of her own unrestrained passion flew between them, followed by undiluted terror. The bond thrummed with pain as Impa's memories became a shared spectacle.

"You didn't mean to. Why should I believe that? You clearly wanted to, long before Daltus came along. He was the excuse. It's convenient, isn't it, this anger at him?"

The words seared their bleeding hearts, driving down until both of their aching souls cried from the torment of truth.

Both were right, and neither were wrong. In their actions, yes, but not their words. Not their feelings.

"What hurts worst," Impa said softly as she looked away once more, "is that...your fear is not unwarranted. I don't trust myself anymore, why should you?"

"You haven't-

Shadows concealed her sudden movement. Cloth whispered through air, betraying her otherwise silent motion. Within seconds, the space between them had been closed.

A cry of shock lodged itself in Zelda's throat as hands wrapped around her arm and waist. The floor under her feet was met by her back in seconds. The body atop hers was warm and heavy as a mouth possessed hers with savage intensity.

And yet, she felt no fear.

Worry, yes, and even distaste. But no fear.

Well...not much.

There was no lust in the act, nor from the bond.

There was no hunger or greed.

Only...determination.

And pain.

Her hands wrapped around cold, strong wrists. There was no resistance as she pulled the hands from her body. She released them, turning her head away as she laid her hands on the other woman's shoulders.

"You can't scare me to prove a point," she said softly.

And then she was alone.

Chilled by the absence, she stood. Her hands shook as she righted her dressing gown, her mind still trying to understand what had just happened.
"I…I trust you. I love you. You're right, my trust is not complete. Nor do I trust blindly. You said you were proud of me. You know I am trying. That I am…working through what I can, as fast as I can. I can't…I can't make myself feel something I don't.

"I…I want to help you. I hadn't planned on saying what I did. I was angry at Daltus, at…at everyone who thinks like him. Not you. I'm sorry. I want to help soothe that pain. But also to help you realize you…you don't need to doubt yourself.

"My trust issues…don't have anything to do with you. You're as much a…a victim of this as I am. Eldric calls you a 'secondary survivor', someone who supports a…a survivor, but is also hurt because of what they went through.

"I am angry. Afraid. Hurt. But that's not towards you. I love you. Trust you. I'm worried and afraid about…about what the future may bring…but that doesn't change the fact that I want to spend my life with you. I always have."

"You still want to marry me?"

Like a shocked child, her voice was fragile with its confused hope.

"Why would I not?"

Rounding the couch, Zelda settled beside the older woman. Taking her in her arms, she ran a hand through Impa's hair. The words were muffled by their position, a reversal of their normal roles.

"I lost control. I hurt you."

"Oh Impa…" Shaking her head, she spoke in a rush. Despite not understanding it herself, she knew her words were true.

"You said you made a mistake. I believe you. I know what I said yesterday hurt. That was the point. But it wasn't true. Some part of me is still a scared twelve year old staring…at him in the dark of night. In the deepest recess of my mind where the fears are, that part of me whispers that it's true. But I know it's not.

"You're not a bad person, Impa. You were overwrought and overworked. You snapped, we both did. I reacted with anger, you with desire. It doesn't mean you wanted to…to push."

She paused then, swallowing harshly. She knew that neither of them were fooled, that the catch in her voice had not been hidden.

"You're not like them. You don't enjoy hurting me or anyone else. You understand that I can't…I can't handle all of your…feelings yet. I know you hide them…'control' them, as you say. You're human, Impa. You're going to need a break from yourself. You can't hide who you are forever. That…that includes your emotions, your dreams, your desires."

She fell silent, realizing she was babbling and refusing to make a bigger fool of herself.

"We're a pair, aren't we?" came Impa's eventual question, a small smile coloring her words.

"Why do you say that?"

"We're both far too guilty, ashamed and adept at hiding for our own good."

"True…very true."
With a shared chuckle, they fell into mutual contemplative silence. As one, their eyes sought the flames.

[-]

"Your Majesty?"

Blinking to clear her eyes, Zelda shook her head and faced forward. Thoughts of the previous night continued to taunt her, threatening to reclaim her attention. "My apologies, Mikal. Have you been waiting long?"

"Just a few moments. Are you well?"

"Yes. Merely…thinking."

When he nodded, his gentle face void of his normal smile, she could only frown.

"Is something wrong, Mikal?"

"Not...wrong," he said after a moment's consideration. "More…unusual."

"Which I suppose is why my office doors are now closed?" she asked with a rueful glance at the aforementioned doors.

"Yes."

She met his eyes with a raised brow, sitting back in her chair.

It was difficult to summon any concern, given the recent months. Something 'unusual' could not compare to what he had told her over the last quarter of the year.

"I received a letter today. In it, I was asked to courier a message. The writer believed, correctly, that any letter to yourself would be opened."

An annoying policy, she admitted sourly within her mind. Though necessary, given how many assassination attempts, scare tactics and other unsavory parcels had been intercepted.

"After reading my own missive, I don't see a reason to deny the request."

"How noble of you," she drawled.

When he met her eyes a second time, having glanced at the parchments in his hand, she grimaced inside.

"My apologies, again. That was rude."

A hint of a smile touched his eyes. "I understand."

He laid the sealed letter on her desk and left without another word. The doors closed softly behind him, the soft click of the latch far too loud in the otherwise empty room.

For some reason, it made her nervous. What could the author have told Mikal to make him believe such privacy was needed...or wanted?

Twirling the folded letter in her fingers, she stared at it for a long while. A flush stained her cheeks when she realized her childish antics. Avoiding whatever was written would not calm her curiosity.
Without another thought, she slid her finger under the wax seal and pressed the folds flat.

Your Royal Majesty,

There are many things I wish to say in this letter, and after three attempts, I have decided to simply speak from the heart. I requested Advisor Mikal pass this letter on to you, as I doubted you would see it otherwise. Please forgive my presumption, but it seemed the only way.

I was one of your jurors, Your Majesty, which is how I met Advisor Mikal. I dared not risk speaking to you directly after your trial for a number of reasons, propriety being the least of them.

I am not Hyrulian born, though I am now a citizen. My parents were of a lower middle class in my country, and sent me to live with relatives so I could receive a proper education. At age seven I lost my family from distance. At age nine, I learned they had perished in a plague. I had thought this was the worst of my suffering. I was wrong.

I am a few years older than yourself, and watched the war unfold. I lived outside the city, in one of the Province-based towns, but the unrest reached even us. It tore our village and homes apart, long before the fighting had officially begun.

Once war was declared, we knew nothing would be the same. I left school and remained at home, helping to run the village and manage the children as the adults around me fought one another and our true enemies.

I learned during one cold winter day that it wasn't the dark creatures I should fear. My village was raided. My relatives and neighbors were slaughtered by Hyrulian soldiers, rather than the creatures they claimed to have run off. As our homes and stores burned, I spent hours begging them to spare my cousin. She was like a sister to me, and barely four years of age.

They slit her throat as I tried to pull her away from them. They said she was too young for sport, and therefore a bother to be taken care of. I realize now this was a mercy. I pray to the Mothers she felt no pain, but I know she did. Her eyes showed me that much, even as the snow became a red, steaming river.

It is the Hyrulian army, Your Majesty, which still haunts my dreams. Human men killed my family and one held me captive for months. I do not believe I need to elaborate on the reason for my position in his tent.

A small comfort I now have is that their leader, the one who killed my cousin and bound me to him, is now dead. He died a few months after I escaped, shortly after His Majesty, the late King, was called home by the Mothers.

I cannot understand the suffering you have experienced in terms of magics and creatures, but the pain of force is something I know all too well. The isolation, the doubt, the fear, the guilt, the shame...these are things I also know, and fight with to this day.

I pray it comforts you to know there are others who empathize with your pain. None of us would wish this suffering on another, but is it not easier to bear if you know you are not alone? I have met several others, men and women, who have shared these painful experiences...for a variety of reasons.

Like many others, I too hear the gossip and rumors. You are our sovereign Queen, yet so too are you human. Many are judging matters which are not theirs to look upon. I do not understand your relationship with Guardian Impa, but I support your willingness to find love. There is no shame in
marrying the one your heart has chosen.

I did so. And today I have a beautiful daughter who will be starting school soon. She is nearly four, and named after my dear young cousin in loving memory. She is not my husband's child. He loves her regardless, and says she is his in the ways that matter.

In fact, my marriage is not legal. We were married only two months after my escape. He was a friend I trusted above all others, and knew what I had endured. He agreed to marry me, knowing our marriage would result in an "early" yet healthy child...which should not exist. Our marriage has never been consummated.

Have you ever released a held breath, without realizing you were holding it? To see these words on paper gives me that. By law, you can seize our humble farm and all assets for fraud and larceny. Yet, I do not believe you will. We live a peaceful life, as best we can. This does not conform to society's views. An educated woman of middle class, even damaged, should not wed an illiterate seventh-generation farmer. Yet I have. I have found love, trust and respect in what many consider 'unconventional'. I am happy with my life.

I wish the same for you, Your Majesty. I freed myself years before you could do the same, and yet it haunts me to this day. Perhaps it always will. I know that with each year, it becomes easier. I watch my daughter grow and no longer compare her face to that of her sire. She is our daughter, regardless of blood.

This letter is not a ploy, Majesty, nor a plea. The trust I have in you is not born of desperation, but rather conviction. You have long been a fair monarch, regardless of your title. Your heart is in every action you take and word you speak. It is this which has led me to trust in you, to confide in you. To step beyond etiquette and consider myself your equal. We are two women who, at one time, thought themselves alone in our pain. We are not.

Let love be your savior, Queen Zelda. Not a person, but a feeling. Love in yourself and to another. Love of the world, and for it. You told us your actions had been for Hyrule. Now, as a Hyrule citizen, I ask a request of you: to do what is best for you. Many argue against you, your love, your hidden history. For ever one person who opposes you, there are ten who support you. As a ruler, yes, but more importantly, we support you as a person.

Sincerely,

Katherine Lumoran

Hands trembling with emotion, she folded the letter and placed it in her desk.

Hours passed before her doors opened again, her eyes having long since lost sight of them.

[-]

"Impa?"

"Hm."

"Is the bond physical?"

Lifting her eyes from the spymaster's report, Impa tilted her head as she considered her mate.

How odd to see her on the visiting end of a desk. It was a rare day Zelda found her in this particular room.
More than likely a holdover from when she was a child and barred from it.

"Impa?"

Shaking her head, she smiled. "Sorry. Thoughts. What was your question?"

Lips twitching at the irony, Zelda sat in the chair across from the older woman. The letter folded in her pocket crinkled as she smoothed her pants nervously.

"The bond. Does it have a physical, biologic basis?"

Curious, Impa considered the question for several minutes. "I'm…not sure. There are stories of past sages and magi testing the tangible nature of the bond. Which, in a way, does make it physical. But for biological, chemical? I'm…not sure. There's no way to study it.

"Why?"

"I…I was talking to Reyel about it a few days ago. We were interrupted before I could ask. He was barely able to finish his summary of the stages. The question has been sitting in my mind."

"I doubt you're the first to ask. But it's not something anyone can answer. Maybe in the future, or the distant past when Her Grace reigned, you would be able to know."

"Oh." Frowning with disappointment, Zelda watched her twirling fingers.

She spoke before Impa could voice another thought.

"If…it is physical…do you think the stages would be also?"

"I think…" Copying Zelda's frown, Impa sought words. "I think it would, in a manner of speaking. It's similar to physical and mental maturation. You have stages of life. Childhood, adolescence, and various stages of adulthood. Why would the bond be categorized any differently? Living is a state-you either do or don't.

"I think…the bond is the same. There is either a bond or there isn't. It develops the same way a person does. Over time. Quickly, slowly, logically, irrationally…doesn't matter. But it does develop. So…yes, I suppose my answer is 'yes'."

"Do you think they would be…dependent on life events, like physical growth is?"

The lack of eye contact was far more telling than her even tone.

"Zelda," came the quiet inquiry, "is something bothering you?"

Taking a deep breath, she freed the letter and laid it upon the desk before she could doubt herself. "I received this today. I…it…it made me think. A lot. About different things. So did recent events."

Slowly, she moved her gaze from the other woman to the letter. With loose fingers, she lifted it. Each word made her eyes slow, until her racing thoughts focused only on the words themselves. The second time she read it, it began to make sense.

After the fourth, she realized the ink would not change. Equal care was used to rest it upon the desk once more.
At a loss for words, she stared at her mate. So many implications, so many worries. How did one sort such thoughts into a coherent order?

"I want to try," came the nearly silent words which broke her thoughts.

Startled, she blinked several times.

What a vague statement.

"I...I w-want to try." Zelda's voice lowered further as she glanced at her hands. "When...we're married. I want to try. Having sex."

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
BN: Sun and Moon- Two Steps from Hell
Chapter Fifty-One

Preparations

Numerous responses darted through her mind, and each was summarily discarded.

Diplomacy eventually took control of her errant thoughts, calming her frantic heart with a simple solution.

"All right. We…can try, if that is your desire," she said after a long pause. "Why the sudden change?"

Knowing she was mimicking Eldric's infuriating "professional" tone, she found it hard to care.

Answers were needed before such an agreement could be understood.

"I…I don't…I don't want this to…to rule me…forever," came the halting response.

"Is this about what I-"

"No."

Zelda never lifted her eyes from her hands as she shook her head. Carefully, with measured movements, she clasped her hands.

She knew Impa wasn't fooled. More than likely she didn't believe her.

But…she had spoken the truth. She did want to try.

Someday.

Eventually.

Not in the immediate future.

What in Hylia's name had she just requested?

Ah, yes, to "try" and have sex on their wedding night.

Was there anything more pathetic?

And could the ground swallow her chair now?

One of Midna's twilight portals would be really useful…

"Zelda, I can see you starting to panic. Please…calm down. There is no date set, nothing is written in blood-"

"That's actually very messy. I wouldn't recommend trying. Especially if you're the one giving the blood."
"-or etched in stone. You gave a statement, which was a request. I agreed. That's it. It's-

"It seems like a lot more than that."

"-not a promise or anything binding. We're two rational adults having a conversation."

Impa raised an eyebrow as Zelda opened her mouth to interject once more.

Only to close it.

And grimace sheepishly.

"Was I acting that childish?"

"Not childish. More…"

"Irrational."

"Yes."

"Sorry."

"Zelda…I love you. Dearly and desperately. But sometimes…you need to let everything go and live in the moment. There are no consequences for any part of our conversations. Worry about the future when the future gets here. I'm not saying ignore the past…but don't dwell on it. Don't let it define you."

"Do you think I've been?"

"Yes. Not intentionally…but yes. You said as much the other day."

"I did, didn't I?"

Silence reined once more as both women considered the last few days.

[ - ]

"How are things going at home?"

Always "at home", never "the castle".

Then, how could he expect different? The castle was his home, had been since he was a boy.

"Well," came Shad's response after a moment's thought. "Everyone is starting preparations."

"For the wedding."

A statement, not a question. The quiet tone revealed more than the words. Blue eyes held a sad smile.

"No one told you?"

"No," Link said softly, "And I didn't expect them to. The…the staff, they talk. We can read the paper. I'm sure you…remember how it was. Hearing things days too late."

"I do. I'm sorry I didn't mention it. I…I thought she would have told you, when she came..."
"She mentioned visiting?"

Shock laced his words and expression as blue eyes met brown once more.

"No," came the guilty admission, "The Resistance is still in contact with one another, and a few of us met within the castle. I overheard Mikal and one of the Sheikah speaking of it."

Nodding, Link turned away.

Did he expect no less?

"Why are you here?"

"B-because I love you. I'm not…not ashamed of that," Shad said after a moment's hesitation. "I was here too, remember? My father…visited me, when he was allowed. I didn't know I could come, until Zelda did."

"Did…you not want me here?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." Tremulous, choking emotions wrapped around his heart and stole air from his lungs. His throat closed as the room around them became a watery blur. "I…I don't know what I want. I can't stop thinking about what I did. To you. To her. To all of them. At the time, it felt…right. It…made sense. But now, I know it's not. It didn't."

"Link, it's not-"

"It is my fault, and you know it. I made the choice to use rather than stay clean. I made the choice to ignore the help offered. I made the choice to abuse you."

His voice cracked as his composure fell. Agony riddled his body as he shook, sobs tearing themselves from him without mercy.

"For years, I wa-watched as he b-broke her. I helped her…live a-another day. Ju-just be-because I did-didn't rape you do-doesn't mean I didn't abuse you."

Long arms wrapped tightly around him as he squeezed his eyes closed. Fighting the memories of his own voice, of his own hands, he struggled to breathe past it all.

"I love you."

He came undone.

Whimpers mixed with his sobs as the wolf within him grieved.

"I forgive you."

There was no thought other than the shattering of his already broken heart.

"I support you."

His soul cried for the acceptance he was given, even as it spoke of his unworthiness.

"I want to go home," came the moaned words minutes later. "I want…to go home…"

Lips trembling, fresh tears of lost family, of lost love, spilled free.
For the first time in many years, the beaten, feverish child cried for what could never be. For what had been stolen that fateful day he was sent to fetch medicine.

[-]

Running a hand through his already tangled hair, Mikal forced himself to take several deep breaths. It made nary a difference seconds later as he lifted his eyes to stare at a portrait rarely seen. The late king had sent it to storage less than a month after the current queen's birth, and none had the heart to bring it to her attention.

It was not the official portrait which had been shrouded in black mourning cloth until the late monarch's death. That one had been burned, as per his private request, so as to spare his daughter the pain of its existence. No, this one was not the now-ash portrait of their stately persons in wedding attire, perched gracefully atop some cushioned surface.

No, this was the portrait captured from memory. Nayru rest their souls, but the emotion shone from their eyes as the king swept his new wife across the empty ballroom floor. The skirt of her gown melded with his cape, connecting the two of them as surely as their gazes.

They had not loved, not then. Possibly not even held adoration. But...he knew, as the entire court had, that the king and his new queen had felt affection for one another. Even then, on their wedding day when they so barely knew one another, it had been clear.

To everyone except themselves.

And now, here he was again, caught up in planning a wedding not his own. Neither party wanted the fanfare, yet both had resigned themselves to the trappings of their stations.

How clear it was, to see history replay before him. Decades older and wiser of his position, even he could not manage the sheer stress of such an endeavor.

Two Sages marrying, in their own right, would be an event for national celebration. Yet add the complexity of a secretive tribe, divine birthrights, a monarchy in which no new titles would be granted, two women, and a rather painful war just years previous...and it became clear why planning this wedding was a nightmare.

And why he was a damned fool for offering to help. He should have left it to them and the coordinators.

Bugger his soft, romantic heart.

He couldn't help but want this day to bring them nothing but happiness. For one day, he wanted them to be able to hold their heads high from the strength of their love.

Yet, how was such a thing possible? When one bride's contributions were minimal but strict, and the other's was steeped in tradition? How did he coax them to tell their desires, rather than what their individual societies had told them would be?

The agony upon his queen's face when she'd looked away, saying she would not wear her mother's white gown, had nearly brought him to tears. His comrade's indifference was all but cold when she'd told him to ask her grandmother about the vows.

His stomach still dropped at the thought.

So independent were they, in their own ways, that they did not even recognize the resignation they
had consigned themselves to.

And damn it all, he would not see the woman he considered a sister and the woman he considered a daughter fake their way through a farce of a ceremony.

His own wedding had been simple. It was more about the legal formalities than the celebration, but it had been what they’d wanted.

Gazing at the portrait once more, he stared at the faces long after they blurred. Beseeching, he could only whisper to whoever would listen that there be a way.

[-]

And so there was, though it came from the unlikeliest of sources. It was not faithful, though overburdened Mikal. Having put far too much pressure on himself, he began to crumble.

Thankfully, Malon was there to pick up the pieces.

It was not Impaz or her family. Their silence was expected, by Impa and all others. They would contribute when asked, but it was not their wedding.

Nor was it Shad, with his simple yet sensical tastes.

It was not even Navi nor Midna. Despite their physical distance, both well understood the headache of planning a royal wedding. Though their support helped, even they could not offer the simple advice needed.

Instead, it came one day as the brides in question were retrieving new summer cloaks from Lywel.

As she had wrapped their early season wear, she had taken in their drawn expressions. Both had avoided looking in any direction near the formal attire, telling the elder seamstress all she needed to know.

When she took the rupees from them and was holding out the receipt, she had merely smiled. "You both are simple ladies. I hope your tastes continue to be reflected in the coming months, rather than be swept up the latest fashions."

Both had looked at her with confusion and cynical skepticism. They knew what her words alluded to, even if they did not understand them.

And yet days later, when Impa threw a book of calligraphy into the fire only hours after Zelda walked away from the primary planner, did they both understand.

It was a day for them.

Then, and only then, did they recline against Zelda's headboard. While Garo licking their exposed toes brought out their chuckles, they made a list. Of their dreams, of their hopes, of their refusals and disgusts. They wrote out what they wanted most from the day, and how they would like it to occur.

The next day, they presented it to the assembled coordinators (during which Mikal was absent, for his own peace of mind, according to Shad) and stood firm behind it.

Each man and woman had time to look it over, and after nearly thirty minutes, each had breathed a sigh of relief.
"This…makes things so much easier," one had said with a bright smile. "Why didn't you do this when we first asked?"

They'd asked for a list?
…when was that?
Ahh…during the first few meetings?
Oops…
[-]

After all of this, all the frustration, all the tears, they now found themselves lazing in her garden. Feet plunged into the gentle, circular stream, they leant back on their elbows and watched the clouds pass overhead.

Ignoring the guards posted in the outer courtyard (how often had Link snuck past them?) and the windows behind them (thankfully no longer an official meeting room), they simply…were. It was not an effective way to rule a country or run the nation's security, but even they needed time to simply be.

Or so they and their family said.

Everyone else was summarily ignored.

"Do you think Navi and Midna will come?"

"I think they would ignore us entirely if we didn't invite them."

"I sent an invitation."

Smiling at the petulant tone, Impa chuckled and twined her fingers in Zelda's loose hair.

"They'll come. Though I doubt they'll tear the invitation into bits."

A faint blush marked the Hylian's cheeks as she recalled her actions. "I was…"

"Hurting," her Sheikah counterpart supplied quietly. "There's no shame in admitting it."

"At least our priests are foolish enough to start an international 'incident'."

"Some of them are."

"Then they won't attend. …who is invited anyway?"

"Officially? Everyone we discussed. Unofficially? Whoever can navigate past the guards."

"…are you sure we can't elope?"

There was a hesitation before Impa looked at Zelda through hooded eyes.

"Would you prefer to elope?" she asked quietly. "Or a…smaller ceremony?"

"I don't know," came the whispered response.

"Our wedding is just that, my love…ours. I want you to enjoy the day, not dread it because it's a
"public spectacle."

"What about you?"

"What?"

Laying on her back, Zelda met Impa's eyes, saddened by the confusion she saw there.

"We discussed what we wanted. But…what sort of ceremony do you want?"

It took a moment for the Sheikah woman to answer. The briefest of emotions crossed her face before she laughed, smiling with genuine amusement.

"Zelda…this is a Hylian tradition. In the ways of Sheikah, we are mated already. Married. I told you this, remember?"

"There is normally a public declaration and a blessing, but Sheikah are either bonded or they aren't. Mated or not. It doesn't require a ceremony, officiates or papers. The public displays are more for everyone's enjoyment, for our entire tribe to acknowledge them."

Green eyes could only blink as the new information was absorbed and processed.

"Oh," was her eventual response.

Chuckling once more, Impa lay on her side and watched the younger woman. There were days she displayed a flawless embodiment of the Sheikah she had been adopted as.

And then others, the Hylian birth shone through with startling clarity.

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, she hummed softly. "I want your people to recognize our bond, our relationship. Would I prefer a small, quiet ceremony? Yes. But I accepted a while ago it wouldn't be possible. We are both Sages, and you are Queen. We are...public figures, because of who we are. While we may not like it, we know they need this as much as we want it."

"That doesn't mean our wedding is for the country," she continued when she saw those beautiful gray-green eyes flash with protest. "It's our day. We are simply kind enough to let them see our love and joy displayed in a manner they will understand," she added in a conceited tone.

Zelda's laughter was music to her ears.

"That sounds repeated, Impa!"

"Because it is," Impa admitted without shame. "Grandmother is a very wise woman."

"You were whining, weren't you?"

"For several hours in fact."

When Zelda hugged her, laughing so hard tears sprung in her eyes, Impa could only join her.

Sometimes you needed to laugh at yourself. To remember that life was not to be taken seriously.

That there was more to living than work.

More than pain and healing.
Their laughter turned to shrieks of horrified amusement as Garo instantly jumped atop them. Soaking wet from wandering the waterways in the garden and adjacent courtyard, he burrowed between them without hesitation or shame.

Licking them both with obvious joy, he rubbed against them.

Better to spread his scent.

And dry his fur, short though it was.

Yipping when one of them pushed him away, he nipped at the waving hand and crouched low. Tail wagging and tongue lolling out, he barked.

Sharing a smile, they both laughed again before reaching for the growing mutt.

The posted guards, Sheikah and Hylian alike, smiled as the sounds of play filled the area.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Break Free by Ariana Grande
The Price of Freedom

Chapter Fifty-Two

The Price of Freedom

The grass under their feet was lush, green with new life. Where broken weapons had once littered the land, now only wildflowers dotted the fertile ground. Rivers of blood had long ago been washed away by the changing seasons. Little creatures scampered underfoot, hiding within the cleared minefield.

They watched with small smiles as Garo chased them all. He darted through the growing plants only to begin jumping around like a rabbit, seeking new prey.

"I've missed this. Walking. Going where I want. Having the freedom to choose what I do."

"You're almost done, aren't you?"

"A few more weeks. I'm...not sure what will happen after that."

Blue eyes met green as they stilled. A gentle wind blew around them, stirring the tall grass until seeds clung to their clothes.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't...belong. Not there, not anymore."

Delicate cotton met heavy muslin. "Link, what happened...the castle is still your home."

Quiet words from a strong woman told him more than he would admit. Barely resisting the urge to pull her braid (how long had it been since he'd displayed such childish affection?), he smiled weakly.

"Zelda...I'm not sure I can live there. Shad has forgiven me, but to live in the same rooms...the same building where I nearly destroyed our family...I don't know if I can do it," he whispered. "I am ashamed and guilty and angry at myself. But...even that doesn't hold a torch to everyone else.

"Impa wants me dead, and I don't blame her. She and the other Sheikah will take any excuse I give them. Impaz is probably the only one of the group who will talk to me. Mikal still looks at me with pain on his face, like he doesn't really trust me...doesn't know me. The staff probably knows the truth by now, and they were half-afraid of me already."

Though unseen, both knew their companions were near. Rarely had they been left alone outside of the castle over the years since she had found him. And never since the day he took upon himself a despot's mantle.

It was disheartening in many ways, yet...also inspiring of an odd security. To know there were those who would watch, who would keep them in check lest their divine magics and political stations cloud their judgment, was a relief. Having seen what such deficiencies in balance could do, even their lack of privacy could not override the necessity.
And yet, so too was it a warning, one they minded yet often did not want to consider. What would happen to them if they took the same path was something they could never forget.

Just as they could never forget their chosen paths, so too could they not forget their shared past. When she'd met him outside the hospital, hand raised to shield her from the late morning sun and speculative onlookers, there had been no plan in mind. A walk, yes, and certainly a discussion—or several.

They'd navigated the manicured lands with ease before starting down a road leading towards the marketplace. Quiet, idle conversation had flowed between them. As much for their own sake as for appearances, there had been no evidence of strain in their words or stance.

Only the distance between them, the way she barely stood within his reach, could have told anyone the truth. When he could just meet her eyes, and only for a mere second, those who knew them would have understood. It wasn't until they'd left the crowded streets, with its memories and gleaming repairs, that their masks had begun to crack.

It had started with his congratulations. A soft, sincere token of affection for one he'd once called sister. They had both grimaced at his acknowledgement, though for different reasons.

In an attempt to ignore her guilt for silence, her shame for deception, she had also struggled to fight the anger which had blazed through her.

Without thought, she had told him of Daltus, of the "miscommunication" which had occurred. It had been pride, rather than compassion, which kept the scorn and spite from her voice.

The irritation which rose within him, so long his habitual response, was quickly neutralized. He focused on the words of his therapists and doctors, of his fellow inmates (ok, patients). There was no hissing, menacing whisper within the back of his mind to spur him on.

But even then, he had to ask if he'd already done something to annoy her.

She'd apologized, though he did not. He'd done nothing wrong. He told her of how Shad had brought his father during his last visit, how odd it had been, how off he had felt. So rarely did he see the other man to begin with, it was seemed….shameful for their meeting to take place in a hospital.

There was little true judgment between them as they had traded stories. When she pulled an apple from her knapsack and sliced with a dagger, the dripping fruit hanging from the tip in offer, he merely nodded his thanks. Theirs was a strained relationship, one born of childhood friendship and nearly destroyed by adolescent traumas.

Yet even with the tension, with the strain of words unspoken and the careful dance of non-contact, there was a…a freedom between them which hadn't existed for several years.

Far more than either wanted to look at.

And as they walked, neatly avoiding nature's obstacles as well as their shared demons, they sometimes lapsed into silence.

It was one such silence which met his admission. She would not argue the truth of his words, nor would she give false platitudes. Her staff had become frightened of him as the years wore on. First by the whispered tales of his adventures, then of the change in his gentle, caring demeanor.

She pulled at the fingers of her gloves, heart thrumming a quick tempo as her thoughts raced.
Swallowing her worry and anxiety, she spun to face him. Her fingers brushed his throat, skimming the invisible lines of near beheading.

How often had she done the same, her fingers covered in thick potions and shimmering magic rather than delicate cloth? How many times had he stared at her with tear-filled eyes, trembling with pain he dared not voice lest they be discovered?

Too often, was the silent confession deep within her mind. Far too often to ignore and pretend never existed.

Her hand fell, her fingers twining moments later. "Hello there," she whispered as she held his shocked, agonized gaze. "My name is Zelda. I…hope we can be friends."

His breath caught. Time became a dizzying vortex within his mind. Shattered, screaming memories of days gone by collided with the brutal, scorching truth of present indecision.

It was not a blank slate, he knew. There was too much history between them, too many nights of blood and screams. Even now, as she waited for his answer, his shame would not let him forget.

Would not let him pretend.

"Hello, Zelda," he said in the same quiet tone. "I'm Link." His voice cracked as the world fractured into watery blurs of color. "I would…really like to be your friend."

[-]

If the price of ignorance was innocence lost, what was the price of freedom?

Turning from his desk, from the texts and charts scattered across the vast surface, Eldric pressed his ink-stained hands to his face. Heels digging into his aching eyes, he sighed roughly when white fire danced through the darkness. Enjoying the neurological fireworks, he leant his head against the window.

The muffled sounds of soldiers and workman drifted through the heavy glass, bringing a smile to his weary expression.

And yet, he could not stop his thoughts from slipping. From returning to the young woman he'd come to consider a daughter as much as a friend. She had never been "just" a patient, though it had long since been for reasons other than her nobility.

As his hands slipped from his eyes, he couldn't help but wonder…what would Their Majesties think of their daughter now? Would they feel pride at her strength, sorrow at her pain…joy at the love she had found?

Nay, mayhap it was best to leave such thoughts alone. Their Majesties, Goddesses bless their souls, were dead. It would do him no good to think of "what if".

Was it wrong, he wondered as he pushed away from the wall, to want peace for them all? For the ones who still suffered?

Even years later, even with the donations and volunteers, there was still poverty, hunger, death. There were still children doing an adult's job, to support their family. There were still families torn apart in face of their struggles.

The citizens, for all their equality on paper, lived within a caste system. Nobility may have ceased
with the late queen's death, but poverty had not.

There were still soldiers who needed help, and who died slowly inside even when it was received. There were those who were forever trapped in the agonizing, bloody madness of war and would never again see the light of day.

Was it wrong to want happiness, for everyone to live in the peace so many had died for?

Across the city and into the empty fields, it was a question two unlikely warriors were asking themselves.

Step by step, their mindless path took them through the Province. Mutual silence hung between them as they become lost in their own thoughts.

And yet, even their individual recollections could not stop the shared knowledge which froze them in place.

As one, they stared at the innocent patch of earth. Save grass and flowers, there was nothing which marked it as special. It was like any other spot of land within Hyrule.

And yet…it wasn't.

Time fell away, spiraling them backwards. The warm sun hid behind black clouds, the bright sky torn apart by virile lightning.

Her hands clenched, her muscles quivering at the feel of hot blood against her skin.

"You did it, Zelda," he whispered softly. "You killed him."

Her fingers uncurled as her hand rose to cover her mouth. A wave of numbness raced across her skin, leaving her floating within her own body.

The world around her blurred as disgusting, traitorous tears burned her eyes. Angrily, she swiped at them, muttering to herself.

"You killed him, Zelda…and he can't hurt anyone anymore."

"Yes he can! He hur-hurts us…inside!" She shuddered, swallowing another hitch of her breath. Sheer will kept everything safe, kept those foul emotions far from her heart.

Until he hugged her.

She tensed, making a sound of fearful protest despite herself. He remained still, his arms loose and yielding if she wanted to bolt.

"You killed him," he repeated again. "I've had a…lot of time…and a lot of help to…think. A lot of what we did…still doesn't make sense. Not the war, not the Sages, not the journeys and battles. Definitely not us. But…but I can see something, you know?

"Now, I can look back and see that…it wasn't really our fault. We didn't ask for the Triforce, and we didn't ask for the adults to have us fight their battles.

"But…most of all…we didn't ask for him to target us." He swallowed hard, never looking away from the fertile land.

"He…the war, his mission, the magics and legends and all of it…it defined us for a long, long time.
We lost ourselves in it. We were \textit{kids}, Zelda. Kids when this all really started, and way too young when we were told to sacrifice ourselves for our brethren and country.

"We did what we had to do. They told us where - and \textit{when} - to go. We never really had a chance to grow up. If we weren't traveling the land, we were fighting or training or learning.

"And…" he trailed off for a moment. His voice wavered as he whispered a truth so secret, so shameful, it took his therapist pointing it out to make him acknowledge it.

"And sometimes I miss it. Because \textit{then} I knew what I was doing. I knew the world around me and how to live in it. This new world, this lack of war… I don't understand it. It's supposed to be 'peaceful'. So…why does it hurt more than any battle wound?"

A ragged sob tore itself from her throat.

"And…and I think in some way, we all miss it. The soldiers, you know? Not the fighting. Not the screams. Not the hard decisions. But…the certainty. Being able to say 'this is what I'm doing, this is who I listen to'. It was easier, in a way…because we never really had to make a choice. We just…had to follow orders."

He lowered himself to one knee as hers gave out. Her arms wrapped around her stomach, her head bowing as she shook. Keeping his hold loose, he lowered his voice further.

"I know you hate him. You always did. And I know you're still afraid of him, even though you killed him. It's…it's okay, Zelda. I'm still afraid too. Because even though he's dead - even though the bosses and minions are dead - they never really leave us, do they? The memories still exist. \textit{Evil} still exists. We know that someone…has it in them to do the exact same thing.

"And that's okay. We can be afraid. We can…be afraid together. We used to stand together in front of the demons, Zel. What happened?" His voice cracked as his own eyes burned, the little boy within him still so very scared and confused. "Why did we stop trusting each other? Why did we start fighting each other, instead of the others?"

She made a sound deep within her chest, unable to voice what tore through her. Grief, rage, pain, love, hope, fear…and so much more.

She felt him pull away and shivered at the sudden lack of heat. Desperate, needing to offer comfort as much as accept it, she grasped his hand.

Not a hug, no, and surely not an embrace.

But it was contact, one they both so desperately needed.

No words were needed as he squeezed her hand with equal strength. Their spirits brushed, the links between them opening for a bare moment.

How horrifying it was, to know that their paths had become so deeply entwined they could never be separated. A parody of health and growth, their adolescence had been heralded in blood.

Their transition into adulthood had been precluded by violence.

And now, when they should be rebuilding their lives and moving forward, they could only stare at the past.

Sometimes, though…what came before held all the answers to what should come after.
At least, that's what Reyel told himself.

He watched his tribe sister wander the castle. At times, she would settle with one person or another for a little while, deep in discussion. Yet as the day progressed, the time between these conversations lengthened.

A shade hiding from the sunlight, she was restless within the grand structure. Her eyes sought windows and doors continuously, though never once did she step towards them.

It reminded him of years past. The more immediate memories were of war, of the times when Zelda would train without her Guardian. Of times when, unbeknownst to them, she may not have been in the castle at all.

But also of times further gone, with none but their tribe as witnesses. Years during their own childhood and adolescence, when their elders would leave…and not return.

It happened far too often, even if they were not Guarding the monarchy.

Sometimes, even the answers one sought were not worth the price of pain. There could be no freedom from a one's own history.

With a tired sigh, he returned his thoughts to the present. Leaving her to stare at the tapestries, he made his way to their shared office.

It was times like these when the weight of his family and their combined duties made him wonder how their youngest tribe female endured it. They protected her, and by extension, those around her. They provided advice when asked…and sometimes when not. Yet for all their meetings with the spymaster and military officers, they were not in charge.

She was. And he couldn't figure out how she - how any of her family - did it. Everything about the nation passed over her desk at some point, and every decision regarding it had to be approved. Even delegation could lessen her burden, as her delegates would surely seek her out.

It left a bad taste in his mouth, truth be told. Politics always had.

Unfortunately, someone had to do it. Civilization could not exist otherwise.

"Reyel."

Turning from the door, he smiled despite his dour mood. "Grandmother."

He met Impaz's eyes and felt his smile fall away. She was, and never had been, fooled. She was far too wise a female - never mind a Sheikah - to fall for such tricks.

And…mothers always knew.

It was damned scary sometimes, even for the Living Shadows.

She chuckled, reading his face as clearly as she always had. Poor boy…he never had learned how to lie to his mother properly. Somehow, that included her too.

She walked into the office without another word and took his chair.

"Reyel," she repeated in her soft tone. "What is the price of freedom?"
He sunk into the chair across from her, considering the question.

"If the price of ignorance is pain, the price of freedom is…truth. Awareness."

He drew in a shuddering breath and let it out just as roughly. Leaning into the hard wooden chair, he met her eyes once more. Words danced between them, unspoken memories of years shared.

"Freedom is inherent…but when taken, it must be regained. It is the innocent who suffer."

She nodded then, turning to watch the oil lamp several feet above her head.

"Freedom is never free," she said softly.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Mystline by Nujabes
Countdown

Chapter Fifty-Three

Countdown

Days turned into weeks. Time became a blur as ideas gave way to solid plans. A tentative date became solid, calendars marked across the land.

And through all the chaos, life continued on with its mysterious pattern.

Goddess help them all.

[–]

Mrs. Lumoran,

You expressed the need to write from the heart. Like yourself, it took several tries before I acknowledged defeat. Can we truly plan such a conversation? For there is a difference between a letter and a conversation.

I hesitate to commit my words—myself, by way of expression—to parchment. I value my privacy, and know how simple it is to intercept a parcel. Yet for the sake of honesty and trust, I will try.

Betrayal comes in many forms. Unfortunately, it is often perpetrated by those who can wield the deadliest blows.

I find myself wanting to ask many questions. Most of these are unbefitting an informal acquaintance.

I will settle for one, however, which may be as philosophical as personal. However do you find the courage to speak of your worries and dreams?

The warmest of regards,

Zelda Nohansen

[–]

"Is it ready?"

"I don't understand why-"

"Is. It. Ready?"

"Yes! For Fathers' sake and the Mothers' too, the menu is ready! Honestly Mikal, you're not even a coordinator for the wedding. Why don't you go back to advising the Queen and let us keep track of the preparations, hm?"

"I would, gladly- if I didn't have everyone breathing down my neck."

"Well…you are her chosen advisor. Who else is she supposed to speak with?"

"I don't know, Jean- you?!!"
"Mikal?"

"Malon, what are you doing here?"

"We were…supposed to meet for lunch with my uncle, remember. An hour ago…?"

Neither woman said a word as Mikal closed his eyes, whispered curses falling from his chapped lips.

[-]

Shrieks of outrage echoed through the corridors, unintelligible words swelling in their wake. Some swore it was a demon, a beast sent from the darkest abyss. It was an omen, they said.

Torna merely stared at the soot and flour covered creature. Shaking his head, he sighed and crouched to the floor.

"Garo, you know to stay out of the kitchen."

Licking the night-smeller's hand, Garo whined softly. His ears hurt and he'd smashed into something hard while trying to escape the screaming two-leggers.

He'd just wanted the bone!

Wondering if this was how Impa felt regarding Link and Zelda's misadventures, he lifted the filthy mutt with a grimace.

"Bath, first…then we'll see what the Queen wants to do with you."

Ears flattened, he slumped against the male's arms.

This so was not fair.

[-]

"Shad? What are you doing here?"

"Coming to take you home, what else?"

"I…I'm not welcome there," came the soft admission. With faltering steps, Link moved from the hospital doors towards the waiting man.

Shaking his head, Shad drew the other man into a crushing hug. Tears burned his eyes, his mind a chaotic sea of emotion.

"Yes, you are."

"No one-"

"I want you there. Mikal wants you back. Don't we count?"

"It's not your castle though," he murmured in reply, his face buried in Shad's neck.

Stroking Link's back, he sighed softly. "You said she told you it was your home. And when I discussed it with them, no one objected."
"She hates me."

"She loves you, you stubborn fool. Just as you love her. You both made some mistakes, but…that
doesn't change. Don't you have some sort of connection with the Triforce?"

"..yes…"

"And what does it say?"

"I don't know," came the breathless, whispered reply. "I haven't…haven't felt it…in ages."

Kissing the other man's cool cheek, Shad pulled away and took his hand. "Come. Let's…head that
direction at least. One step at a time, hm?"

Nodding, Link squeezed Shad's hand in his and drew a deep breath. With one last glance at the
hospital, he headed for the gates.

It was time to move forward.

[-]

Mikal drew a deep breath and closed the door behind him. Only when his back met wood did he let
the ragged exhale leave him.

Tears burned his eyes as he bowed his head, whispering half-thought prayers.

His son was home.

He was home.

It would be a long journey for them all.

But for now…

His son was home, physically and mentally. And that…that was enough.

[‐]

"Eldric? Do you have a moment?"

With a startled yelp, Eldric turned hastily to face his visitor. A groan escaped him as he collided
with the storage cabinet, his head spinning.

"Impa…please knock…" he begged with another groan. One hand to his head, he walked the few
steps to his chair and sunk into it gratefully.

She bit her lip, swallowing the childish need to smile and fidget. "I'm sorry, it wasn't my intention
to scare you."

"And yet somehow you always do." With a final rub of his head, he sighed and gestured. "Close
the door and sit down. I doubt you came to stare at me."

"No," she said quietly. "I came to ask you something."

"So ask," he said without pause as she paced the small office.

"I…a sword, Eldric? How would anyone survive?"
A moment of shock flickered through him, only to give way to wary suspicion.

He’d expected her to seek him out a while ago. But…

"Are you…doubting her word?"

The question – the accusation – hung between them. He watched her eyes widen, horror and pain covering her face.

"No!"

"Because I assure you-"

She raised a hand, stalling his quick, vehement reply. "No, Healer, I am not doubting her. Do not put words in my mouth! I believe everything I’ve heard to be true…I know it is."

He sat once more, ruffled with protective anger. Gulping air, he shook his head, knowing such emotion would only cause further problems.

He wouldn't apologize, however.

Far too many people had questioned him on the matter already.

"I don't understand your question, then."

"She said he…abused her with his sword." Her haunted gaze met his, echos of another's memories shredding her heart. "How can she live?"

"Impa," he said softly, sadness weighing his shoulders until they slumped.

That had been a long night…a very long night, one which still plagued him to this day.

"No one said he used the blade of his sword."

Hesitant comprehension made its way across her vulnerable features, laying bare the quivering spirit.

"The blood loss…?" came her eventual question, her numb lips barely forming the words.

She sipped air, dreading the response she already expected.

"Zelda has endured many horrors, Guardian Impa," he said at last. Unaware he'd bowed his head or closed his eyes, he met her pleading expression.

"Allow her this solace, will you? The choice of when and what to tell you…on her terms. Don't seek answers neither of you are ready for.

"Please, for both your sakes, let her – your Charge, your fiancé – make the choice to share. There are so few choices she has left…respect this one, please.

"It's the best gift you could ever give her. The honor of choice."

[-]

"Malon! Come for a visit, my dear?"

"I came to check on Epona, uncle. She's been…lonely since Link left."
"He's returned you know. Almost a week now. Malon…Malon, where are you going?"

"To strangle him for not telling me he was back! Stubborn brat, I swear Navi was…"

The squawking of various animals, followed by the slamming of the barn door, made Kaneil shake his head and chuckle.

Poor boy wouldn't know what hit him.

[-]

"Torna? Is everything all right?"

Apprehension coated her words like the dawn's mist. Only when the latch clicked, the door securely shut, did he turn to her.

He was only an inch or so shorter than Impa, and thinner too. Out of all of the Sheikah, Torna was the one she knew the least about. He was quiet, and nearly as adept at hiding as her Guardian.

It was…disconcerting to see him standing before the closed doors, staring at her with hooded eyes.

"Torna…?"

He blinked, shaking his head before bowing it ever so slightly. His voice was softer than most of his brethren, though it carried to her well enough. "My apologies, Zelda…little sister. I didn't mean to frighten you."

She nodded, reclining in her chair as he neared.

The Sheikah were family, had been with her when she'd hid from even Impa…but there were simply some reflexes she could not repress.

She met his eyes, defying the fear with threatened to consume her.

She could do this.

One day at a time.

"We…thought you might appreciate this," he said in that same quiet tone. A mixture of compassion and familial love painted his voice as he crouched beside her.

He knew, just as many of them did, the horrors which had occurred in this office…this castle. The pains which had ripped the two teenagers to shreds.

Not to mention what had occurred outside.

It hurt them, to watch and be unable to help. She did not want it, not from them.

But this…this they could give her. Could give both of them.

Hands extended, he glanced the folded cloth resting on his palms.

How innocent a few yards of colored thread could be…

"What…is it?" she asked. Confused by his behavior, by the gestures itself, she looked between the giver and gift.
Without a word, he pinched the fabric and shook it, the ends trailing on the floor.

It took her several heartbeats before the breath caught in her throat.

"It's...she's one of them...she's one of them...Impa, she-she-"

"You...you all..." Choked, words failed her.

He smiled. Not a lightening of his eyes or the briefest turn of lips most of the Sheikah gave, but a full smile.

"We are tribe, little sister. If we can relieve you of one last nightmare, soothe a single tear in your heart...we will try."

With a shaking hand, she took the proffered veil.

And promptly ripped it apart.

[-]

*Your Majesty,*

I must disagree – letters are a form of conversation in the fact that they are communication. They are not, however, bound to the normal rules of conversation. Time and distance gives retrospective clarification to each word.

As for finding the courage to speak...I'm not really the right person to ask. It's equal parts necessity, determination, fright and lack of forethought in my experience. Most of the personal truths I've spoken, those hidden dreams and fears I've told my husband, have been outbursts rather than deliberate choices. I simply...spoke.

*In turn, if I may, I have a question of equal measure. How is love defined?*

*Sincerely,*

*Katherine L.*

*Post-scriptum: Please call me Katherine.*

[-]

"Midna. Midna!"

"In here, Navi. There's no reason to yell."

Ignoring her wife's annoyed tone, she laid the smoothed parchment across whatever report was open.

"I was reading—what's this? Does that say what I think it does?"

"That we've been asked to attend the various 'showers' of Impa and Zelda? Yes."

Equal parts shocked and bemused, they stared at one another before bursting into laughter.

Who'd conned those two into bridal showers?

Silver rupee said it was Link…
"I didn't have anything to do with it!"

"...do you have a guilty conscience already?"

Bemused, Zelda raised an eyebrow at Link's childish expression.

"You looked angry!" he defended with a sputtered reply.

"Angry? More...confused. Why in all that is holy did you invite Ilia to my bridal shower?"

"I didn't. Why would I?" Confused, he blinked, staring at her narrowed eyes. "Honestly Zelda...my suicidal tendencies aren't that extreme."

For a moment, neither spoke. Both winced, realizing how obscene and mournfully true such a statement was.

As she rubbed her wrists, feeling the scars despite her sleeves, he ran a hand through his hair.

Awkward...

"No," he added after the silence became too much. "I didn't add her to a list or anything. You don't know her, she doesn't know you, and it wouldn't be fair to even suggest it." He shrugged. "Why is it called a 'shower' anyway? It sounds more like you're going swimming than having a night in."

Zelda's laughter coaxed his own free, their humor echoing into the corridor.
All eyes were fixed to the ornate doors, the half-muffled sound of raised voices making several wince.

The impact of something striking the door made the nearest leap back with an oath, hand to chest.

Reyel watched them, confused, amused and annoyed in equal measures.

"Are the soldiers so inadequate in their position that you all must congregate before the Queen's office?"

Faces masked with guilt turned to him, one after another. Several scampered off with hasty excuses.

His brethren shared their exasperation with a wave of subtle emotion.

"Her Majesty and Maderone Impa are arguing," Shad told him in his soft voice.

"And you all feel it necessary to eavesdrop?" he drawled, unable to resist the opening they so willingly provided.

Mikal winced. "No. We all came at different times - those of us remaining, I mean. Zelda and I were meeting when Link asked for a moment."

Link nodded, looking far too much like a child with a hand in the pudding. "I just wanted her opinion. I didn't know that Impa hadn't told her. And she hadn't told me it was a secret."

Shad mumbled under his breath, rolling his eyes.

"How was I supposed to know, Shad? Can you tell me that?"

Feeling a headache forming, Reyel started to speak only to turn away. Pressing his back to the wall, he stared at the doors as waves of anger and frustration burst into the hall. The heavy wood opened with ricocheting force, nearly slamming into the unsuspecting men as they scrambled to clear the opening.

Impa stormed past, lips twisted into a snarl. Her eyes flashed as the air around her burned, pulsing with hard-won restraint.

Sighing, he shook his head and quickly entered the office. The soldiers closed the doors behind him, his brethren no doubt replacing them moments later.

Hopefully someone went after their first sister…

He watched her skirts whip around her as she paced from one wall to another. Magic threaded her aura, visible to any with a developed Eye.
"May I ask?"

"No!"

"I will anyway."

"Go away!"

"What has she done to anger you so?"

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"Petulance won't solve anything."

She faced him then, her slate eyes burning with emotion so very recently awoken.

Anger.

Anger from *betrayal*.

Anger from ignorance and assumption.

"I am not *pouting*, Reyel," she hissed through clenched teeth. "I am *furious!*"

"What did she do?"

"I told you, I don't want to talk about it."

He sat in one of the visitor's chairs, never looking away from her. "Then I'll wait. Neither of us are going anywhere."

"And before you try to leave," he added as she stalked towards the doors. "You might want to know that they won't let us out."

She swung towards him, trembling as her fists clenched tighter still.

"You…you…"

He nodded as words failed her, acknowledging every epithet she could not find. "I'm a bastard, if not literally, and an ass. I am unworthy of your attention, and should burn for all eternity. Very well, you are allowed your views.

"The reason they will not release us, however, has nothing to do with *me*…and everything to do with *you*. You and Impa are barely restraining your tempers- and magics- as it is. No doubt you would harm one another, and any bystanders, if you were to meet.

"So for now…you will stay here, with me, until one of you is calmer."

Incensed by his calm tone, infuriated by his relaxed posture, she hurled a globe without realizing she'd lifted it.

He deflected it with ease, resting it gently on the ground with a sweep of his hand and slightest bit of magic.

"Get out!"

"Shall I repeat myself?"
"If you feel it so necessary to lock me away as if I'm an errant child, then do so. I may be able to finish some work! But I will not stay here with you!"

"I'm no threat to you, little sister," he reminded her in a softer tone, hands spread in good will.

"Stop. Placating. Me," she hissed with narrowed eyes. Fury stole her breath as annoyance clenched her teeth.

Rubbing his forehead with a sigh, he wondered what deity or ancestor he'd angered recently.

There was no other reason why he would be caught between the two of them.

It was cruel and unusual punishment.

There was simply no other explanation.

"What do you want from me?" he asked her after a long pause. Weary, he raised his head to meet her burning eyes. "You are both my family, my tribe. To see any discord within the Sheikah hurts us all. Your pain is ours, as it always has been.

"I am not placating you, little sister. I am trying to…to help you regain some fraction of rational thought." Composure tattering, he closed his eyes.

"Until the two of you won't destroy the castle in a fit of pique, you will be kept separate. Until you are calmer, few outside the tribe will be granted access to your person. There are enough rumors coursing through the land regarding this convoluted family, thank you very much.

"And for the record, since you appear to have begun to take our concern for you to be a personal slight…I would like to remind you of something."

His eyes opened once more, staring at her with the fiercest emotion she had ever seen in their red depths.

"We – the very tribe who are meant to protect you, who have adopted you as we have few others – watched for years as you and Link destroyed one another. We heeded your orders as our sovereign to keep the truth from Impa. We honored your request as our sister to do nothing. We even, in some deluded attempt to treat you like the equal and adult you claim to be, let you gallivant across the country at the whim of a madman!"

He leant forward as she winced, her shocked expression giving way to pain. Fingers digging into his knees, he became the voice of Living Shadows.

"So, Queen Zelda, let us consider the leniency you have been given as a ruler.

"You are far too skilled as magician and warrior to remain in Hylian care. The Hylian soldiers are a face, a formality to comfort the masses. The Sheikah have been your sole protectors for years. Instead of asking for your help, you shunned it. Instead of accepting our advice, you threw it in our faces. Instead of allowing us to strike, you tried to take matters into your own hands!"

"Re-"

"I'm not done yet," he snapped, having had enough. "In light of all of this, we still let you do what you wished. Every when, night after night, we watched Ganondorf's twisted games corrupt what made you you. For years we allowed Link to act in his stead, to order you as if you were a true submissive and he a dominant. We gave you the freedom you asked for. And where did it get you?
"Several places I'd rather not think about. In the Twilight realm, nearly dead. In our own world, nearly dead several times before that. Though, admittedly, not by your own hand. In a courtroom, judged by people who could never hope to understand. In this office, clinging with some misguided delusion of normalcy.

"Where it has not taken you..." he began in a quieter tone, refusing to let his words fill the halls beyond them. "Where it has not taken you, is to a place of happiness. To a place where you recognize the people who love and honor you, who trust you and can be trusted.

"So think of this before you yell at us for expressing our concern, before you look at us with such contempt and annoyance in your eyes. We aren't placating you, Zelda. We are assuring you to a truth that you can finally hear. We know why you fear us. We don't hold it against you…how could we? It's not your fault, though it may have sounded as though I said such."

"I don't fear you," she whispered as she played with her sleeves.

He smiled tiredly, understanding her tone intimately.

"No, not as people. As people I dare say you enjoy our company – possibly even like us. But the fact is that the people, the spirit and mind, are housed with male bodies. And those bodies terrify you."

"I-"

"Please don't apologize. If your sense of honor – which is far too exaggerated at times – demands some sort of recompense, tell me the truth. What did Impa do or say to make you so angry you threw a ledger at her?"

Their eyes turned as one towards the broken book lying by the door.

A shamed grin tugged at her lips before fading. Confliction had replaced her rage, leaving her more confused than anything.

"She…wanted to surprise me…"

"That's it?"

Glaring at him, at his sarcasm and mockery, she resisted the urge to throw something else.

It was days like this she could image how it would've been if she'd had a sibling.

Thank the Mothers for small mercies…

"She… She wanted them to move our rooms during our honeymoon!"

Thoughts screeching to a sudden halt, he could only stare at her. Of every horrific, embarrassing possibility which had filled his mind (and disgraceful though it was, some of them were very possible knowing Impa)…this was not one of them.

"I don't understand. The two of you nearly came to blows…because she wants to move to a different part of the castle?"

Her cheeks scorched under his gaze as she turned away, facing the window behind him.

In reply, he turned the chair, refusing to let her hide entirely.
She was far too much like the Sheikah-born in that regard. Concealment was second nature.

Part of the regal territory, maybe?

"I like our rooms now."

"Did you tell her that?"

"...yes."

"Before or after you started yelling?"

"Who said I yelled first?"

"The guilt in your voice."

A muttered "damn it" followed by a rough sigh made him smile, even as his heart threatened to crack in half.

[-]

Air escaping her in a violent hiss, she slammed the door behind her.

Shadows writhed around her, magic gathering in her hands as it flowed through her veins in undulating bursts. A stream of amethyst colored power left her hand, colliding with the wall where it dispersed against the wards. Protective runes shimmered into view for the briefest moment, their presence inflaming her rage.

She spun, deflecting the blade with a kick of her heavy boot. A sprinkle of red followed her foot, a line appearing on her leg where the rebound had grazed her.

There was no time to assess, merely react. In a room of dusk and midnight, where darkness and shadows ruled and riled, there was no light with which to see her opponent.

And so she fought her body a blur of motion across the stone floor as she deflected metal and flesh. Every distracting emotion bled into one another until there was only bitter anger.

No words escaped her as she raged, venting her emotion on whoever would enter her domain.

Struggling for the breath which escaped her, she pulled her magic inward. Shadows wrapped around her like a cloak, concealing the darkness which marked her veins.

Deep within her, the core of what made her Sheikah – of what made her Guardian and Sage – howled.

Injustice!

Ignorance!

Pettiness!
Foolishness!

A growl rattled within her chest, swallowed down by the tang of clean steel.

With a deliberate breath, she forced her mind to still – to quiet. She drew the Shadows, the darkness, and all which lived hidden within it deep into herself. Another calming breath found her thoughts drifting into a sea of Shadows, spreading across them until there was nothing but calm.

Only then did she open her eyes, unsure of when she had closed them.

Blue eyes stared at her from under blonde hair, a warrior's determination hiding a child's fear.

"You can lower your blade," she commented ever so quietly as her hand pushed against the blessed weapon.

The Master Sword found its sheath with a quiet sigh.

And still he stared.

Afraid, but as stubborn as she.

Turning away, she dug her nails into her palms, desperate to maintain her hard-won control.

Damn Zelda!

After everything, after all they had been through, after all she had put up with for the younger woman…this was how she was repaid!

The…the ungrateful brat!

"She's not, you know," she heard that infuriating threat say behind her.

By the Gods, why hadn't she killed him?

Oh yes…for Zelda.

"She's not ungrateful."

"You can read minds now?"

"No. I just hear you muttering."

"It's none of your business," she told him through clenched teeth, her ire rising.

Even knowing he was risking more than his life, he shook his head anyway.

"You're wrong," he told her quietly. The memory of years past, of when she had taught him to fight with a saint's patience and to read with a mother's understanding, gave him courage.

Funny… Nayru's Love could not hide him from the truth of Impa's hatred, nor Courage embolden him to apologize. And yet, a child's love for his mother could make him follow her as she fell apart in this hidden room.

"I didn't know it was supposed to be a surprise, and I'm sorry. But Zelda's not ungrateful, Impa. Not about the surprise, not about anything. She loves you."

She spun to face him, disgust burning her throat as she heard echoes of true wisdom– not to
mention Wisdom itself, the twice-damned relic—within his voice.

"And how do you know that?"

He met her gaze within hesitation, never flinching at the raw truth he saw there.

"Because you were too busy clinging to her words to listen."

"What is there to listen to? She'd rather stay in her adolescent domain than—"

He shook his head again, refusing to argue with her.

"Impa…I've made a lot of mistakes, and some of them I can never make up for. Don't follow my lead, ok? Listen to her…open your eyes and see what's right in front of you."

"You're a pain in my ass," she said in a clipped tone, walking around him to reach the door.

"Did you ever ask her if she wanted to move?"

Her hand frozen above the knob, her head tilted as if to catch his words.

"What?"

"The king's chambers should have been hers, right? So why didn't she move then?"

A hundred thoughts ran through her mind, a million memories flashing before her eyes.

"She said…she didn't want to."

"And you respected that."

"Of course I did," she snapped, rounding to face him. "What are you saying?"

"That you aren't listening to her," he repeated in the same quiet tone. "Zelda's words may be true, but they aren't always honest. You know that as much as I do. She has a pretty skewed sense of the world, and can talk riddles better than any Keaton I know."

Holding his gaze, she weighed his words.

Unfortunately…he was right.

"Think about that before you throw everything away."

Without another word, he pushed past her and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Post Harbor- Cities of the Interior
Nevermind the Name- Clouds
Listen (II)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Listen (II)

Garo watched from under the safety of the wood thing the two-leggers called a desk. Whatever it was, it hid him pretty good.

He did not want to be anywhere near them when they started howling again.

Not with their voices. They'd stopped that. But their scents. They burned his nose and made his skin twitch with nerves, like when a hunter was near.

They were mad and it was…a little scary.

He wasn't used to them being angry at each other.

They weren't supposed to be mad at each other.

Whining silently, he carefully lay under the desk and watched his mistress pace.

It was dark outside and both the big and little fires were low. They should be in the nest snuggling with him. Instead, Impa was-

Was not hiding in her den anymore.

Silly females. They were so angry they couldn't just admit it hurt.

He'd have to remind them what it meant to function as a pack. They'd obviously forgotten! Just because there were no tears didn't mean you didn't smell or feel them. Pack was pack. That's the way it was.

[-]

Impa crossed her arms and leant against the wall, silent as she watched Zelda move around the room. The younger woman's back was to her more often than not, her long hair plaited loosely and swinging wildly.

By the Gods she could be infuriating!

And, she admitted with the smallest twists of her lips, rather appealing. The way her gray-green eyes shone-

"Stop looking at me like that."

Oh for Din's sake!

Grinding her teeth as the waspish tone was matched by a horrid scowl, she turned to her room.

She didn't have to put up with this indignity.

Throwing books? Hurling insults? Threatening to draw her sword?
She'd had enough abuse for one day, thank you!

The door shut behind her gently, despite her temper.

What use was a concealed door if it was cracked in half?

Fuming, she threw her robe across the room and crawled into the small, cold bed. She punched the pillow and mattress, cursing all the while.

Tossing and turning, her mind spiraled around itself as the unseen moon continued to rise.

"Why on Earth what you think I'd want to move? I like my chambers!"

"Did you ever ask her if she wanted to move?"

Damn Link!

Frustrated, she threw the covers against the wall and slipped from the bedroom turned cell.

She was going to tell Zelda exactly what she thought of her tantrum, and-

She halted mid-step, the door gaping behind her. With the ember's dim light, she could see carnage before her. Clothing and bedcoverings were strewn around, the storage trunk emptied and dressing room ajar.

All done over hours, all done quietly enough it had not penetrated her thoughts.

And the bond, which had buzzed all day with their mutual frustration and anger, was quiet.

Desolation hung in the dark room, chilling the late spring night.

"Zelda?" She broke the silence, too worried to care for their argument, too filled with memories of a blood-scented dawn.

One of the shadows moved. No, correction - a figure within the shadows moved. Zelda rose from beside a balcony door, clutching what looked like cloth.

Magelight danced across the room, a gentle burst of neutral magic flittering between them like fae.

"Zelda?" she asked again, heart in her throat as she stepped forward.

"Why do we keep tokens of pain? To remind us not to make the same mistakes?"

"Or out of some morbid need to believe we could have changed things. Even you, with Time in your grasp, cannot alter everything."

"I know." A quiet sound, barely a whisper, but it carried the weight of a stadium's cheer. Of years spent wondering "maybe" and "what if"…and realizing nothing could have been changed.

"I…I'm sorry I yelled at you. And threw a book at you. I lost my temper, again, and you didn't deserve it. Again. I can't even blame Daltus this time."

She looked away to assure herself of her footing, and only then for a second. Her eyes rested on Zelda's once more, wishing she could take the pain within their shimmering depths…and knowing she couldn't.
"We're both to blame," Impa said without hesitation or prelude. "We had an argument, it happens."

"You're still angry."

"And you aren't? Right now, I am more worried than angry."

Zelda felt a sad, bitter smile twist her lips.

How much pain had she caused the older woman over the years?

Probably too much to measure…

"I'm not going to hurt myself."

"Maybe not physically."

"You're spending too much time with Mikal."

Impa chuckled softly, tiredly. She stopped then, just feet from Zelda.

The younger woman's hand rose, offering her the bundle. Now, closer and in the light, she could see that it was indeed cloth.

"Can you…burn this tomorrow? Or later today, rather? I could…" Her words faltered, choking her as her eyes slid closed to hide memories of agony and heartbreak. "I could never…find the strength."

Staring at the bundle with suspicion and fresh worry, she swallowed her reluctance and asked, "What is it?"

"Clothes," came the whisper, "The clothes of a stupid girl who thought she could handle the world, who thought it safe to sneak off for a swim."

The horror, the truth, scalded her. Disgust made her shiver even as she tore her eyes from the offensive articles, unable to release them.

"Why do you want to move, Impa?"

The hesitant, broken words made no sense at first. It was such an abrupt change.

"Move? Oh…you mean…" She exhaled a soft, slow breath. "It was a surprise, Zelda. That's all. Something I thought might make you happy. A new beginning."

There was no verbal reply, only a small nod. Green eyes never met hers, having moved away when she'd accepted the bundle.

In the dim magelight, she almost mistook Zelda's unfocused gaze as being directed towards her. But as one heartbeat led into another, she saw they were looking just slightly to the left.

Behind her.

"Zelda…was I wrong?"

"No. It- I was shocked is all."

Those haunted eyes found hers once more, the emotion within them quickly hiding beneath
desperation.

No…not desperation.

She dropped the clothing, her hand wiping against her pants without thought as she stepped closer. Slowly, she rested her other palm against the younger woman's cool cheek.

Not desperation. Desperate determination.

Denial.

"Sesha, keta…please…be truthful with me. What did I do to anger you?"

A thousand truths sprung to mind, each one more convincing than the last. And yet, she couldn't voice a single one.

Because while true…they were not honest. Not fully.

Swallowing her pride, her independence, she hugged the Sheikah female and drew a deep breath. The comforting scent of rich earth filled her lungs, soothing her aching heart.

"I don't…understand…why you want to move. Why…why…I can't help."

"You think I want to live in a hole in the wall for the rest of my years?"

"I wasn't aware our chambers were so small!"

Their own words, spoken hastily as was anger's way, echoed through their minds.

"I'm sorry, sesha," Impa whispered as Zelda's arms wrapped around her. Returning the embrace, she sighed. "It was never about you not helping. I thought you would like a change. Part of it was for new chambers, yes. But mostly it was about… About starting a new chapter in our lives. I can't really explain it. It's something that just felt…right. Something that…wasn't, apparently."

"Do you not like where we are?"

Frustrated at the inability to find words, she shook her head. "Yes. No. I love you, Zelda, and that doesn't change because of what part of the castle we live in. But we've been in these same rooms since the castle was repaired. While they were good enough during the war, these weren't designed for two adults.

"And," she added with deep breath, "while your area of the chambers is rather comfortable…mine is not. It's become…claustrophobic, to tell you the truth."

A sigh of relief escaped her. How long had she wanted to admit that?

Far, far too long, her conscience mocked her.

Silence met her admission for a long while.

"Ok," she heard Zelda finally reply, "I can understand that. Can we…talk more about it in the morning?"

Knowing the topic was being brushed off, but grateful it had been aired even a little, Impa nodded. She pulled away and began clearing the bed, feeling the exhaustion which plagued them both.
It was easy to forget how tiring emotional upheaval could be.

Only when Zelda had crawled under the covers, rumpled though they were, did she wish her happy dreams and kiss her forehead.

A hand caught her wrist as she turned to her own room.

"You can stay you know," came the drowsy admonishment as Garo curled at her feet.

Grateful for the chance to simply rest, she took her own place under the covers.

And yet, even as she drifted into sleep with an arm around Zelda's shoulders...she couldn't stop the unease which crept through her.

Something...wasn't right.

And indeed it wasn't. The morning found them straightening the room. Messy though it was, the dawn's light proved it was not as bad as it had appeared.

And so the day progressed, seemingly filled with meetings, plans and whatever tiny respite from it all they could find.

It wasn't until dinner, a solitary meal taken in Zelda's office as she hunched over last year's harvest reports and compared them to this year's request for supplies, that Impa had finally had enough.

Setting her plate aside, she watched the younger woman begin her calculations anew. "Zelda."

"Hm."

"Can you look at me?"

"I need to get this done, Impa. I'm sorry."

"It's an expense approval, not a foreign trade agreement."

"And yet, as Queen, it still requires my approval."

She plucked the quill from Zelda's fingers and closed the inkwell, ignoring the annoyance crossing her face.

"We need to talk. Unlike the others, I won't let you ignore me by hiding behind your duties."

"We did talk."

Tired and frustrated, she swallowed the first retort that sprang to mind.

This all reminded her...so very much of a day just a few years past, here in this very office.

"I'm sorry Impa. I...I need more time."

"You will tell me one day?"

"I will."

"I'm still mad at you. Furious. But I'm worried even more."

"I know. I can't tell you. I'm sorry Impa. I...I need more time."
"You will tell me one day?"

"I will."

"Please, Zelda…talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about," she mumbled, a clean pen in hand as she searched her desk for a new bottle of ink. "We talked last night."

"No, we had a semi-coherent conversation in the wee hours of the morning."

"You told me why you wanted to move. So we'll move. Just tell me when and where to be."

That.

That evasion, that complicity, that is what bothered her.

It made the Guardian in her writhe in disgust and the mate in her want to tear her hair out.

It was simply…not part of Zelda's nature. She was not docile to agreement by any stretch of the imagination.

A cold chill ran down her spine, dousing her frustration before it became anger.

How sickening, how horrifying, to realize this was probably what drove Link to take on a madman's role.

Helplessness and frustration.

Damn it. She didn't want to empathize with the…boy.

"I don't want you to 'show up'. I want you to-"

"You want me to enjoy a decision you've already made," came the calm response, cutting her off without pause. The regal head finally raised, green eyes meeting hers with an unnatural stillness.

"I have agreed to move. What more do you want?"

There.

She could see it now, the faintest flicker.

"Why did you give me the clothes?"

"To burn. I thought I'd explained that."

"But why now?"

Zelda shrugged, turning back to her mathematics.

"I just…felt like it. You have my apologies if it was an imposition."

"So there was no other reason?"

"Not really."

"Then why are you so afraid of moving to new rooms that you give me such a token in
desperation?"

Her throat closed as a hand seized her heart, tension radiating from her numb frame.

The numbers danced before her eyes, becoming a smear of black as her hand shook.

She…she wasn't desperate. She wasn't afraid or worried or-

The pen snapped in her hand, betraying her.

Because nothing else she'd done in the past twenty-four hours had done so.

Sighing, she met Impa's worried eyes.

"Will we have our own spaces?"

"What do you mean?"

"In our…new chambers. Will we have areas that are ours, places individual to us?"

"I…don't see why we couldn't."

The pain reflected in her voice was tenfold in her eyes, she knew this. Yet…she wouldn't look away. She wouldn't hide.

It's what had gotten them into every argument they'd ever had.

They were too damn stubborn for their own good, sometimes.

Zelda sighed again, and spoke before she could censor her words. "Do you remember when you proposed and thought I was rejecting you, because I wasn't sure I heard you right?"

"Yes…"

"I think that's where we're at now. You have an idea, but I don't live in your head and know what it is or where in the castle you want us to move. And I know where we are living, and that while the space isn't divided equally, we do have areas that are 'ours' to a certain degree. So I guess my question is where exactly are we moving to?"

"I…I was thinking the older suites. Your parents, and a few generations back to my understanding, occupied the 'current' monarch's chambers. But there's a suite which predates the current chambers."

Head tilted, Zelda allowed her mind to travel the castle and all its reconstructed areas. His Ganondorf's bombs had done damage, true, but most of it had been isolated. It was the possibility of structural comprise, rather than actual destruction, which had caused much of the rebuilding.

Those rooms though…

"Were those the ones by the library's east entrance?"

"Yes."

"They are a corridor long, if not more."
Impa nodded, lips twitching at her aghast tone.

"It's a nightmare for security purposes…yet both suites for the ruling monarch are far more spacious than most. The primary chamber is placed somewhere between the separate chambers."

Their eyes met once more as Zelda's voice dropped in question, the barest hint of emotion lacing her words.

"There are a full set of rooms on either 'side' of the main, shared rooms…if my understanding is correct."

"Yes."

Silence hung between them as tentative understanding and building pain collided.

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Remember When We Were Kids- Michael Ghelfi
Iambic² - December's Shadows
Heart's Ghosts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Five

Heart's Ghosts

Toes digging into the space between cushion and chair arm, she knew she'd made the right choice.

Navi and Malon would no doubt enjoy a few hours free, rather than cloistered in a room having some awkward celebration. They'd said as much.

And she, much to the dismay of every councilor and advisor who thought far too much of themselves, was going to enjoy a few hours reading a book.

A book not related to law, finances, history, communication…

Taking a deep breath, she forced her fingers to relax their vice grip on the spine.

Garo jumped in her lap, earning a quiet laugh and then a sputter of dismay when he licked whatever skin he could reach.

He watched her wipe her muzzle with a furless paw and scoffed.

She still didn't understand pack greeting.

Silly two-legger…

Laughing again at the expression on his face—or what she imagined it was—she ruffled his ears.

"Silly mutt," she murmured as she curled in the chair again, opening the slim volume with barely a thought.

The first page made her look up, her eyes falling to the content dog. A frown pulled at her lips before she sighed, admitting defeat.

There was one task she had to complete first.

Damn it.

"Up, Garo."

Ears lifting, he looked at her before obediently sliding to the floor. Shaking his fur into place, he followed her from the big room into a lot of passages.

He knew this way!

Rumbling happily, he forced himself to walk beside her.

Let her think she was leading him. You had to give beta-omegas freedom sometimes.

She smiled at the bounce in his step, amused at the turn of events.
What the Sheikah had done to change his attitude was either miraculous or bribery.

Knowing her adopted tribe as she did, it had to be the latter.

Knuckles rapping against the door, she waited for the muffled call before turning the knob.

A soft laugh escaped her as Garo darted into the office, rounding the desk in record speed. Red eyes stared at the begging mutt as a single gray eyebrow rose.

"What do you want, cur?"

Rolling her eyes, she closed the door, turning back in time to see Garo accept a treat.

That explained everything.

"You keep dog treats in your desk?"

Reyel met her eyes, smiling with a little boy's mischievous pleasure.

"No, _Torna_ keeps treats in the desk."

"Which you employ to seduce my pet."

"Shamelessly," he agreed with a firm nod.

Delighted in his open expression, in the light mood which permeated his unexplained sorrow of late, she took the visitor's chair without pause.

Bribery was almost as successful as flattery.

"What are you working on?" she asked, gesturing to the strewn scrolls and books.

"A historic puzzle, believe it or not," he said with a sigh of annoyance. "Impaz and Mikal have made it their goal that we - meaning anyone living in the castle - learn something new every day."

She blinked with shock, processing his words, before laughter pulled itself free.

He scowled in mock aggravation and began righting the mess.

"Cruel woman, laughing at our suffering."

"I'm laughing at the fact that you let them bully you into it!"

"Have _you_ tried to say 'no' to Impaz?"

She hiccuped and snorted, swallowing the rest of her laughter at the look on his face.

"Not lately, no."

"Then clearly you are smarter than the rest of us…"

Her cheeks burned with her forced silence.

He chuckled, knowing it was amusing and unashamed to admit such.

Swallowing the last of the biscuit, Garo whined softly, hoping for another.
He was dismissed with an unflinching stare. Ears pressed to his head, he rumbled in aggravation and laid beside the desk.

Stingy two-leggers.

Zelda watched them with a soft smile, amusement tempered by budding nerves. "Reyel, can...may I ask you a favor?"

Turning his gaze back to her, he searched her face before nodding slowly.

Zelda's "favors" had not always ended well for his tribe, the Hylian soldiers or castle staff. Rather like that one time she tried to cook…

"Will you take care of Garo?"

Curious, he leaned forward.

What an odd request.

"Take care of him? Are you going for a long ride?"

Not this late in the day she wasn't, not if they had anything to say about it.

And they - meaning the "overbearing" tribe which stood in for Impa - had quite a lot to say about it.

She shook her head, taking a deep breath as she clenched her hands together.

"No," she said softly. "While we're...gone. After the wedding."

Garo lifted his head as the male - erm, Reyel's - scent shifted abruptly. Amusement, curiosity and pack-scent faded as cold wind and burn-the-nose sourness filled the air.

Whining softly, he stood and pressed against the other male's leg in comfort.

Pain.

It was the only word she could use to describe the shift of his expression before shadows descended. Hidden by the stoic - no, stone - mask of the Sheikah tribe, the eyes which stared at her were now empty.

Lifeless.

"I'll watch him," he agreed in the same quiet tone as she.

As quickly as it had come, the heartless statue was no more.

Had she imagined it?

No.

Leaning forward as he reclined, she reached a hand across the desk. "Reyel...?"

Irony graced them as he avoided her touch, resting his hands in his lap.

He smiled, a sad, weary smile, in some misguided attempt to ease her worry. "Please forgive me,
little sister. I've not been in the...best mood lately.

"Shall we speak later? I would like to finish this puzzle."

She watched him, wondering idly if _this_ was how Impa felt when she did the same.

Goddess, it was frustrating.

"Reyel, I'm sor-"

"You didn't do anything, Zelda," he said sharply, eyes flashing as he turned away. "Now, please... I'd like to be alone."

She stood, conflicted, and called Garo to her side.

"Will you still join us tonight?"

Them. She, Impa, Impaz, Torna.

Impaz's idea, naturally.

She hadn't had the heart to tell the other woman 'no', however much she wanted to.

"I don't think so."

She nodded, knowing he would not see it, and turned to the door. As she reached for the handle, something brought forth a memory of recent words.

"Are you going to lie to me now?" she questioned, keeping her back to him.

Flinching, caught in a trap of his own making, he leapt to his feet in anger. It burned his throat, choking his heart as he struggled for air.

"I gave you my word," he hissed between ragged breaths, scrambling for some semblance of control. "I do not lie."

As one would treat a wounded animal, she turned slowly. Her eyes met his with compassion.

Mistaking it for pity, he turned to the record cabinet.

Understanding unfurled within her like a flower at dawn, slowly but with profound impact. A soft sigh escaped her, every petal a new emotion within her racing heart.

"I wouldn't have asked if-"

"Don't, please," he begged, desperate for truth to remain unspoken.

Best to leave the past where it belonged. Present shadows were heavy enough to bear.

She laid a hand on his shoulder, unaware of her own steps until it made contact. The raw, broken sound which escaped her brought tears to her eyes.

How often had she made that very sound, locked within the same agony?

"Oh Reyel," she breathed, squeezing his shoulder ever so gently. He sagged under her hand, his strength fading with every second of her unquestioning acceptance.
"Love is a cruel master," she whispered as she saw the first tear fall. "Unrequited more so."

He shook, strangled by his bleeding heart.

Shrugging off her hand, he turned his back to her entirely. Eyes closing in a desperate attempt to escape, there was no warning.

Her arms wrapped loosely around him, shocking them both, before tightening. His head fell, resting on her shoulder when she stood before him. His knees trembled, threatening to fail.

There was no weight heavier than a burdened soul.

Chapter End Notes

Song:
Post Harbor - Cities of the Interior
Chapter Fifty-Six
I Am

The cobble remained unmoved as his knees slammed into the damp stone, the impact jarring his fiery joints. His breath shook as he sought air, his lungs burning from exertion and exhaustion.

The maze of empty corridors and rooms echoed with his tortured screams, his bloodcurdling howls of agony. The sound deafened him to the Earth's pulse, to the world's settling rhythm of night. It rang through his bones, vibrating every cell until his trembling body threatened to combust.

Throat raw, feeling torn from the force of his vocal release, there was no escape. There was no freedom.

His fists collided with the unforgiving stone, another gut-wrenching sound yanking itself free until he choked. Tears burned his face, his throat, his heart. Blood pounding in his veins, hands half-numb, knees throbbing, he dug his fingers into the grout until nails broke and skin threatened to split.

Eyes closed to the truth, to the secrets buried within these subterranean channels, he felt the weight of it all shatter upon impact. Heart mauled, spirit breaking, there was no strength left within a battered mind or body.

There was only pain.

A sob slipped free, hitching his useless breath as he heaved with the violence of one pushed to the limit. Bile ran unhindered from his cracked lips, hitting the ground and sprinkling his hands when he spat moments later. Again, his stomach rebelled, the shaking of his weak limps bringing him to near collapse.

His eyes opened on their own accord, seeking some orientation within the world of one destroyed.

Echoes of his own screams leaked from the walls, blood long washed away shining like rubies. The dead and forgotten rose, meeting the living figure with quiet cries of shared pain. Ancestor, prisoner, it mattered not to the Eye - only that he was not alone.

Falling to his side, ignoring the burst of physical pain in his shoulder and neck, he curled in on himself. Another sob, one of mourning, renewed the flood of bitter tears. They ran down his wind-burned face, unnoticed.

A cruel master…a cruel master….

What irony was this?

One kept innocent by brutality - who was she to understand?

And yet, how could she not?

Injustice made his eyes close once more, darkening the world until even the Shadows did not
Reyel's arms wrapped around his chest, a shiver of cold slicing through the trembling. Cold slithered through his burning skin, his muscles cramping from the abrupt stillness.

He prayed, though to whom he did not know. He prayed for strength, for guidance, for acceptance. For mercy.

Unrequited, love was pain.

Unknown, love was torture.

Unexpressed, love was death.

As those first raindrops soaked into their suits, they became as still as they were silent. Eyes locked, hearts pounding and chests heaving, awareness strummed between them.

What crime had he committed, what wrong had he done which was so great that he must suffer this eternal torment?

When she laid next to him in the darkness, her weight above the covers pinning him in place, he slung an arm around her. As if they were children again, he blew her hair from his face.

Closing his eyes, he nuzzled his warm pillow and sought the comforting sleep hovering just on the edge of his thoughts.

His tribe sister, his comrade, his cousin. How illusive these words were, how distracting.

None saw deeper.

None understood.

Once, so very long ago, his endearments had been literal in their connotations.

Now…now they were courtesy, a mask.

How delightful the Gods must find this, a Living Shadow taking refuge behind veils and half-truths.

"She asked me about us."

"Us?"

He hummed, nodding, knowing she could see the motion. "Yes. If we'd ever been together."

He laughed as a sound of disgust wrenched itself from her.

"At one time you didn't feel-"

"That we were both lonely and grieving. And a bit drunk. Nothing came of it, except sore heads and a few laughs."

He didn't reply.

Sometimes…the past was best left alone.
The past…the past was not the past. It was the present, the future, one he would escape if he could.

How would chose this fate, this endless nightmare?

Alone, isolated by a traitorous heart, he wept upon the damp Shadow Temple floor.

[-]

Still rather aggravated despite Nabooru's and Midna's attempts to calm her ire through humor, Impa nearly growled when arms wrapped around her.

This wouldn't end just because-

Her thought fell silent as she noted the stillness within her mate. "Zelda?"

"I love you," the Hylian said quietly. "I think…we need to talk about this."

Pulling away, she faced the younger woman and saw only resolve within her calm eyes.

Nodding, she took the extended hand and drew her to the couch. Embracing the other warrior, she ran a hand over the unbound locks of dark gold silk.

The world- their world, the private reality of their chambers- stilled when their hearts beat as one.

"I'm scared," came the Hylian's halting admission, her words a petal upon night's weak breeze. "I'm scared of moving, I'm scared of losing what we…what we have. I'm scared of change."

Impa's hand ran through the smooth, warm hair with even strokes. Fiery, defensive emotion cracked and slipped away like ice upon windowpanes. She swallowed her own words, listening.

"I'm scared that everything…the move, the wedding, the travel…that we won't be us anymore. We'll be too new, too different. I don't want us, our relationship, to change. I-I don't want," she began with a shuddering breath, "I don't want…to belong again. I don't want to lose me or…or…"

Her words trailed off, voice failing as her heart fluttered and thoughts raced.

For a moment, there was only pain. It took Impa several minutes to compose her own thoughts into something coherent.

"Is belonging such a bad thing?" she asked, half afraid of the answer she might receive.

A cheek rubbed against her shoulder, head bowed, looking at the couch beneath them.

"Yes," came the whispered reply. "Belonging to someone…yes."

Rejection was a bitter poison to hope, a cruel, slow killer which infected the heart in moments. And yet some note, some spark of emotion unnamed, some glimmer of memory half-hidden, rekindled faith.

"I think we're…misunderstanding one another again," she said in the same quiet tone. "You are my keta, my sesha. I belong to you, with you, as you do with and to me. As much as I protect you, you are my equal. Is this wrong?"

"I…" Eyes raised, meeting hers as confusion and dawning understanding grew within their depths. "Belonging to someone…as I understand it…is not what you described."
His name was a silent truth between them, his actions a nightmarish kaleidoscope which distorted everything within its path.

Impa’s heart hurt as knowledge rose within her mind. She nuzzled the younger woman, taking comfort in Zelda’s warmth.

"I love you. I want to live a life with you by my side, to experience this wild journey the Goddesses have set us upon together.

"I want us to move so we can begin our marriage with somewhat of a…fresh start. These chambers were never meant to be your permanent location. We - the Guard - chose them after our return because they are easier to defend. For me, they represent battles and darkness, the need to constantly be on guard and alert. I can't…I can't relax here," she said with a sharp exhale. The words spilled forth, each admission slowly giving way to frustration she had never truly admitted to herself.

"I want you to be happy Zelda, truly I do. But I'm not sure how I can be happy here. As your Guardian, I have the strategic advantage of a hidden room. As your mate, I have only bitter shame. I know there are times you don't want me near, that you would rather not have me sleep beside you. I respect that and respect you for admitting the truth. I understand why you feel that way, even if I don't like it.

"When I'm not with you, I'm in what amounts to a closet. During the war, it was sufficient, but we're not at war anymore. There's no reason to live near the training grounds, to be so isolated from the others living here."

Her throat burned as she swallowed, hard, thick saliva nearly gluing her tongue to the roof of her mouth.

Oh Gods, why could these conversations never be easy?

"You feel…trapped…where we are?" Zelda questioned softly, touching Impa's cheek to regain her attention.

"Yes."

She nodded, pulling her hand away, torn. Their minds brushed, fragments of emotion and memories passing through the bond like fish in a stream.

"I trust you," she said with rushed breath, forcing the words out before she could change her mind. "I trust you and love you, and…and I'm…I'm afraid that if we move to new chambers, the woman I love will vanish. That this…this," she emphasized with a gesture to their embrace, "will end."

The lithe frame within her arms, curled so comfortably against her chest, tensed. She waited, biting back the need to question.

"When we’re married, if we move…will anything we have stay the same? When I'm in your bed, will we have this?"

…is that what she was afraid of?

Impa's eyes closed as she rested her forehead atop Zelda's crown, stroking her back in a vain attempt to soothe herself.

She forced herself to consider everything her Charge had said, to look beyond her own worries and
frustrations.

"I am not Hylian," she said with considerable care, "and though I understand their ways, I don't claim to understand why or how they came about. I explained what mates are for Sheikah. Reyel explained the bond you have lived with for years.

"I love you, Zelda. That does not change because we marry. I protect you first and foremost, which also does not change. The intimacy we have, the closeness, the affection…it doesn't go away simply because we sign a paper.

"We - the people we are - will not change. We still decide how to live our lives, how to express our love. I personally think the Hylian tradition for their wedding nights is ridiculous. Who in their right mind would have the energy after such a busy day?"

Impa shook her head. After all this time, some things about the other race still mystified her.

Maybe Nabooru could explain it, next time she visited.

Then again…maybe not.

She cupped Zelda's cheek and kissed her forehead, barely resisting the urge to lift the younger woman's head.

"Our wedding night, we will be on our way out of Hyrule. Hopefully asleep from exhaustion, rather than staring at the sky unable to sleep. Nothing will change from every other night we've spent together. Nothing. Just as our days and nights will remain unchanged when we return home.

"You asked if we could have…separate spaces," she added before courage could fail her.

She held her breath, letting the request for explanation hang.

"Not…not to live separately," Zelda said in the same soft, halting tone. "If…if we need time apart, we could have it." She licked her lips nervously, meeting Impa's imploring gaze as she gathered her courage. "I like sleeping with you, I do. But sometimes…sometimes I need…to not. To…to be alone. It's not about you, I just…I just…"

Was there any way to explain something you didn't understand?

Impa nodded, giving her the lightest of kisses as she smiled. "I get it, I understand. Sometimes I need time apart too."

Zelda exhaled sharply in relief, earning a chuckle. They both began to laugh, tension leeching away as reason settled within their minds.

One crisis averted.

[-]

An explosion of lightning and fire heralded the darkness. There was no sound to be heard above the rushing blood of a pounding heart. With shaking hands, covers fell across the bed and floor.

With a hunter's skill, he slipped from the room as sweat bound hair and cloth clung to his burning skin. The quietest of steps betrayed his haste as wild eyes darted from wall to wall in desperation.

Where…where…?
Gulping air, he forced himself to calm, to *think*.

*There...*

[-]

In his decade of working at the castle, he'd come to recognize the various knocks upon his office door. While not the only healer in residence, he had his "regulars".

The staff, as a rule, tended to give a quiet, quick rap of the knuckles close to the handle. Businesslike even in illness.

The soldiers were heavy with their greeting, often using the flesh of their fists rather than bone.

The Sheikah so rarely sought the services of he and his colleagues, though their announcement was more of a tap than anything.

Only a handful of residents within the grand building would seek him so late, however.

Zelda, whom he'd told many a time to enter without request - unless it was locked, in which case she was *not* to pick the bolting mechanism.

Again.

These late hours, however, she would (reluctantly, mind you) simply enter rather than risk drawing attention to herself.

The cautious, quick drum of fingers was not the sound of his Queen, however.

Choking on the bitter dregs of long-cold coffee, Eldric lifted watering eyes to the door with confusion. Pounding on his own chest, he gasped out "Come in" between harsh coughs.

He nearly choked a second time when a huddled figure slipped into the candle-lit room.

Dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief, he carefully sit the mug back on its coaster and glanced at the parchments.

Unharmed, thankfully.

"Good evening Link."

Evening?

It was nearly dawn.

Lips twitching as his own thought darted across Deaso's eyes, Link sat in the offered chair. He smiled tiredly at the rumbled healer, recognizing the familiar expression of loneliness on the other man's face.

"Late night?" he asked quietly, his voice strained with exhaustion.

"Or early morning, depending on one's view," was the infuriatingly philosophical answer he'd come to expect.

Patient eyes gazed at him expectantly, earning a response far quicker than in daylight hours.
"Can I…talk to you?"

"Of course. I am not your primary therapist though, nor do I know what you've discussed with them."

For a moment, their eyes met and mutual amusement hung in the air.

Damned legal disclaimers...

"I can't-" he began in a broken, agonized whisper as he hugged himself, looking away. He bowed his head, the wolf within him whining in pain. "I can't tell anyone else. They…they wouldn't understand."

For a moment, twin fissures of anger and exasperation threaded through Eldric's heart. He forced himself to acknowledge, process and release them within the few moments he had before a response was necessary.

There was no anger at the younger male, merely his actions.

Like it or not, he understood with a degree of painful clarity how they had come to occur.

He simply nodded in understanding. "You can speak with me at any time, about anything."

"I have…I have nightmares."

Flashes of dreams, of pleasure and horror twisted into a parody of life, eclipsed his mind. He shivered with cold only he could feel, arms wrapping tighter around himself.

"I…I…I'm with Shad and I close my eyes, and when I- When I-"

He broke off, swallowing harshly.

_Sounds of pleasure, his name a plea upon trembling lips, met his ears as he wrapped his arm around a slick stomach. Hot back flush to his chest, he closed his eyes upon the image of Shad's head thrown back in ecstasy._

"When I open them, I-I...It's not…Shad's not…"

_When they opened, hands - his hands, larger and darker - were in their former position. But the hair tickling his face was blonde, feminine cries of fear and pain the only sound he heard._

His numb lips trembled as he forced the words out, chest squeezing as he hugged himself tighter still. "When I open my eyes, Shad's not the-there and I'm not _me._"

Eldric felt his heart crack as tears fell on the younger male's arms.

Would they never have reprieve?

Would the ghosts never rest?

"Link…have you had this nightmare before?"

A quick nod was the broken warrior's only reply, a near silent sob escaping despite himself.

Laying a clean handkerchief at the edge of the desk, he softened his voice and lowered it a bit further.
Now was not the time for professional detachment, for analysis and diagnosis.

Sometimes…sometimes human compassion meant more than any expertise.

"You are not Ganondorf, Link. Nor will you ever be anything like him."

Delicate lids pressed shut as tears forced themselves free. The shudder of a child crying from the depths of their soul wracked the younger man, his body rocking as if he had no notion of its action.

His words were quick and free, each utterance broken by sobs and primal sounds of pain. With almost frantic intensity, each admission of horrifying visions came faster still. The words began to bleed together, until they were unrecognizable syllables.

Eldric simply rounded the desk and laid a hand on Link's shoulder, unsurprised when shaking arms wrapped around his waist. There was no fear of the inhuman strength and quiet growls which sometimes escaped.

How long did they suffer alone, before anyone took notice? Before they allowed anyone to know?

He ran a hand over damp hair, silent, hearing the echoes of a feverish child's cries within the purging sobs.

Loneliness. Abandonment. Did they still mean the same thing to Hyrule's Hero?

No… It wasn't the Hero clutching him, seeking some basic, visceral connection in the pre-dawn hours.

It was a young man, alone of the torment he and his family had suffered needlessly.

It was the beaten child, misunderstood and unwanted by people it didn't understand.

It was, quite possibly, the helpless infant left within a mythical Forest to perish.

Had it ever been anything else?

Would it ever be anything else?

Chapter End Notes

Songs:
Angels Fall by Breaking Benjamin
With each day that passed, the time in which they had to simply breathe dwindled. A week, a mere seven passings of the sun, signaled the end of patience and tolerance.

Fingers drumming against the desk, Impaz nodded to herself and laid half-finished letters aside. Her knees ached despite the warmth as she crossed the room and entered the corridor beyond. Garo followed with a yawn, bumping her gently in request.

Idly, she ran her fingers between his ears as they walked.

The regular castle workers spared her a glance, still unused to her after all this time, yet continued on with their tasks. She simply smiled to herself, used to it.

The pity.

The confusion.

She was Sheikah, but…not.

Following her instincts, her Sight, she soon found herself outside. Garo licked her hand before rushing forward, enjoying the freedom.

"Good afternoon, Zelda," she said softly, her eyes never leaving the joyous mutt.

Hidden within shadows cast from a nearby tower, Zelda returned the greeting with one of her own. "Good afternoon to you also, Impaz."

So much for solitude.

A small hand rose to shield aged eyes from the merciless sun as they tracked the gleeful canine.

"Are you hiding today, or merely resting?"

"And how are you doing today?"

"At my age, child, there's little time or desire to mince words."

"Evidently."

She turned then, facing the younger woman. Unblinking, she watched for several long moments before nodding to herself.

A sharp, piercing whistle rent the air. Ears ringing, Zelda rubbed them in distress as she heard Impaz call "Garo, come!" over her shoulder.

"I don't want to talk," she said with quiet, childish defiance as she looked at the older woman again.
"No, I doubt you do. I will not make you. Perhaps it would be best then to leave the castle for a few hours. You might find the peace that you are looking for."

The chestnut gelding beneath her, unadorned and unrecognizable, moved with graceful speed across the plains. Firm, packed earth gave little dust as hooves trampled lush grass. Determination bent her atop the joyous mount, leaving her just another daring rider to any who could see her.

Illusion made her follower unnoticed, the subtle magic turning eyes from Torna's presence.

She forgot him at times, though he was never truly beyond her awareness. For a few minutes, she simply…was alone. She was riding free, the wind in her hair and burning her face as the sun glared down upon them.

Her goal was unknown, destination unplanned. There was no desire to see her fellow Sages, nor Rutela. Now was not the time for her rounds among the villages.

For once in a long while, she would…simply be.

And yet, despite all determination to avoid any and all people, she found herself riding towards a lone farm. Conveniently tucked between two small villages with an hour's ride, yet sheltered from the worst elements by the edge of a nearby forest, the sight of hale crops greeted her first. A hand-wrought fence peeked from behind the corn, containing various animals.

A flutter of indignant fowl stirred a few dozing canines. When the house became visible, she slowed the panting equine in contemplation.

Was this…a good idea?

Her eyes turned downward, staring at the fingers curling around the reins before she could stop them. Twin scars peeked from beneath her light sleeves, taunting her with a truth she could not deny. Forcing herself to loosen her grip, she took a deep breath and hoped for the best.

Sometimes…that was all you could do.

The sound of barking dogs drew her attention. Patting the sow's chest gently, she spared the piglets one last glance between rising. Body aching from the prolonged crouch, she groaned as muscles twinged in protest before she quietly laughed.

She was far too young to be getting old.

She dunked her bloody hands in a pail of warm water, cursing the summer's heat as she dried them on her pants. The summer solstice had brought wave upon wave of unrelenting high temperatures.

If this kept up, they'd all be facing a drought before mid-season.

The barn door closed behind her as she stepped into the sun, scanning the yard. The dogs only started up when there was a visitor, so where…

There.

"Can I help you?" she called as she made her way down the dirt path. The unforgiving afternoon sun half-blinded her as she neared the lone rider.
"Madam Katherine Lumoran?"

"Yes," Katherine said slowly as she came to a stop. Hand raised to shield her eyes, she stared at the solitary figure from a short distance.

The other female slid from her mount with practiced ease, reins hanging loosely from her hand. Something about her seemed familiar, but it was hard to tell with such a length between them.

"May I help you?" she repeated, exasperation overcoming her manners. There was much work still to be done, none of which included playing hostess.

Maybe she could finally convince Jay to build that gate…

"Is there common ground to be found within an unexpected haven?"

Her hand dropped, covering her mouth as the wavering question reached her ears. Recognition struck as unease and insecurity made itself known within the other female's tense posture.

Her words, an open offer she had never expected to be accepted – or at least not so soon – rolled through her mind once more.

She moved closer then, only stopping when they were feet apart. This close, there was no mistaking the Queen.

"I think," she said slowly, proceeding with cautious informality as the Hylian woman had, "that common ground can be found amongst most people. It is, however, up to them if they wish to stand upon it."

There was no arrogance, no supremacy radiating from the brunette – only exhaustion.

"I'm sorry to—"

"Please, Your Majesty…Zelda. Please don't apologize. My words were sincere," she said softly, meeting those tired green eyes without hesitation. "Let's put your mount to graze and have a spot of lunch."

"That would be…pleasant."

Their eyes met once more before both women looked away, discomfort a mirror reflecting the infinite truth.

"My husband won't return for several hours," Katherine admitted as she led the way to the equine pasture. "Your…companions are welcome to join us, if they wish."

"Thank you, but they are well enough when left to their own devices."

She'd seen no other, but common sense and all appearances within the courthouse told the farmer there were guards around.

Accepting Zelda's word, she simply nodded.

No reason to dwell upon the matter.

Tending to the horse didn't take long with two sets of hands. Brushed, praised and fed, he was let loose into the pasture, refusing to rest within the cool stables.
Shaking their heads as he tossed his mane in pleasure, Katherine opened her home with bated breath.

Back to the other woman – to the *Queen!* – she struggled to calm her fluttering heart as she pulled a jug of lemonade from the crude cellar within the kitchen.

Their was a humble home, built by Jay's grandfather and added to by each generation. Suitable for a family proud of their farming legacy, it was simple with rustic charm. At least, that's what she'd told Jay years past.

She'd come to believe her words as true, as time wore on. It was…home.

It was not, however, the stone house she had been born within – nor a grand castle.

"You have a lovely home, Katherine," Zelda said softly, watching the other woman tense as she procrastinated.

Slowly, Katherine turned. Brown eyes met the ground as hers so often did before shoulders squared and a proud head lifted. "Thank you."

She smiled, recognizing her own behaviors…and hoping that, some day, she would display the same strength. The same pride.

Warmth burned in her chest, reminding her that she had displayed them. Her cheeks threatened to burn as she recalled that eventful meal–

No!

Smoothing her shirt, she took a deep breath and pushed Daltus from her mind.

It was a difficult task, given the…present which had arrived this morning.

Mouth dry and tasting of ash, she smiled with brittle emotion. "I'm sorry, I am…out of sorts at the moment."

Resting the jug and glasses upon the table, Katherine gestured to the chairs before taking her own seat. The cool kitchen provided a welcome relief from the sweltering heat which had been her daily companion.

She poured them both a drink when Zelda sat, the awkward silence between them broken only by the muffled sounds of a thriving farm.

"How are you feeling?" was the unexpected question which shocked them both.

Sipping her drink, Zelda met Katherine's eyes before looking away.

"I'm…nervous," she admitted slowly. "Excited too, but scared. And," she added with a rueful smile, "there's also a healthy dose of 'What am I doing?'."

Katherine chuckled softly, nodding in agreement. "I turned to Jay two days before the ceremony and told him that if he'd changed his mind and wanted to run the other way, I'd understand. He just raised an eyebrow and said that was a horrible attempt to get rid of him."

"He sounds like an interesting person."

"He is."
Watching the light infuse Katherine's eyes, smile pulling at her lips, Zelda wondered if that was what she looked like when thinking about Impa. If that same mixture of love, exasperation and amusement shone through her skin like a thousand candles.

"I'm scared," she whispered before the words could enter her mind. "The wedding, the travel, the move. It's all...so many changes at once." Her hands shook as she clasped them atop the table. The world began to blur as horrid tears burned her eyes.

Reaching across the table, Katherine offered a hand in invitation and wasn't surprised when it was taken. A lifeline within an ocean of change, she gave compassion when there was none to be found for herself.

A sob broke free, followed by the trembling of soul's winter.

It was all...too much.

The Holy Parents above, it was simply too much.

Her voice quivered, a half-sound of pain and denial pierced by a harsh reality.

Married. She was getting married. To Impa, yes, but married.

And...and...and a honeymoon! Weeks of travel, of leaving Hyrule to Mikal and his less-trusted colleagues, if meeting new people and going new places and...and...

"I-I don't kn-know wh-at to d-do," she said between sobs. Mewling, vulnerable, every wall she had built crumbled in an instant.

"You remain true to who you are and what you want," Katherine's gentle voice told her. A hand rested atop hers, sheltering cold fingers as they clung for survival to the second hand.

Her shoulders curled as she bowed her head.

For a long while, there was no thoughts, no words – only cries. Only the tears of a scared child, of an angry teenager, of a broken adult. Only the sounds of one lost without definition or understanding.

Soft, with care rather than curiosity, the inquiry came when her sobs had eased into heavy breathing.

"Zelda, do you want to get married? Do you want to have a wedding? Do you want a honeymoon?"

Exposed upon the merciless beach without her shell, she flinched as the scorching sun touched her raw flesh.

"I..." was all she could say. Her response, so automatic since Impa's proposal, became tangled in her aching throat.

"Think about it for a few minutes."

Their hands released, neither of them glancing at the marks of nail and stress they each left behind. Zelda searched her pockets before wiping her eyes on her sleeve, admitting defeat.

Weapons, coin, hair-thong...no handkerchief.

This is not when she'd expected when leaving the castle today!
"You have a choice, you know."

"I know."

"I'm not sure you do," was the quiet yet firm reply.

Zelda's head raised on its own accord, snapping to attention as she bristled.

"Hear me out. You want to spend your life with Impa. And, more than likely, you want the world to accept that. But spending your life together doesn't necessarily mean marriage. And if it does, it doesn't mean you need to have a wedding. A wedding is just…just a pretty ceremony, really. It doesn't have to be fancy or complicated. It could just be that you sign the papers and go on with your life.

"No one can tell you what a marriage is. You have to define it for yourself- it's a choice. Is it a sign of commitment and partnership, or an…arrangement? Are you getting married because it's something you want - because it feels right - or because you think you have to?"

Shuddering to her very depths, she drew a deep, shaking breath and spoke from her heart.

"I…I want, to marry Impa," she said with quiet conviction. "I…I can't explain why, but it does feel right. It feels…natural. It's just…scary."

"So you're choosing to marry her?"

"I…yes." Startled, she could only blink as if an owl exposed to the midmorning sun. "Yes. I…it's my choice."

A weight, a knot of some unrecognized or unacknowledged pressure, released itself within that instant.

A choice made.

A right honored.

"Answer truthfully, before you can think. Do you want to have a wedding?"

"No…"

"Then…what do you want?"

"…I…I don't know…"

Puzzled, green eyes met hazel.

Their hands clasped once more, an automatic human reaction that had been beyond either of them for so long, the simplicity of the shared act spoke volumes.

"Zelda…it's time to put yourself first. Haven't you sacrificed and suffered enough for Hyrule?"

"I…"

Choking on the words, on the truth which had been echoed so loudly over the last several months, she could only utter an unintelligible sound.

"Can you let this day be about you and Impa?"
That was the question, wasn't it?

_Could_ she?

For once…_could_ she put them – herself – before the country?

Chapter End Notes

**SONGS:**

Per StoryTellerLore:

- atashi igai watashi janai no (Nobody Can Be Me But Me)- Gesu No Kiwami Otome
- Breathe by Jacoo
- Shattered by Koda
Love Me (II)

Night had fallen before some – any – measure of calm resided within Impaz's troubled heart.

Her children were hurting and screaming for help, for acknowledgement...

And she could do nothing.

"Welcome back," she said as the candle flickered, the stirring of warm air the only indication of movement.

With both fatigue and composure shining within agonized eyes, Reyel nodded. "Thank you, mother," he said softly, bending to kiss her cheek like the dutiful son he was.

They were all the children of her heart these days, regardless of who birthed them. Thank the Stars and Seeds they'd come to understand that.

"Will you be staying with us?" she asked as she patted his cheek in return.

"Yes. It…it was never my intention to…leave the tribe."

"Good."

Their eyes met, words unnecessary as the Truth flowed between them.

Without warning, the fingers resting on his pale, stubbled cheek pinched his ear. Unmerciful, her white-knuckled grip drove his hunched form to its knees, a yowl of shocked protest escaping his raw throat.

"Impaz! Ow, let go!"

"Stubborn – foolish – petulant child! Running away won't solve anything! Didn't I – didn't we – teach you anything?! There are better ways to solve your problems than hiding like a frightened, sulking child."

"Ow-ow, I wasn't—"

"You were, and you know it too, stubborn boy!" She gave his ear another twist before releasing him. Arms crossing, she watched him sprawl on his behind in the most undignified manner possible. Fiery red and just as hot, the offended ear was eclipsed protectively by long fingers as accusing eyes met hers.

"If you insist on acting like a child, Reyel, I will treat you like one." Her voice softened as he looked away, bleeding heart writ across his aura and face.

"Child…I know you hurt. I know you grieve, how well do I know. But running from the truth, no matter what form it takes, will never help you. I understand you needed time and space, we all do. And yet…what did it give you, except an eternity in which to feel?"

Swallowing hard as his throat closed, emotion choking all words yet to be heard, he bowed his head. Resting his forehead against her knee, he felt every scant ounce of renewed strength flee as her hand ran through his hair.
She did not promise him anything, nor offer the slightest reassurance beyond her presence – beyond the tribe's presence.

For now…it was enough.

[-]

The last two days had been a whirlwind. Most of it had blurred into a cacophony, only a handful of faces recognized within the masses she saw every day.

Every hour, every minute, was nearly more than she could endure.

"Can we have a private ceremony?"

Her whispered request, so soft it barely reached her own ears upon the first word, hung within the room.

Slowing the comb she ran through Zelda's hair, Impa looked at the younger woman. Sitting on a pile of cushions facing the empty fireplace, her profile was unreadable. And yet from her perch on the edge of the couch, with one leg on either side of the reclining form, her body language was unmistakable.

"Is that what you want?" Impa asked in her own quiet tone as she separated the damp hair into sections.

"I…I want…it to be…just us. And those we love…those we trust to witness.

"I don't…" Shoulders hunching forward, the admission was almost a plea. "I don't want to be a spectacle…again. Either of us."

"Then we'll have a private ceremony."

The room spun for a moment. Forcing herself to take a slow, steady breath, Zelda closed her eyes.

Why had she thought it would be a complicated matter?

"Thank you."

[-]

"Mikal Evat, if this is some poor attempt—"

"It's not, Jean, I promise. I apologize for the time you and the others spent on this, and you will be compensated accordingly. Queen Zelda and Guardian Impa are firm – they will have a private ceremony in four days. The public reception and sending off will occur as planned, however."

Incredulous blue eyes met serious brown. A strangled noise escaped as her cheeks, normally fair, became an unflattering splotchy crimson with anger.

"I—"

His expression hardened, understanding evaporating under the heat of diplomatic authority.

"Yes?"

"I will…make sure…things are rearranged…accordingly."
"Make no mistake, Ms. Grewden – you are employed at my discretion. The brides-to-be, one of whom is your sovereign ruler if you care to recall that little fact, have made their decision. While I am sympathetic to your plight, I am Her Majesty's Advisor, and spokesman first and foremost."

"I understand, Advisor Evat."

"Then I will leave you to inform your colleagues."

He left the office moments after the last syllable cleared the air. The door shutting with a soft click behind him, he ground his teeth for a moment.

Some days he enjoyed working with Jean…

And others he wondered how her parents allowed her to live beyond her teenage years.

Speaking of children…

Checking his watch, fingers tracing the scratched glass with sad fondness, he headed for the small dining room with quick steps.

The boys had requested a private lunch.

It was nice to have his son home.

Hurried steps cut through the bustling sound of coordinators, assistants and castle workers. Slowing, he turned and felt his heart lighten. Extending a hand, he clasped his fingers around Malon's when they rested atop his palm and pulled her close. Earning a happy laugh as he spun her beneath his arm, his smile became one of pleasure and affection.

"Mikal, you're making a fool of yourself!" she admonished quietly as her fingers laced through his.

"I'm not," he insisted in a normal tone, barely sparing those around them a single thought. Guiding her through the chaotic corridor, he shook his head.

"Your reputation is besmirched, Advisor," she warned as he brought her knuckles to his lips.

"My reputation is fine. In fact, your uncle says my ego could use deflating from how I've become perceived as of late."

She laughed again as they stepped into the dining room, imagining that conversation.

"Are you sure Link and Shad won't mind…?"

He chuckled quietly, rolling his eyes heavenward as he reached for the dining room door.

"Link said I was to bring you if you decided to come, if only to spare him further beatings for not inviting you."

"He knows me so well!"

"Who knows you well?" came Link's voice as they stepped into the room.

"You do."

"I do?"
"You know I'd throttle you if you said I couldn't join you for lunch so soon after you 'forgot' to tell me you were home."

"…I do know you…"

Cheeks red and a boyish grin on his face, he returned her sudden hug with one of his own – and tried not to breathe in the mass of red hair engulfing his face.

"You should braid that mess. Hey, ow!"

"Don't talk about my hair."

Shad echoed Mikal's chuckle and wrapped a protective arm around Link's waist, pressing a kiss to his "sore" temple. "Stop while you're ahead. She's female, and therefore, always right."

"About time he learned it too."

"…I spent the last several years surrounded on bossy-erm, strong females. I learned that already."

"Then consider it a refresher."

"…women are scary," Link muttered as he took his seat.

Malon simply grinned in response.

[-]

Leagues away, a startled sound – a half-cry, half-laugh of his name - brought a similar grin to another's face.

Catching the tanned hand which swatted at his chest, he chuckled.

"What are you doing home so early? Are you ill?"

Jay could only smile wider as Katherine rested her free hand against his forehead.

"I missed you," he admitted softly, gently squeezing the fingers twining around his.

"The fields –"

"The lads can handle it. You said you were making chops."

"For dinner, you lout!" she replied, tugging a sun-toughed ear. "Not for lunch."

"Maybe—"

"Daddy!" A joyous squeal shattered their banter, drawing their attention to the house. An excited blur ran towards them as fast as her little legs would carry her, tangled hair bouncing in the non-existent wind.

Catching the wild child with ease, he swung her around before kissing her cheek. One arm wrapped around his neck as her legs grabbed his chest.

"I fell out of a t'ee daddy!"

"I see that, Maggie," he said, eyeing the white cast on her arm. He glanced at Katherine, who only winced and gestured to the back of the house.
"I told her to pick dandelions while I hung clothes… and she tried to climb a tree."

Caught between sighing and laughing, he shook his head, kissed them both and carried his daughter into the house.

He would worry about the medical expenses later.

After a family lunch, a rarity this time of year.

Sometimes...it was nice to put work away and just live.
The wind rustled manicured grass and meticulously placed flowers. The small, quiet graveyard was heartbreaking in its peaceful beauty.

Taking a shaking breath, she sat beside the headstone and traced half-numb fingers over the engraving.

"H-hi daddy," she whispered, her voice breaking as her heart cried anew.

"Mikal gave me…your letter this morning. I-I haven't read it yet. I…I suppose…I wanted to be near you, when I did." Glancing at the scroll clutched tightly in her other hand, she took another deep breath.

"It's hard, being Queen. But…you knew that already…didn't you? You tr-tryed to tell me…and I didn't listen."

Tears burned her eyes. A single drop fell as she blinked them away and then laughed to herself, as if that would keep her from crying.

"So much has changed since you died. There's so much I want to te-tell you, things I couldn't whe-when you were alive." Her eyes fell to the still parchment and she smiled ruefully. "Something tells me you'd want me to read this first though."

She broke the seal with fumbling fingers. Breath escaping in a sudden rush, her chest burned as the long-dried ink seared patterns into her mind.

Her eyes flicked between the gleaming stone and creamy stack of parchment.

It was dated two days before his death…

"Daddy…" she mouthed, voice silent in face of such undeniable truth.

My dearest daughter,

As I write this, you are angry with me. It may be due to my mistaken intent to protect you, or it may not be. I don't know, and I cannot ask you. I can only hope that by the time you read this, you understood my hasty actions for what they were: a desperate father's attempt to protect his only child.

I failed you in so many ways, Zelda, and I apologize. I put Hyrule before you, as my father did me, and his before. It is what I never wanted. When you mother died-

Here, his letters wavered, emotion exposing the hidden heart she'd lost sight of as a teenager.

When your mother died, I wanted so very much to join her. We were married a short time, but I loved her dearly. You remind me of her, with your independence. By the time I emerged from my grief enough to notice, I could not change the course I'd set – for all I was your father, you also knew me as King.
I am tired, my daughter. I am writing this now, while I have the energy to complete my thoughts. I am entrusting it into Mikal’s care. Though not the longest appointed advisor to our family, I believe him to be steady and faithful. He adopted that poor boy Link without making you any the wiser, something I find endearingly amusing. There were days I waited for you to ask me to do the same. I never knew, and probably never will, if it was a child’s self-importance or the Triforce of Wisdom that stopped you.

Maybe it was simply…yourself. You always knew more than many of us, magical artifact or not.

How I wish I’d listened and learned from you, from the example you provided so naturally.

She swallowed hard as one page gave way to another.

This letter is not meant to reach your hands until either your twenty-second year, or the days leading to your wedding – whichever comes first. I know I will not be there to see either event.

I am tired, my daughter, and I’m sorry I cannot be there to watch you grow. You will become a ruler too soon, without the experience I’d hoped to give you. I only hope you do not crumble under the weight of war, and the peace which follows. It can make the strongest buckle and cry like a newborn.

There are many things I wish to tell you, many stories I hold in my heart. I know most of them you will never know. I do not have the strength – or the privacy, any longer – to write them all. I will tell you one, with as few words as I can.

Your mother and I were arranged to marry, as you know. It was a custom neither of us wished upon you, but one I thought my duty to consider after…certain events. We were lucky, however, in the fact that we found love. Brief though it was before you were born, we were happy together.

Her eyes shone day in and out, even when this foreign country threatened to consume her. Your mother loved life and every new experience it gave her. She had the gift of prophecy, as you do, and she never let darken her thoughts for long. Until you were a child capable of speech, I did not truly understand what a…weight it was upon her, to know the future. My only regret is that I could not support her more.

She left a gift for you, which I am attempting to find. It was a letter, and her favored night-rail.

The letters wavered once more, making her laugh ever so weakly as she imagined his blush. It was an odd gift for sure, but one quickly clarified.

There are many things children do not wish to know of their parents. She favored it, or so she said, because it was the first sign of respect within our relationship. I will spare you the details, dear daughter. Suffice to say, she packed away the barely-worn gown with a lighter heart, and the knowledge that choice would be honored.

Her breath caught, fresh tears spattering the aged ink before she could move the parchments.

So that is what she’d found on the fateful day…

Oh Goddesses!

Struggling to breathe past the pain, past the horror of anger and misjudgment, her hands shook as she tried to focus on the words.

My strength wanes further, as I’m sure you can tell. My pen drags across the page, and I see the
hourglass threatening to empty. I hope to finish this in one sitting, before duty – before Hyrule – takes me from you once again.

I do not know what your mother wrote in her letter; I can only hope it brings you closer to her in some way. It was she who set the timeline of the reading of these letters, which I have decided to oblige. My gift is not as subtle, but I hope it is just as personal and understood – or at the very least, appreciated.

Within the marina, there docks a single ship which has never sailed beyond the initial stability tests. Windfish is yours, solely and irrevocably - it does not belong to Hyrule or the crown in any way.

I remember how you sought any story of oceans, and how many of your own stories as a child revolved around them. Let this be your freedom, Zelda. For your birthday, or honeymoon, I ask that you leave Hyrule in the hands of your capable advisors and ministers…and see the world. If only for a little while, live as Zelda the artist - the musician. Leave Queen Zelda upon the dock with her subjects and friends. I promise…she will be there when you return.

You have all my love.

~Father Daphnes
Chapter Fifty-Nine

Once Upon A Time

Hand trembling in time with her staccato breath, her numb fingers closed around the gleaming doorknob.

Swallowing hard, she turned her hand and stepped into the open doorway.

"Can you let this day be about you and Impa?"

Silence met her words for the longest time, punctuated by the harsh breath of recent tears.

"I don't know," came Zelda's whispered response. "But...I think...I think I can."

"Then talk to her. Talk with her. She'll understand, I'm sure of it."

Her hands closed around the glass as her guest's twisted together.

Two days earlier...

Once more, as if by clockwork, Eldric stared at the door with expectation. The quiet ticking of the clock – a recent purchase he was solely regretting – measured each heartbeat in rhythmic seconds.

"Please," had been the impassioned request. "Please. Tell her...what you think she should know."

"...are you sure?" he'd asked after several long moments, mouth dry and palms sweating with anxiety.

"I-I trust you," she'd replied quickly, if quietly. "I can't...I can't...tell her. I can't...explain. It's all there, constantly, and it never goes away. It's so loud in my mind, and I know that...that when we're gone...she'll need to understand."

The calm, firm knock that pulled him from the night's events came just as the hour struck.

"Come in," he said, wondering if it was truly necessary.

In the late afternoon, distant voices carried through closed windows. Activity bustled around them, barely paid any mind as the door was shut with finality.

His office, filled with the tools and resources accumulated through years of hard work, was suddenly too small.

Rising, he gestured to a half-hidden door, earning a stiff nod.
"If you'd rather not—"

Her words sliced through his, interrupting the well-meant escape with confidence.

"I'd rather it not be necessary, but it is…so I am here."

He led her from office to exam room, only recalling a lamp at the last moment. He took several minutes to light the room, igniting oil lamps and pulling the drapes aside on those high windows, before facing her once more.

She examined the sequestered chamber with hooded eyes. By no means was it a cold room, nor was it sterile. It was, in fact, one of the more tasteful treatment areas she had ever been in – and considering the Shiekah's habits, that was saying much.

In the end, however, no silk draperies or embellished cabinets could disguise the true nature of such an area.

Nor could the bright sun chase away the emotion which clung to old stone, decorated though they were.

"We can take as long as you want," he said quietly – nay, tiredly – as he chose a reading chair to rest in.

It was a modest chamber, but still smaller than the average sitting room within the castle. With a final glance around, she sat in the remaining chair, her focus to him.

"Where do you want to begin?" Impa asked, her own voice foreign to her ears.

Rubbing his eyes at the headache which threatened to finally bloom, he sighed. "That…is up to you. Zelda has given me permission to tell you whatever I see fit. Within reason, of course; some of my knowledge is incomplete at best, as I only treated the aftermath. That said, I can and will refuse to answer questions if I feel it is something you aren't ready to know – or something she isn't ready for you to know."

"I understand," she said after a pause, allowing his words to penetrate the worry gnawing at her clouded mind.

He sat back in the chair, exhausted beyond words and knowing sleep would continue to elude him for several more days.

Between Zelda and Link, he rarely expected three days to lapse before one of them was at his door – day or night. But accidents in the training arena, kitchen, storage areas, stables (et al, ad nauseam), combined with the constant fluctuation of other healers and medical aids, was draining what precious time (and strength) he had left.

He was one man, and not meant to care for the entire castle on his own.

Maybe it was time to send another request for assistance.

After the wedding…

"During the trial, I…witnessed some of her memories. But they are surely faded now. I know what I saw, and yet…some of it…doesn't make sense, with what she has told me."

"One thing you must understand," he said slowly and carefully, "$is that for all Zelda is held
together, her sanity is relative.

"There are periods of time she does not recall, entire...sessions...of torture she does not know of. Some events have been distorted by injury, fear or sheer trauma; others by time. The memory does unusual things as days become months and years. None of this accounts for her role as Sage of Time.

"I don't know what you saw, and I'd rather you not think about them – they are not your memories to begin with. But there are a few basic facts she and I have discussed at length. Her primary abuser was Ganondorf himself, with the occasional...associate aiding in her pain. The bulk of her suffering came from his hands, or his commands. Those he allowed to 'play' with her were male, with two notable exceptions.

"One female, the veiled woman from her trial, was Ganondorf's self-styled consort. She beat Zelda several times. The second female, from what I can piece together, was a slave so broken by her own suffering she..."

He trailed off, unable to voice such speculations fully.

Impa nodded in understanding, swallowing hard.

After a long moment, he continued. A folder, grabbed from his desk without thought and clutched tightly without notice, was offered to her.

"She does not like caves or the dark, enclosed spaces that reminds her of them – this can include places as obscure as a storage closet. She has ceased to cut, but will scratch herself instead. For the most part, she will eat regularly and without hesitation, but will neglect herself when busy or stressed without realizing that she is doing it."

He smiled ironically as she took the folder, glancing apprehensively at the cover.

"For these nuisances, you can probably tell me more than I can tell you."

"In the folder are drawings. It took me a while to find them, and I doubt they're something I'll ever show to her.

"Not many of Ganondorf's associates were allowed to sexually abuse her. Of those who did, only one or two of them raped her with their own bodies – most used objects, including the females. From her descriptions, it seems the favored object was a Bulbin insemination device."

Hand shaking, she opened the folder and stared at the sketch.

No, not a sketch. A catalog page. A medical catalog.

"It is...very similar to what would be used with human females. The primary difference, aside from the noticeable shape, is the rounded 'bulbs' at the end."

She made a strangled sound, understanding with acute female clarity how such device would feel, even if it could not tear flesh.

Drawing a thin, broken breath into her struggling lungs, she turned to the next page.

[ -]

"Is there ever... Does it ever not...hurt?" Zelda asked as they neared the corral.
"Sometimes. It still hurts a lot. But...some days, I don't think about it. Some days I wake up and fall asleep in Jay's arms, secure in his love and my strength. But other days...I nearly drown," Katherine admitted in a whisper.

One and a half days earlier...

"Is everything packed?"

"Yes, for the thirtieth time."

"So we didn't forget anything?"

"Not according to the fourth inspection of the list and these rooms."

"What about—"

"Zelda!" Impa snapped quietly. Well...as quietly as such a vocal expression could be uttered.

Teeth meeting with an audible click, Zelda felt her cheeks warm as she slowly turned from the dresser to stare at her mate.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I just...the last time we left..."

"Was in the middle of the night, during a war," Impa said quietly as she wrapped her arms around the other woman. "We were fleeing for your – for our lives. This is different."

"So much has changed since then," Zelda whispered as she rubbed her cheek against Impa's shoulder.

Unbidden, the memories spilled between them.

The late Queen, beautiful as all laboring mothers-to-be were, imparting her last wish upon a scared young woman. Scared, but so very determined.

She would not fail.

The words threaded through the merged recollection of the first fateful meeting between Gerudo and Hylian royalty within a decade. A fierce struggle of wills tinged the memories like leeching dye.

Until, one day, the struggle evolved. It was not over by any means, but as blood ran from a heaving chest to stain the innocent, scarred ground below, there was no denying the truth.

How tears stung their eyes as they were transported back to the fateful day when reality became inverted.

They had survived.

The psychological trials continued. But those of law, enacted by power-hungry fools who did not heed the truth of their stations, had passed. The country, which had once been protected by the blood and tears of children, was secured once more.

Hylia's will remained true as Wisdom guided this golden land.
A chuckle, weak yet so very true in its amusement, broke the mournful silence. Impa's lips pressed ever so lightly against Zelda's.

Power – golden-white with majesty, with the weight of Crown and Triforce – rolled through the dining hall as a chair slammed into the unforgiving wall. Undeniable, strength radiated from a decisive soul. Crushed by the irrefutable reality of her sovereignty, another usurper had crumbled beneath her might.

In some ways, the same could be said for the third male within their tragedy-turned-love story. Rather than crushed by her reality, it was his which chipped away at the sacred armor of Nauru's Love. Death had nearly stolen the bright spirit and inquisitive mind within a tortured form. Life had been spared, however, if only for the strength of love.

So much had changed…and so much had not.

They were here, as they always had been – together. Though love had changed, though relationships had broken and evolved, they were…

Still here.

Together.

Alive.

No matter their titles, their duties, they were still Zelda and Impa, still two souls paired by circumstances and choice.

And sometimes...

That was enough.

[-]

One day earlier…

Half a nation away, with crashing waves and grand bells filling the air with sweet music, pale fingers closed around a scribbled-upon crumble of torn parchment.

The last grains of sand fell from one bulb to another as light brown eyes closed.

"My Lord?" came the quavering inquiry.

"I said 'go'," he repeated. Tired, yet invigorated by the renewed fury coursing through his blue veins, he turned from the empty hourglass. His eyes sought hers, unmoved by the tears shimmering atop dark lashes.

Artifice, not love, was the base of their union. Which had, mercifully, come to an end.

"Prince D—"

"Leave, Saluo," he told her quietly, looking away.

Silk rustled as she closed the space between them, her skirts brushing the immaculate stone beneath plush velvet slippers.

"Daltus, my love—"
He shrugged away the hand which rested upon his arm, turning to face the tremulous sea.

"I don't love you, Salou, nor do you love me. We had an arrangement – which has come to an end."

"I do love you!" she tried, her voice breaking as the first tear fell.

"You love my gold," he corrected as he raised a hand to the thick glass.

"I love you. I told you I never wanted to be your queen!"

"The fact that you mentioned it at all is why this is over," he snarled as he spun on his heel.

"I—"

Hand pressed to her throat, she stumbled backwards. The fire in his eyes was so new, so unforgiving, that she could not hope to stay.

Drawing a deep breath and struggling as her heart broke, she dropped her hand. Head held high, she smoothed her skirts and brushed futile tears from her cold cheeks.

"You know where I will be," she said quietly as her knee bent in curtsy.

The gesture was lost, as he'd already turned away.

Lost, in his own thoughts...as he had been since his return abroad.

"Send the priests," he called as she opened the heavy door.

Sparing one last glance at the elegant bedchamber, she mumbled her agreement and closed the door behind her.

The soldiers did not stop her hasty retreat.

[]

Eighteen hours earlier...

Years of constant vigilance, of hyper-sensitivity to every sound and motion, made it impossible to remain still.

He paced the castle, thoughts racing yet going nowhere with every aimless step he took.

Heartbroken by the memories of the children they once were – happy, though never carefree – painted every stone with vivid colors in the early-morning sun.

Without notice or care, history pulled him to the secret little garden.

He'd found her here, once, peeking through a window few knew existed. It had been soon after his recovery, the last of his bruises still fading.

She'd smiled when she'd seen him, turning away from the glass portal as if it no longer held interest.

Years after that same window had been replaced with brick, he'd found her hanging from a ledge. A wince pulled tense muscles as he recalled the injury his shout had caused.

And now, with near a linear decade between them, he came upon her once more.
As the darkening sky above them became streaked with the hues of rose and copper, wistful longing burned his throat.

He made no obvious sound, but she turned to him anyway. Her bare feet hanging in the circular current, canvas trousers bunched at the knees and hair escaping the tight braid from hours before, she looked as tired as he felt.

Shifting his weight from foot to foot, as if he were a nervous youth once more instead of a confused adult, he waited.

"Whatever happened to our innocence?" she asked softly, raising her face to the wispy clouds.

Following her gaze, he traced the spears of dusk with tired eyes.

"It…wasn't hard to kill the confidence."

"What confidence? We were children."

"Exactly. All children are confident. Arrogant too. They seem to think they're invincible."

She chuckled then, turning back to him as his own lips pulled into a weak grin.

"Sit with me?" she asked quietly, patting the ground beside her as her smile faded into sadness.

Unquestioning, he sat as requested, keeping an obvious distance between them where once he would have been shoulder-to-shoulder.

"Are we friends again?" he asked quietly.

"I think we're…getting there," she admitted after a pause. "Can that…be enough?"

"Yeah, Cess…it's enough."

A flick of her foot sprinkled water through the air, some of which hit the target.

Laughing and wiping his face, he pushed her shoulder lightly.

"Brat."

"Mutt."

[—]

Twelve hours and forty minutes earlier…

"Close your eyes."

"Grandmother—"

"Close your eyes."

"But—"

"Close your eyes or I will tie you to the chair and blind fold you!"

Sighing in defeat, Impa slumped against the unforgiving hardback chair and closed her eyes.
"Sit up straight, Impa."

Sharp knuckles tapped against her shoulder, her spine straightening in response.

Gods… She felt like a child again.

"You're acting like one."

"This is ridiculous, grandmother!"

"What is ridiculous," Impaz said in the most impatient, maternal tone Impa had ever heard her use, "is your decision to have the Guardian symbol tattooed on your back!"

Grimacing at the memory – at the hours of upon hours of agony the two combined marks had taken to complete – she said nothing.

It… wasn't ridiculous.

Exactly.

Shrewd, narrowed eyes stared at the scarred and colored flesh. A wooden pick touched bare skin, leaving behind a drop of clay-red dye.

And beneath it, an indent.

"Grandmother!"

"Hush now." Impaz said softly, tugging an unrestrained lock of gray hair. "You will not be here after the ceremony, and have denied your kin the rightful celebration of your mateship. If this is the single Sheikah tradition you will observe, then endure."

"You don't need to drive the henna into my bones," came the grumbled, half-hearted response.

"Then sit up, be still and stop complaining."

"I bet you wouldn't be this cruel to Zelda."

"Zelda isn't as hard-headed as you."

[-]

Six hours earlier…

Knees bent and arms held aloft, she spun with a hunter's grace to avoid the nearing blade. Her own dagger glimmered in the faint light, tracing her motions.

Choice became the stage on which she danced. Spotlights blazing within her mind, she allowed her mind and body to flow with the music of life. The tides of action became the winds of time, carrying the story and knowledge until it was weightless.

Breath coming in even bursts, she ignored the red slash upon her bicep and parried without hesitation.

Once upon a time, there had been a Princess within a white castle.

Once upon a time, there had been a King from a barren desert.
Once upon a time, there had been a Hero of the wild forest.

Once upon a time…a decision had been made which set Fate's cruel weave into motion.

There had been no request made of her, no consent given to the path she was made to walk. Born to parents of nobility within a world of luxury, life's harsh realities had been imprinted upon her very soul before the first shocking breath had been drawn.

Survival was paramount, at any cost.

Shadows danced across the walls, cast by fighters whose passions ran as hot as their truths did cold.

An ember, a spark, a warmth which radiated from a body made to fight – to endure – could not be ignored.

It could not be dampened, even the crippling knowledge of experience rained within the desolate expanses of mentality.

"My Queen…"

Once upon a time, there was a Queen.

Once upon a time, there was a woman.

Once upon a time, there was a girl.

Beauty, grace and Wisdom defined her – but none could explain her.

Arms bare, tan flesh was exposed to a shaft of firelight. A single thick white line ran alongside a web of blue.

Every silent step upon the stones sent a chill through the balls of her feet, despite the season's warmth.

She spun, evading the hand which nearly encircled her arm, and ducked behind a partition.

The audience to the morning's performance was within her own mind, and that of her opponent. There was no applause to be heard as her pirouette displayed an effortless elegance to the Queen's sorrowful ballad upon the stage.

Once, she had been a girl determined to dance her way through life – to master every score demanded of her with the perfection expected of her station.

Once, she had believed in fairytales and the goodness of their deities – in the knowledge that everything would work out in the end.

And then…she had grown up.

The orange flames became living reminders, the colors evoking a spectrum of emotion she dared not look upon as the crescendo became known to her tuned senses.

Focusing upon red eyes staring with fierce determination from a blank face, she drew her first ragged breath.

Their blades were cast aside as the dance of their forms became all the more intimate, hands and feet colliding with various limbs by calculated activation of burning muscles.
Flesh upon flesh was a choice made within the silent discussion of their actions, a decision honored by those who understood.

It had not always been so.

It truly…had not.

Now, with the fortune of sheer will and keen intelligence, with the luck of raw emotion and bleak thoughts, the future was being laid upon the stars.

When the end upon them – when the curtains fell and could not be raised in encore – they had cast aside their roles. Breaking the rules which the play had set upon them, which the orchestra enforced with every melodic note, they had stepped before the red velvet. No longer seen, but unforgotten, the cast behind them had been oblivious to the sight of standing ovation.

[-]

Five hours earlier…

Moist heat was all-encompassing, an unwavering shroud of milky white which cleansed the aching body. Much abused muscles uncoiled from the web of tension which had been spun over time.

A storm of sensation, tendrils of pure white vapor carried aromatic specs of rainbow, summer rain captured within stone walls.

Invigorating mint, cooling eucalyptus and comforting sage assailed his nose and doused his bleeding heart in moments. His wounded spirit crying for comfort, he closed his eyes and turned his face to gentle waterfall.

Hands filled with sacred salts which burned his wounded flesh, he murmured prayers beneath the drum of water and his own heart.

"O Gracious Ones, Mothers and Fathers to the world and One who is All…” he began, nearly choking on the thick cloud of steam.

Throat burning from the incandescent droplets, he bowed his head as he choked, turning away from the welcoming heat.

Flesh red from both temperature and emotion, he stared at his scarred hands as they began to blur.

There was no comfort within the ritual of cleaning, of release. There was no peace to be had this day, not when his splintering heart threatened to break irreparably.

Fingers curling instinctively to his palms, he pressed his fists to his chest as if to protect the vulnerable organ. Reclining against the damp stone, tears mixed with water until salt washed the taste of the oils from his lips.

Suddenly and without provocation, a growl tore itself from his clean, chapped lips. His foot shifted, hitting an overturned bottle which became a projectile. Glass shattered against the wall, every clattering shard a breath of freedom against the grief threatening to crush him.

He had hoped, perhaps naïvely, that the duel would help. That it would drain the PAIN and the ANGER until there was only calm acceptance.

How wrong he was.
A sob of agony became a snarl of frustration. Bending without pause, he lifted another delicate bottle by the neck and hurled it with all his might.

Gods be damned, NO!

The white world became red as his eyes narrowed.

He wouldn't let this pain - this misery – break him.

He wouldn't.

[-]

Two hours earlier…

"You're late! You're late! I wasn't sure you were coming at all!"

"Link…need. To. Breathe!"

Loosening his hold, he grinned sheepishly and smoothed Navi’s rumpled Kokiri-colored gown. "Sorry. Sorry."

Midna shook her head, a lilting chuckle escaping as she turned tri-colored eyes to the human-wolf. "Why were you so nervous? It is not your wedding."

Cheeks reddening, he gave her his best mock-glare and headed for the main stairs, the vast castle doors closing behind them.

"You were supposed to be here days ago."

"Business," Midna said with an dismissive wave of her hand.

Navi rolled her eyes and trailed behind them, hoping to contain the damaged they'd yet to cause. Some things…never changed.

Midna and Link's childish antagonism was one of them.

[-]

Present…

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she ran a hand over her sleeves and willed her fluttering heart to still.

Time – immaterial but so very important – had passed at a snail's crawl in the blink of an eye. The choices and events which had brought them to this point were not to be denied.

How could they be?

Life – Fate, Destiny, whatever have you – were not to be denied.

It had started young, so young there was no understanding to be hand. The celestial symbols, which had defined them long before they could comprehend the paths they were upon, had presented early and without hesitation.
Be it sword and rose, or a triad of triangles, the course of their spirits’ incarnations would not be altered. Not through the gift the life, loss to death, joys of love or agonies of hate.

Heart in her throat, she closed her eyes for the briefest moment and listened to the clock’s welcoming chime.

It…was time.

Hand trembling in time with her staccato breath, her numb fingers closed around the gleaming doorknob.

Swallowing hard, she turned her hand and stepped into the open doorway.

Chapter End Notes

SONGS:
A Little Forgiveness by Molly Sandén (some lyrics were used in this chapter)
"The warmth you are feeling is desire, passion. It won't hurt you...I won't hurt you."

She raised her hands to release her hold, not shocked in the least when Zelda fled. Neither quickly nor with obvious discomfort, but there was no mistaking her silent exit with Garo at her heels.

Tugging on her hair gently, she took several deep breaths and fought with the constant exasperation that threatened to turn into something more. She couldn't – wouldn't – blame Zelda for this. It wasn't her fault, not truly. The miscommunications (or lack of communication, period) rested on both of their shoulders.

Tired of the fleeing, the hiding – by both of them, damn it all! – Impa followed. She did not run her frightened Charge to the ground like a wounded gazelle, but tracked her like a dragonfly in flight. She followed the bond as much as the soft footsteps some distance away would allow her to.

A wrong turn caused them to meet in a dead end, the previous corridor having been bricked off during the war.

Slowly, as if counting the seconds and measuring her options, she watched Zelda turn.

All of this evasion, whether physical or mental, hurt. But the distrust, pain and confusion she saw within those defiant green eyes dug much deeper into her heart.

Surprising both of them, Zelda spoke first, heedless of who might hear within the halls behind them.

"I don't...I don't think it's a s-sexual desire or passion I feel," she said quietly. "At least...not what I...re-recognize to be se-sexual."

The thought ran through Impa's mind as to the nature and validity of such recognition, a thought she did not voice.

Now was not the time.

Something must have shown on her face, however, as she moved closer. Zelda closed her eyes briefly as if in pain, swallowing hard and almost compulsively.

"It wasn't always...painful when he...called me. S-somet-times it w-was –"

Clenching her eyes, she dug her nails into numb hands and compelled herself to take several deep breaths as her head spun. Forcing the words and her voice to remain somewhat level even as her heart beat an erratic, deafening tempo in her ears, she spoke again.

"Sometimes when I...was with him, what he did wasn't always...painful. Sometimes I...felt nice. I would re-react, and...and..."

She felt, rather than heard or saw, Impa standing before her. Offering silent comfort, the strength of presence.
"He didn't call me every night or even every week. There were long stretches of time where I wouldn't see him. Other times he would call me often, but it didn't last. It was odd, going between those times," she admitted with a weak, broken smile. A hand stroked her hair as she opened her eyes. Focusing on Impa's concerned gaze, she swallowed again.

"I tried, a few times," she admitted in a shamed whisper. "I tried to...to touch myself. I tried to remember that wh-what he did...wasn't right. That if I e-ever were to—"

"Breathe, sesha, breathe. It's all right. You don't have to tell me," Impa said softly.

"I do," Zelda choked out. "I don't understand...anything. I know what it felt like, and I clutch everything Eldric tells me in my mind. That the re-reactions, the...the org-orgasms I had weren't my fa-fault." Her words came in a stuttered rush with barely a pause for breath, "That I...didn't want them. He s-said the body just...reacts."

Impa bit her tongue so hard she feared piercing the muscle. Keeping her touch steady, gentle, she continued to run it over Zelda's hair as the younger woman's eyes closed once more.

The Hylian shivered fiercely, uncurling her hands only long enough to embrace herself.

"The warmth...I don't understand. What is desire? What is passion? Why...why do you say...they won't hurt?"

"Because, my darling keta, the choice is always yours. It's like a dance, remember? The music may play, but that does not mean you have to dance or, if you want to dance, to accept any invitation. You can dance alone if you so choose. But desire is...is wanting to dance with another. It's feeling that music in your blood, in your soul, and knowing that when you're together, nothing else in the world matters. The one you dance with cares for you, and you for them, so there is only enjoyment to be found."

Leaning into Impa's hand, Zelda kissed her palm and forced herself to relax the bone-aching hold she had on her own arms.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, my love. I promise."

[-]

Mikal waited within the simple office, wearing the trappings of a Hyrulian Royal Advisor. He smiled kindly and rested the parchment scroll on the desk, sunlight streaming from a nearby window and highlighting the ribbons and stamp beside it.

"Reviewing the terms to ensure I do not rob the state?" she asked, closing the door softly behind her.

He chuckled and shook his head, taking in the full sight of the gray-haired female dressed in her formal Sheikah attire. How nervous she looked, despite her attempt to remain calm. When had he become able to see beneath the warrior's mask? "No. Merely passing the time."

"How many drafts were written?"

"Honestly? I lost count," he admitted sheepishly, glancing at the ceiling for a moment. "There is no precedent for a Guardian and their royal Charge marrying. Commoners and sovereigns have wed since long before our conception and perhaps even long after we have faded from memory. But
this...you and Zelda are setting history."

"Simply adding to it."

"You will take care of her?" he asked without hesitation.

The clock chimed as their eyes met.

"Always," she replied just as quickly.

They turned as one to the opening door.

Her breath caught in her throat and time seemed to stand still as she met Zelda's eyes across the room. A golden-white spirit brushed hers, the bond alighting with a mixture of nerves, love and joy.

_Breathe_, she heard within her mind.

Whose mind? Whose spirit?

Did it really matter anymore?

Mikal felt a sudden surge of pride and joy as he watched the two women walked forward. As they reached one another and their fingers entwined together, his feelings only grew. He could practically see their love radiating outward, breathing in sync, and eyes never drifting apart, and within it, he hoped that neither jealousy nor malice would mar the day.

He cleared his throat and looked between them before speaking, his voice strong and steady. "We are gathered here to celebrate the union of Queen Zelda Nohansen and Maderone Impa Se'al. May they be a blessing and comfort to each other. May they share in each other's dreams, console each other's sorrows, and help each other in all they set out to achieve. May they trust each other, trust life and love each other unconditionally, and may that love grow stronger every day."

He turned to the Sheikah. "Impa, will you have this woman to be your wedded wife? Will you cherish her friendship, trust her, honor her, love her faithfully, for today, tomorrow and forever?"

Impa smiled, seeing the question reflected within Zelda's glimmering eyes. "I will," she announced, speaking to the Advisor as much as their incorporeal audience. Within the corner of her vision, the shadows lightened as those beyond the Veil moved just the tiniest bit closer, so very desperate to watch and bless this union.

Where was Nabooru when she was needed?

Taking a shaking breath, Zelda listened to Mikal's words once more, the smile in his voice was apparent. "Zelda, will you have this woman to be your wedded wife? Will you cherish her friendship, trust her, honor her, love her faithfully, for today, tomorrow and forever?"

"I do," she said, her voice wavering ever so slightly. The fingers that were wrapped around hers tightened in support, a comforting spirit enveloping around hers in safe love.

"Impa, repeat after me," Mikal requested, drawing their attention to the present. They turned to him briefly in acknowledgement before returning their gazes to one another.

"I, Impa, take Zelda to be my wife. To have and to hold, from this day forward; for better or worse, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, forsaking all others, and there to you, I pledge my
love."

The words were repeated with half a thought, the words a formality to the emotion thrumming from one heart to another; to the thoughts shared between them.

"And now, Zelda, please repeat after me. I, Zelda take Impa to be my wife. To have and to hold, from this day forward; for better or worse, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, forsaking all others, and there to you, I pledge my love."

The words became stuck in her throat as unseen hands clamped around it, her lungs burning. She took a step back instinctively, fear taking the place of an anxiety that had been resting just outside of her awareness.

"Easy, my love, easy," came the gentle words within her mind as a rough thumb brushed over her knuckles. "There is no reason to fear. Nothing will change."

Almost as if seeking reassurance, Zelda looked between Impa and Mikal. He gave her a patient, understanding smile (damn that knowing sadness in his eyes!). "Take all the time you need," he said softly. "It's only us here."

She took a deep breath and clenched Impa's hands tighter, meeting the reassuring ruby gaze as she spoke the oath. As she finished, she was prompted to remove the ring hidden within her dress and she clutched it just as tightly between her fingers so that she wouldn't drop it.

"Impa, as a symbol of our vows, and with all that I am and all that I have, I honor you. With this ring, I thee wed." She slid a slender silver band accented on either side by thin strips of gold onto the fourth finger of Impa's left hand.

Smiling, Impa kissed Zelda's hand before dropping it. "Zelda, as a symbol of our vows, and with all that I am and all that I have, I honor you. With this pendant, I thee wed." Stepping forward, she clasped a silver chain around Zelda's throat and stepped back. A small, flowing locket taking the shape of a lotus formed into an empty cage rested two inches below her collarbone.

Mikal took a steadying breath as Zelda's shaking fingers slid over the pendant, tracing each dip and line. Blinking away tears, he cleared his throat once more. "For as much as you have pronounced your love to each other, I now pronounce you wife and wife."

Rather than a kiss, their emotions tangled together within the bond, they embraced. Arms wrapped tightly around one another, they pressed cheeks to shoulder and neck, taking in scent and pulse without shame. Within the white cloak of those tangled emotions that they had enveloped themselves in, there was no one and nothing else that mattered but them. And it was enough.

Some said it was fate. Others said it was destiny. Impa said it was it mateship. Zelda called it marriage.

For Mikal, it was nothing but pure love.
Epilogue

Across the nation, messengers unrolled scrolls, announcing the marriage of Queen Zelda Nohansen and Maderone Impa Se'al.

Those in protest found themselves outnumbered and overwhelmed by a massive wave of supporters. After years of bitter conflict for the freedom of their beloved land, many were simply happy there was no foreign threat to their lives.

Some were taken by the romanticism of Guardian and Charge, by the mysticism and spirituality of their love; others simply by the knowledge that their Queen, much like the people she represented, had married for love and acceptance, unlike her father before her.

Some muttered at the unnatural union of two women, at the reality that their Queen had married a woman, and bemoaned the future of a throne and government - the very thing that some of them had fought to protect - imperiled by such a drastic change.

But for now, they found themselves silenced.

For now, desperate, he was silent.

The warm, sun kissed wind cut against his cheeks as he ran, feet barely touching the ground. Heart pounding, deafening him to the jubilant cheers and celebration pouring from Castle Town, he sucked in deep breaths to fuel burning muscles. Having eschewed the use of a horse and foregoing the honored means of Shadow travel, he pushed his body to the limit.

He would see them go, as the others were.

Praying he was not too late, that the ship had not sailed before he had a chance to say goodbye, he urged his body all the further, all the faster.

The scent of salt reached his nose and burned his eyes ever so faintly before he saw the pier.

Trembling with exertion, he stumbled once before righting himself.

He would not fail in this.

[-]

Keji turned away from the captain and Navy Guards, satisfied with the last minute check. The ship was packed, paperwork completed, and the crew ready. Raising a hand to his eyes, he watched the royal carriage approach. The Windfish behind him, he walked down the gangplank and across the dock, mindless of the stares, whispers and pointed fingers being directed his way.

There really was no dignity to be found in such childish displays of shock, awe, and fear, but with some careful contemplation, he had to admit that the hidden and protective role that his people had so long played might be partly to blame for it. Perhaps it was time for the Sheikah to make their presence better known, given Impa's marriage.
Taking a slow, deep breath, he came to a halt between two Royal Guards, twin rows of saluting soldiers flanking them in a protective tunnel.

None would harm their Queen or Her bride as they left this day.

A small smile pulled at his lips as he watched the oiled wooden door open, sunlight glinting off the inlaid Hyrulian crest. Stepping forward, he offered a hand to his tribe sister.

She took it with a lack of grace, the expression on her face showing her displeasure with all the pomp and circumstance. With a minute shrug, he stepped back enough to allow her to provide Zelda with the same courtesy.

Though her hand was steady, she trembled inside. Shock continued to radiate through her as the full reality of her situation settled into her consciousness.

She was married.

Blinking at the sun reflecting off the water, she recalled her father's words and let them wash over her, settling some of the anxiety.

"I remember how you sought any story of oceans, and how many of your own stories as a child revolved around them. Let this be your freedom, Zelda. For your birthday, or honeymoon, I ask that leave Hyrule in the hands of your capable advisories and ministers…and see the world. If only for a little while, live as Zelda the artist - the musician. Leave Queen Zelda upon the dock with her subjects and friends. I promise…she will be there when you return."

A new beginning with the woman she considered both friend and mate, away from it all. Maybe…just maybe she could have something akin to peace for once.

Hopeful, she stepped from the carriage and watched Garo follow, his attention moving between the crowds, the ocean, and his leash. With a heartfelt sigh, she handed the leash to Keji and summoned a smile.

"Take care of him?"

"Of course. And I promise," he added with a rare public smile, "we won't let Torna spoil him with treats."

"No, that's grandmother's job," Impa snarked softly as she raised Zelda's hand to her lips. "Come, my love."

Stepping aside, Keji watched them walk towards the boat before glancing down at Garo. His ears were pressed flat and he whined, pulling at the leash. "No boy, you're staying with us."

Whimpering, Garo followed the two legger's commanding tug, slipping into the shadows with him. He tracked Zelda as much as he could, only looking away when he realized there was another male present.

Smelling like wind and sweat, like he'd been running hard, was the two-legger whose heart hurt when he was around the tree-smelling female.

Reyel, they called him.

He looked sad. It was probably because the stupid females were leaving him here too! How could the pack protect them if they were left behind?! Growling, he looked at the rope and sunk his teeth
into it, gnashing on it to get free.

Reyel and Keji both chastised him, looking down as they did so. His chewing became softer before stopping, and their attention once more turned to the ladies ascending the boat.

"We weren't sure you would come," Keji remarked, sounding as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"I almost didn't," Reyel admitted. How many of his brethren had figured out the truth in the last few days?

"What made you change your mind?"

"Love," came the simple response after a long pause.

Two sets of red eyes never left the newlyweds as they boarded the ship.

"What will you do now?" was the question Keji finally settled on.

"I…don't know. For now, try to absorb the sight before me and…live my life. Take it each minute at a time," he added with a deep, soul-cleansing breath.

A sudden gust from the expanse before them blew toward the congregation, bringing forth a renewed scent of marine brine and aquatic life.

Higher up, Midna and Navi both laughed as Link's nose wrinkled, his eyes flashing yellow in the sun.

"Down boy," Navi chided, earning a stuck-out tongue in response. They all waved, Shad included, as Zelda and Impa turned to face the crowd, safely aboard the ship's deck. Renewed cheers, whistles, and cries of good wishes filled the air as flower petals rained upon the harbor.

Unnoticed by only a few, Mikal tucked a scroll into his vest pocket.

He was now one of the hand selected individuals with the power to run the country in Her Majesty's absence, a decision that would take effect the moment the anchor lifted. The weight of responsibility settled on his shoulders and in his heart, making him swallow hard. He couldn't help but smile in thanks as Zelda took his hands in hers and squeezed them in reassurance before shooing him off the boat.

Malon would surely laugh at him for feeling so unprepared, but it was an enormous task and trust he had been given.

Impa took Zelda's hand and raised it to her lips as the gangplank was lifted away.

"If all is aboard M'lady," said the captain, drawing their attention with a quiet cough, "we'd like to sail 'fore the winds change again."

Gazing once more at the people, the country, and the duty she would leave behind, Zelda nodded and spoke quietly.

"Aye, sir. Let's set sail, shall we?"

Though a few gold teeth had replaced his natural white ones, the pleasure he felt at her words was reflected in a smile that matched her own. "Yes, M'lady."

"Raise the anchor and clear the deck!"
They watched the shore and its inhabitants for a long while until even the flags were barely specks against the sky.

"Where would you like to go?" Impa asked quietly as she slowly wrapped her arms around her wife.

Her wife!

Goddesses be praised.

"Wherever the wind takes us," Zelda replied, turning her face to the sun with a smile. "Let's… enjoy our freedom, for however long it lasts. Let the sea be our guide for now. For so long, Destiny has been our driving force. And to heed Destiny's call, we've vanquished fiends and monsters, overcome those who meant to come between us, saved the damsel in distress," she added with a smile and kiss to Impa's jaw. "We've earned our reprieve, I believe. A time to simply…rest and enjoy life. To see the world beyond our scar-ridden country.

"Let's just…be us…whoever we are. I don't know who I am, and I'm not sure I ever did." Feeling strong arms tighten around her, she leaned back, pressed her head to a soft breast, hearing the steady heartbeat that always gave her a sense of security. "But I want to learn. I want to find me, if that makes sense. And…I want to learn who you are too, beyond Guardian and Sage. I want to learn about the woman I married, whose heart brings me such comfort and arms such shelter. I want us to learn from each other, to follow the stars and currents until we reach our journey's end, wherever that may be.

"For now…that's enough."

It had been a long and painful journey that had brought them to this place.

A girl with wisdom beyond her years, molded, tested, and broken by the trials and tribulations of those that saw her only as a means to an end.

A woman whose soul had been called to serve, worn thin by the celestial merits of her everlasting loyalty and what it truly meant to love.

As to the siren calls and bitter tears that Destiny would foist upon them, to the travesties of man and beast that would assail upon their happiness, to the grievances and anguishes that would upheave the poisons of their past to surface, to whether they would triumph against the later days or lose themselves or lose each other, for once in their lives, none of it mattered.

And for now, it truly was enough.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea what to say. It's been a long journey! Thank you to my wonderful beta for all your hard work, (and the last few paragraphs of this chapter). After careful thought, and due to where my writing is going, STL and I have decided not to make a Book Two. Keep an eye on Realms, however, as you may see out-takes and post-LJ scenes to explain what happened afterwards.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!