Congruent

by Sincosma

Summary

Derived from the old word congruō, Congruence is a rare cosmic phenomenon. While much is still unknown about this particular bond, it is characterized by a very powerful, very concentrated energy exchange between the two subjects – undoubtedly the most powerful one ever observed. Link/male!Sheik, slash.
Chapter 1

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A/N: This story takes place post seven year war. Sheik is a male and this is a slash pairing.

Rating: T for now; blood, gore, and language.

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I.

The knighting ceremony was simply a pleasantry; written in gold ink on an ancient scroll somewhere in the Royal Library, buried in an otherwise unremarkable aisle where other such ceremonial scripts and proceedings were kept.

Link barely tolerated the thick, stuffy royal uniform, feeling ridiculous in the rich blues and metallic golds. Although he had long-since abandoned the greens of a people that were never his, this new garb somehow felt even more foreign to his skin. Sweat was building at the nape of his neck and when his eyes met the reds of Sheik's, he found the blatant amusement there was doing nothing to quell the irritation that was swelling in his chest.

This is what he got for helping Zelda.

She stood before him, in one of the most impressive gowns he'd seen her in yet. It was all golds and purples and ornate stitching - something Link would normally admire on a day he wasn't wrapped up like a mummy. He could still remember his own stupid, shocked expression when one of the maids pulled him in front of a full-length mirror to gawk at himself. Now he just sighed, trying not to fidget or throw one of the vases on either side of him at Sheik while Zelda read from a lengthy scroll.

Behind him sat half of Hyrule. These were the people that fled to surrounding kingdoms Link had never heard of the moment the King of Hyrule fell. Zelda forgave them because they were protecting their resources for imminent war as Ganondorf's rule had spread.

Link didn't forgive them because they were cowards.

Anyone was allowed in the ceremony and a good portion of the people behind him were the friends that had supported him during his journey two years ago. These were the people who gave him red potions, a bed to sleep on, food to shovel down as though it were his last meal, and companionship when the horror of the temples crept into his resolve. He was glad for them; they probably knew how not him this all was. Zelda knew too. Sheik definitely knew. But he would suffer it for Hyrule, the kingdom he nearly died to save.

Yesterday he had turned twenty, finally of age to become Royal Guardsman of Hyrule – the Royal Guardsman of Hyrule. Behind all the flashy terminology, he was General of the Royal Armies. The ceremony would ensure that Link had no superiors save the Queen herself. That part was a
welcome change considering how much his commanding officer, Captain Vega, was a test to his patience. The man's determined endeavor to "expose" Link's arrogance was about to send him over the edge. The Captain put him through pointless, tiring training, trying to knock him down the ranks and prove that being a divine hero did nothing for you in the real world.

As though Link knew nothing of the real world.

He was pulled from his reverie via the sound of expensive fabric rustling and Link realized that everyone had risen from their seats. He focused on Zelda and found her smirking a bit at him knowingly. Of course she knew he had zoned out. She had that older-sister look on her face, like she had just caught him red-handed and was fully prepared to blackmail him for this later.

"Kneel, Link, Hero of Time," she spoke in that regal voice he often teased her for, only now it was rather awe-inspiring and were he a lesser man his eyes would have cast away.

Instead, he fought the urge to stick out his tongue like a child but only because behind her sat the entire Royal Cabinet and Royal Guard. He snapped a look at Captain Vega and basked in the fury on the mustached man's face. Link kneeled, feeling the impossibly thick fabric tug in places that made him glare balefully at the woman he was pledging fealty to. She suppressed a laugh as she approached him, the sword that had been specially made for him glinting in her hands.

Named the Moon Blade, it had been crafted exactly to his specifications. The primary ore was Sky Iron, a rare metal from the Goddesses themselves. Other ores from different parts of Hyrule were impregnated into it as well; ores from Death Mountain, Lake Hylia, under the earth of Kokiri forest, and sand from the deserts. It gripped warm and familiar in his hand, a reminder of his great dislike for the Master Sword; the next time he wielded it would be too soon. With it had been the pain and horror of the war, memories that nearly destroyed him after that time had ended. The hilt had been uncomfortable to keep him awake and alert anytime he wielded it. But this hilt was shaped to Link's hand and it was wrapped in thick leather from his old Kokiri garb to symbolize the place that raised him.

Zelda had wanted to embed jewels or other precious metals, but Link only asked for one stone:

Moonstone.

He wouldn't tell her why. He couldn't tell her that, in the years of his outcast youth and the frightening nights of the war, it was his boon. He had Sheik, of course, but in the long watches of the night it was his only tether to reality. Now two large, round glowing moonstones sat in the leather grip on either side, to remind him of its omnipresent light in the bleakest of times and the blackest of nights. Down the blade were ancient prayers etched in ancient Hylian, most of which Link couldn't read. But he knew what they said; Zelda was saying them now.

"Courage, Wisdom, and Power: By the power of the Three, this blade is blessed, sealed, and unbreakable."

He couldn't help but shiver. He had only just recently learned of the long line of Heroes that existed throughout the history of Hyrule. It explained his strange dreams and the nagging déjà vu he would get occasionally. The blade gleamed sharply in the ethereal light descending from the glass domed ceiling above them, the reflected glow trembling in a dance of colors on the walls.

Zelda raised the sword and pulled his attention back to herself. She tapped it a little too hard to each of his shoulders, back and forth until they it counted three times, symbolizing the Goddesses
blessings. As she did this, her voice rang out through the chamber, "By the power of the Three and
the Royal Family of Hyrule, I give thee title of High Royal Guardsman of the Crown."

She held the sword flat in her soft, slender hands and said, so loudly it almost made him jump,
"Rise, Link, High Royal Guardsman of the Crown, Hero of Time, and take your sword, the Moon
Blade. May it aid you as you protect our Kingdom."

Link grinned at her; the next bit was definitely going to be the most ridiculous part of the whole
monkey show. He took the blade from her and held it high above his head, pointing towards the
glass ceiling and the heavens above. Like Zelda made him rehearse a thousand times – as though
he didn't know how to handle a sword – he turned and, facing the crowd, swung the blade in
several different patterns that were meant to pay tribute to the Three. Part of him wished he'd
miscalculate his swings and cut a hole in his stifling uniform, but he finished with a flourish, thick
fabric still intact.

Cheers deafened him momentarily. As everyone rose to their feet, clapping as loud as their hands
would allow, Link was reminded how uncomfortable it all made him. Unfortunately, saving the
kingdom brought him a rather embarrassing fan club, most of which were females and clearly
present by the croons of their voices. He endured the attention and, despite making a fool out of
himself constantly, had somehow garnered even more admiration from them. Royalty clapped
reservedly while commoners whooped and hollered as they did in the pubs. Link had to crack a
grin when the owner of the bazaar – who was clearly drunk – pumped a fist in the air and
accidentally knocked a Duke in the back of the head.

And that was when he saw her.

She sat in the front row, a bit to his right. Tall and slender, every curve of her body was as though
it were carefully crafted so. She wore a deep green gown, threads of silver running in delicate
filigree through the forest-colored fibers. Her hair was pitch black, piled on her head in a mix of
braids and twists that danced with thin silver ribbons. And amidst the display sat a delicate white
crown with a crescent moon.

Link knew enough about rank to spot her as royalty and she was clearly a Queen, judging by the
spires that wound all the way around the circlet rather than the open tiaras Princesses or Duchesses
wore. Queen of what? He had no idea, but her dark eyes captured him and held his gaze like a
snare. They were such a dark brown, endless and unreadable, framed by the thickest lashes and the
finest, highest brows. Something about her energy felt ancient and angry, the vibrations of it
quivering despite the applause. Her entire face was fascinating, like he could look forever and still
not see everything about it. She was alluring and beautiful in a way that made her unreal.

Never had he noticed so much about a woman in such fine detail. He forced his eyes away and
smiled at the crowd, trying to shake off the feeling that she had somehow made him look at her.

As with all royal events, a bothersome, boisterous reception and ball followed the ceremony. It
would last well into the night and it was only just past noon as Link finished changing into a much
lighter uniform. It was very much like the one he'd be wearing from now on; still a little more
embellished but nowhere near as stiff as the ceremonial garb had been.

As a warrior, nothing was more worrying than being stuffed into clothing one couldn't fight well
in. As least he was now in a loose tunic and pants instead of stuffy velvets. Zelda gave him new
boots - he had still been wearing the same boots he saved Hyrule in and this change, at least, he
was grateful for. They were a bit flashy for his taste but as he'd been told many times, he was the
High Royal Guardsman now. "You can afford to be flashy," Zelda had insisted when he gave them a doubtful look.

Link ran his fingers through his hair, which was damp from lingering sweat still, and found himself missing his hat and missing his fairy. Navi would frequently make her home in his hair. Now nothing but scalp met his fingers.

There was a knock at the door and he turned to see Sheik walk in, not waiting for an invitation. He was still wearing his own royal uniform, which was not even in the realm of stiff and immobilizing, much to Link's irritation. While Sheik normally wore his simple Royal bodyguard armor as Impa had, today he wore light armor in white and gold at Zelda's request. It was the strangest juxtaposition against his dark skin and red eyes. As always, the cowl was over his face, though Zelda had managed to pull his hair back in a ponytail despite some grumbling - something Link had spent the morning yanking on whenever he had the chance.

"Very impressive display, Link," Sheik commented in a voice in which no one would hear the sarcasm in, save himself or Zelda. He leaned against an armoire as Link rolled his eyes amidst strapping the Moon Blade around his torso. "I didn't know you were so talented at flipping around a sword like a color guardsman."

"I technically outrank you, Sheik." Link quipped with a smirk. "Better watch that tone."

He knew Sheik was giving him a rueful look just from his eyes. Of course, Sheik didn't really speak with any specific tone a majority of the time; they just knew each other that well. Link had had to sit through Sheik's much quieter ceremony for Royal Bodyguard last year and made fun of him the entire time. Now, he supposed, Sheik was finally taking his revenge.

They'd been friends for three years now, though Link could hardly consider them friends during the war itself. Sheik had been dispatched via the then Princess to be Link's guide through the temples, nothing more. Zelda read from the ancient prophecy and relayed the information to the Hero through Sheik. The whole arrangement had been annoyingly vague and tight-lipped, but Sheik had just been following orders and the Princess had just been trying to keep as many distractions at bay as possible. There would be plenty of time for friendship after the battles. And there certainly was.

It took a year for all of Hyrule to finally exit crisis. Although most of Ganondorf's beast had either fled or been slain, the average monsters and animals were taking advantage of a weakened kingdom. Entire villages were destroyed, its people displaced and starving. Link was given two weeks off to recover from the War and Sheik tended to him when he could. It was then that they were finally able to speak as equals and it was explained to Link that Sheik had just been Zelda's liaison during the past year.

"That makes sense, I suppose," Link had agreed. "All that script was too," he waved his arms theatrically, "dramatic for someone like you."

Sheik had just glared balefully at him – same as he was now, actually.

"What?" Link had laughed, wincing a bit when it bothered a still-mending rib as he sat back against the railing of his hospital bed. "I mean, you look too stoic to say things like 'The passion of friendship will soon blossom into a righteous power'."
This was the point that Link finally made the Sheikah smile. He could tell by the slight crinkle around those dark red eyes. This was the point, Link was sure, that he and Sheik finally became friends.

Link found himself sharing most of his meals with the Sheikah after that. They would take assignments together when they could, spar and train at least twice a day, and sometimes meet at the balcony in the highest tower of the castle to stargaze. He'd determined, after two years of this kind of companionship, that Sheik was the closest friend he'd ever had. They were both quiet, sarcastic, stubborn, strong, and intellectual. But aside from the simple things it was the darkness they both shared. No one had seen the death and destruction Link had seen except Sheik and it blinded them together in a worn and weathered way.

They especially tended to gravitate towards one another in the types of situations like the party they were now in transit to. Neither of them really knew what to do with themselves at things like this. Both of them had broken delicate champagne glasses on several occasions, the grace of lords never with them when it came to entertaining royalty. Inevitably some slightly intoxicated Duchess or Princess ended up finding the nerve to try and "woo" either of them (sometimes both of them), much to Zelda's amusement. Rich, dainty women would eye Link like a painting on display and talk politics like he was the authority on monarch gossip. Or they would try and find a way coerce Sheik into revealing his face – always to no avail – despite the countless times he explained the seriousness of Sheikah tradition. For whatever reason, those people were drawn to both of them, undoubtedly because they were trying to stay under the radar, thus making them stick out like sore thumbs.

There was absolutely no chance of avoiding any of it this time, however, Link accepted grimly.

As soon as they entered one of main party halls, Duchess Morsa (Link was unfortunately all too familiar with her) looped her little arm around his and dragged him off to the spirits. When she learned of Link's moderately low alcohol tolerance - compared to her well-practiced one - she made a point to extort it. Sheik waved goodbye with amused eyes as Link was pulled away with a glare of betrayal.

But it didn't matter; soon enough the same would happen to Sheik. Especially if Queen Alasin of Esna was there. She had taken a very uncomfortable liking to Sheik last year – uncomfortable for Sheik and everyone in the vicinity. The Queen made a habit of finding any excuse to grope him or whisper in his ear, sometimes too unpredictable for Sheik to avoid. And it was excellent source of material to tease the Sheikah about during their sparing matches.

Nothing was more challenging than an angry Sheikah warrior and Link still hadn't managed to beat him yet since the war.

"C'mon, High Royal Guardsman, let me get you your first drink!" Morsa insisted. It was clear she already had at least three drinks in her. With each glass, the volume of her voice got just a bit louder and by the end of the night (which Link would not be present for) she'd probably be screaming. Or singing. And which was worse, Link was still not completely sure.

"Just some mead is fine," Link warned. Morsa just laughed and shoved strong whiskey in his hands. He stifled a groan; he needed to get this whiskey away from him. And her. "My lady, would you mind getting me some fruits from the platter? I've been starving since the ceremony."

Morsa – too eager to please – immediately obliged and set off like it were a royal quest. Link quickly turned to the bartender and relieved to find her ready for the switch having heard the
She swapped his whiskey for a light mead in the same shaped glass. Morsa would never see the slight difference in browns at this point. He thanked her graciously and took a drink just as Morsa returned with nearly the whole platter of fruits.

Thank the Three Zelda was only asking him to stay until sun down.

When Link finally managed to get away from Morsa via a very young and cocky-looking Baron, he sought out Zelda. She was surrounded by a few people, all practically begging for some new export trades. Hyrule was diverse and rich in so many resources, other kingdoms fought for dominance in trade with them like they were the equivalent of a gold mine. It was the only thing that saved Hyrule from the aftermath of war through the generations. Zelda found it funny how openly desperate they were now. Her father used to take this political dance so seriously; she, on the other hand, just played with them. Link warned that one day it was going to bite in her in the behind but her only reply was, "That's why I have you and Sheik."

She caught his eye and beckoned him over. As he approached, she said, "Gentlemen, forgive me. I wish to speak with my new Guardsman. We shall set a date to discuss these matters. In the meantime, please do enjoy the party."

Her big blue eyes lulled them into submission as the men seemed ready to protest – they really had no chance. Zelda still played the serene, beautiful, and persuasive young girl card so well it was a constant reminder she was literally reincarnated for that purpose. She had been thrust into the role out of duty at an age far too young for the enormity of running an empire. The murder of her father and the start of the war locked her fate ten years prior. And since the crown had touched her head two years ago, Zelda had shouldered the weight with more grace than Link thought possible.

Sure, she was overwhelmed sometimes, but her light-hearted attitude towards the dirtiest of politics saved her sanity on the worst of days. She hand-picked the best Cabinet Hyrule had seen in half a century and both he and Sheik had done everything they could to ease the load.

For the first year after the War, during the great reconstruction of the kingdom, Link and Sheik became the liaisons for Zelda when various emergencies forced her to remain at the castle. They did tours around the kingdom, checking up on repairs, helping rebuild houses, and handing out grains and seeds to restart farms. Through all of that, they tried to keep from Zelda how bad things actually were. Every time they reported to the castle or passed through while making their rounds, they never spoke of the graves or the blank-faced widows and orphans. They never mentioned the amputees or the bodies.

Maybe it was to spare her from the guilt she still carried for not stopping Ganondorf and saving her father when they were little. Her prophecy had been moving into motion before their eyes and, despite how much Link and Sheik both insisted now, she had difficulties accepting that the war had been destined to happen. Divine prophecy was once something she couldn't truly accept, especially in the bleak aftermath of Ganondorf's reign. Eventually, she had no choice but to trust things had occurred by the hands of the Goddesses – what else could one do in the face of such evil? Zelda was strong and learned to move from her grief. But even still, when they could spare her reality, they did.

Zelda knew, though. She saw right through them when they told her all was going well, that the damage wasn't near as bad as they thought it would be. Zelda was too clever for that and sent every resource she could to every part of Hyrule and stretched the ones in Castle Town thin.

She looked at him now with those same keen eyes.
"Calm down, Link. You're having far too much fun," Zelda teased, sitting back on her throne and fiddling with the cushions behind her. A frown passed her forehead in distaste. "I hate this thing. I hate sitting in a throne during a party. I feel like my father."

Link just laughed. Although these kinds of things were expected of royalty, Zelda could never stomach it. The former King, Link had come to learn, had been a terrible and cruel ruler. His lust for riches and superiority had spilt blood on the already blood-stained history of Hyrule. His great mistrust for the races of his land had led to a civil war and ultimately the death of thousands, Link's own parents included. Zelda had even herself admitted to the speculation that perhaps the Goddesses had allowed Ganon's dark reign just to force all the filth to be rinsed away in divine prophecy.

The man who had raged pointless wars, however, was very much hidden from his princess. It was not until after his death that the cloud of ignorance was lifted from Zelda and her father's atrocities revealed. But she had still known him as the type to be paraded around on a heavy throne carried by ten men and to hire court jesters and musicians to entertain him.

Link knew well that Zelda would likely spend most of her rule endeavoring to become her father's antithesis.

Even now she wanted to ride a horse like a man, to dance with everyone else at the party, and to shop in Castle Town among the commoners. The Cabinet's only drawback was the old standards in which they held her to. Zelda was the Queen; she could do what she pleased. But the Cabinet still had a say and they influenced what bills passed and what bills didn't. The Queen couldn't spend her entire reign arguing with her own Cabinet all the time; sacrifices had to be made.

"You're not your father," Link assured her, pushing Zelda's elbow out of the way so he could sit on the arm rest of her white and gold throne. Before them danced royalty and commoners, much to the former's distaste. Zelda insisted on having one mixed party hall, while her father would've had everyone separated by class.

"Thank you for tolerating that ceremony, Link," Zelda said, her voice suddenly quiet. "It means a lot to me."

He frowned. "It wasn't a big deal. My only real complaint was that damn uniform." Link nudged her with his arm. "What's that face for?"

She looked troubled. "I've just been having dreams lately." Link leaned back to show he was listening and she shrugged slightly. "I don't know. They're vague. But they all feature the same things: an elephant, a crescent moon on golden armor, and a heart with horns."

Elephants? Link had only seen a drawing of an elephant once. They were enormous animals from another place, far away from Hyrule. Centuries ago people would come to Hyrule riding them like horses. They were tremendous creatures with the sort of strength that would end a fight with one swing of their tusks. Link didn't know much more than that. And what could the heart with horns mean? These sorts of premonitions were always lost on him - Zelda seemed to be the only one who could determine what was practical and what was metaphorical when it came to clairvoyance.

"There's always a figure riding it, whispering words I don't understand. The moon is full and the ground is shaking..." she stopped, as if she were saying too much, and shook her head. "I think it's just stress. I have a very important meeting coming up tomorrow."
Link didn't buy it, but he wasn't going to press the matter. Zelda knew that, too. "Don't stress. Everything will be fine. It always is," Link promised, looping an arm around her delicate shoulders and pulling her close. She rested her head on his side and smiled slightly.

"Thanks, Link," Zelda admitted. "You're sweet…when you want to be."

The Queen dismissed him when two Baronesses approached her for an audience, shock clear on their faces that Link and Zelda were so close; that was sure to add fuel to the rumors. Link excused himself with a bow to the women who were now devouring him with their eyes. The whole Hero romance complex had to end sometime, surely. He shook his head and made for an empty corner to hide and relax in.

It was then that he was intercepted by the woman he saw during his ceremony.

She was just a little taller than himself and her deep, almost feline eyes captured his as she asked in a voice like honey accented with spices, "Could I steal the High Royal Guardsman for a dance?"

He blinked, mind feeling curiously blank. "Um, I suppose…"

She reached out a delicate hand, sheathed in a silk green glove and said, "Queen Evanna of the Eastern Kingdoms."

Link bowed, taking her hand and kissing it, a motion he had been forced to practice for Zelda countless times. Zelda always said he looked too clumsy when he did it. Maybe that still held true because Evanna laughed softly, a sound that made his pulse pick up for some reason. "Shall we?"

Dancing wasn't so bad for Link. It reminded him of combat forms and it was really just like following those patterns but to the calculation of a waltz. He led her along to the flow of gentle music in the hall and she studied him with a strange sort of intensity, as though she were deciding something just then. "You looked very stunning in your uniform today," she said conversationally, her hand tightening ever so slightly on his shoulder. "Truly like the Hero of Legend."

"Thanks."

"So, Hero of Time. You're the one who won the war," Evanna continued. Her lashes were so long he watched them brush against her fine brows. "You're the pride of the country, then."

"Well, I don't know…I guess I am," Link replied with a shrug, feeling pointedly more and more strange as she drew closer. The rest of the room had disappeared and they were just careening through empty space. He had a distinct feeling that there was some sort of spell being cast on him, but he couldn't seem to block it like he normally could with any other mind spell. Sheik had taught him several methods of avoiding such bewitchment, but none of them seemed to be working. "May I ask why you've taken an interest in me?"

Evanna let out a soft laugh, revealing sharp white teeth and dark red gums. "Who wouldn't be interested in the Hero of Time? Especially when he's so handsome."

Warmth filled his stomach and head, making him feel drunk. There was something nearly oppressive about her aura, like she was slowly trying to suffocate him. Never had he met someone with such a presence of magic. Link didn't know whether to be rude and break away or fall into her
warmth. But he felt it was very important that he not give away his awareness of her spell. There was no telling why she was doing it but he didn't want to risk anyone else in the hall if things went south. Link needed to keep her occupied and, ideally, find a way to get her out of there.

"I've never seen you here before. I've never heard of the Eastern Kingdoms, either. Where are they?" he probed, finding his eyes growing heavy as he spoke.

Her smile went even more feline. "To the East."

It took real effort to not roll his eyes at this answer. "Would you like to step out on the balcony? I would like some fresh air," Link suggested, forcing them to stop. The party shifted back into focus and he realized that the entire floor had opened up to watch him and Evanna dance. He held out his arm for her, knowing she couldn't refuse under the scrutiny. Her face was unreadable as the crowd clapped for them. That same cat-like smile pulled her eyes into a sharp slant and she nodded, taking his arm and moving close to him.

The crowd of people broke up and as he led her to the balcony he scanned the faces quickly, immediately finding the Sheikah against the wall, almost out of sight. Their eyes met and Link ran a hand through his hair, the little signal for trouble they'd long developed. Sheik nodded so slightly anyone else probably wouldn't have even noticed it.

They slipped through the doors and out onto one of the great balconies overlooking the courtyard and Castle Town, Death Mountain looming to the west and the great viridian fields to the south. Evanna let go of him and leaned against the white railing. "This kingdom is so beautiful," she said softly; Link watched and waited for her next move. Evanna turned and leaned back, her arms curved out from her body as they smoothed over the marble of the railing. "I am sorry I had to cast that spell on you, but I needed your attention."

He frowned. "There are easier ways, Your Highness."

Evanna shook her head. "Not in there. All eyes and ears were fixed on me. I was trying to form a telepathic connection with you," she explained. "You're rather resistant, however."

He crossed his arms. "I've had far too many people in my head for an entire lifetime. Aren't there proceedings to telepathic connections? You didn't even ask permission."

Evanna laughed, head tilted back, observing him like he were lesser then herself. It was an expression Link was all too familiar with in the royal circles and his tolerance of it wore thinner every time he saw it. "You're talking rather rudely to royalty," she accused.

"You're acting rather rudely to a High Lord of Hyrule's court," he countered. "You are a guest, yes, but you must adhere to our laws and traditions."

Evanna studied him for a long moment. "You're right, Guardsman, of course. I do apologize for my unwarranted attempt. But," she let out a sigh erring towards frustration, "I am getting desperate. It seems to have clouded my judgment."

Her huge brown eyes somehow became wider and she managed to look graceful in her distress. "Desperate, why?"

In an instant, her eyes shifted into a deadly expression. It was in that moment that Link realized that this woman was powerful – more powerful than she was going to let on. It made him want to
order her removal from Hyrule; people like this never boded well for the kingdom. "There is something here that I need. The lives of my people depend on it."

Evanna’s tone is low and her words sharp. She reminded him of a coiled cat. "What is it that you need, Your Highness?" he asked, already dreading the answer.

She gave one shake of her head. "I can't speak of it here. We must go outside of the castle. In three days, meet me at Lake Hylia."

Link stared in confusion. "Why should I meet you there?"

"Because the fate of your kingdom hangs in the balance, Guardsman," Evanna said, her voice like a whip. "So, if you want the information I have, you may want to do as you're told."

"Explain yourself. What do you know?" Link demanded, advancing on her.

"What part of 'I can't speak here' do you not understand?" she hissed, meeting Link's advance without wavering.

"If Hyrule is in danger, I need to be the first to know."

"You are not in a position to be making demands, Hero of Time," she snapped. "Do as I say and I can promise all will be revealed."

Link paused, taking in what she was saying and trying to decode it. Even in anger, she looked deceptively fair, like she's wasn't real. The sun was pitching towards the skyline and dimming red light enveloped her green form. Link didn't know whether she was friend or foe…but what choice did he have? As the High Royal Guardsman now, this was his problem; he was going to have to go along with her for the time being. The position had been given to him for his strength and his intellect.

Link was going to have to trust himself.

Taking a step back, Link crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll meet you at Lake Hylia in three days' time."

Evanna relaxed and gave a feline smile. "Excellent. Just past midday, by the tree on the island."

"See you then, Your Highness." Link bowed stiffly as she glided around him, eyes glinting in a fashion that could only be described as dangerous.

"See you then, Guardsman." She slipped back through the doors, shutting them behind her with a soft boom. He stared after her and watched the large, white double doors shudder slightly.

"What was that about?" Sheik asked from the second balcony hanging above the door.

Link shook his head as Sheik swung down and landed silently on the tiles. "I don't know. I don't think we can trust her. And she's staying in this castle."

"We're going to have to keep a guard on her."

"And do some research on the Eastern Kingdoms, it seems," Sheik added. "It appears Queen Evanna is new to the aristocracy."
"New government, you think?" Link inquired, looking curiously,

"Or a very quiet one."

"Or a fake one."

Sheik shrugged. "We'll have to do some searching."

Link glanced in the sky; at least something was going well. "Good news, Sheik."

The Sheikah quirked a dark blond eyebrow.

"We're off the hook."

The sun was below the horizon.

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Huge thanks to Cherry (sheikofthesheikah on tumblr) and my secret friend for beta'ing this beast. Chapter two will be coming out in the next few days. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 2

II.

When finally freed of their uniforms and back in normal clothing – Link now in dark brown pants and a blue and gold, thick tunic since shedding his visage as the Hero – they retired to the Royal Library and locked everyone out for the night for Official Business. The library wasn't actually that large; it contained more confidential texts than the common library and only accessible to those with the Queen's permission; which, of course, they never bothered getting.

They camped out on the couches near the big open windows and went through stacks of books. Sheik had the tendency to curl himself up when he was sitting. Link didn't know if it was habit from his lifetime of stealth training or if that was just a cat-like trait that was specifically him. It was sort of endearing, though, to look across the couch and see the Sheikah's legs to his chest, head rested on his knees so he could read his book.

Link hung his arm off the back of the couch and propped his feet on the table, nearly falling asleep in the candlelight.

"Do you think she was talking about Pryvnia?" Link asked tiredly.

"Pryvnia is several weeks travel from here and they have no Evanna in their royal family. I checked," Sheik replied, tossing over a family tree painted on ancient parchment that Link had no intention of looking at.

Link sighed, allowing his eyes to slide closed. "We may need to go to the Great Library. No other place has such an amount of information. Anyone could learn anything there." It was a long-shot that they'd even get in, considering Link was clearly not a Kokiri and Sheik looked even more alien with his bright red eyes, but it was all he could recommend at that point. Frustration ebbed at him and he was reminded that one of his greatest flaws was a lack of patience. Link wanted to know the answers now. He needed to protect Hyrule. His stupid fancy title of Hero wasn't for nothing; he was the General now.

Sheik shot him a look. "You think they'll let us in?"

"The Deku Sprout is probably a sapling by now. The Kokiri will trust his judgment and he might let me in," Link reasoned, trying to sound much more reassured than he actually was.

He earned a skeptical look. "Might?"

"I'm the Hero of Time! Why is there even a question when I saved the kingdom?" The argument was more for himself than Sheik; it was most likely the same case he'd make when faced with a disapproving Mido.

Sheik stretched out his legs and tossed his book aside. He leaned back and Link marveled – as he always did – at the fact that they were close enough that Sheik felt he could relax around him. Sheik never relaxed. With a long, muffled sigh, he said, "Well, we'll head out at first light, I suppose."

Link stretched out as well and crossed his arms. His body was one long slouch along an angle of
the cushions. A fat pillow was bunched up strangely beneath him but he had not the strength or
care to move it. "I haven't even been the High Royal Guardman for a day and I'm already dealing
with security issues. And I don't even know what they are."

"We'll figure it out as we go, Link. Don't worry," Sheik reassured him. Link scowled at this. He
was the Hero, he shouldn't need reassurance. Sheik, in his usual uncanny way, seemed to sense this
because he added, "You missed a big chunk of your life and you're still fresh out of a war. It's okay
to feel overwhelmed now. I know I do sometimes."

Link rubbed his face for what felt like the fifteenth time in the past hour, trying to wake himself up
a bit. "Yeah, I know…"

Sheik turned to look at him, red eyes glowing in the torchlight. Link blinked a bit, sometimes taken
aback by how exotic Sheik could look sometimes. He couldn't even imagine what the man would
look like in this situation without his cowl. While he knew he'd probably never see past the fabric,
curiosity sometimes ate at him.

"I think it's in the Queen's best interest that she go unaware of this situation."

Link smirked at him. This was usually their way. They had a habit of neglecting to tell Zelda
anything like this. Though she would eventually find out, he nodded to the Sheikah. "Agreed."

Sheik stood, stretching upward like a cat and Link caught himself watching the muscles that
rippled underneath his uniform. Though he too had shed the clothing of the war, the blue and white
fabric was still tight enough to discern each rope of muscle. Link forced his eyes away and Sheik
bid him goodnight, recommending they meet in the stables at dawn.

Shaking away strangely uneven thoughts, Link nodded and left for sleep as well.

Link awoke to the feeling that something was very wrong. He didn't know what it was, but he sat
up straight in bed out of a dead sleep, cold sweat on his brow, and nausea twisting his stomach.
The feeling was anything about foreign and he had long since learned to never ignore it. The
Goddesses had blessed him with powerful intuition and it wasn't a skill he took for granted.

In a flurry of motion, he leapt out of bed, shoving his boots on over his sleep pants, and snatching
the dagger from his bedside table. Link slipped out of the room and felt a wash of cool air hit his
bare chest and shoulders, shivering briefly. Link was in the west wing, where High Lords of the
court took residence and he knew that anyone on the wing would be able to take care of themselves
if there was a battle. He should really check on the Queen first but a nagging feeling told him to
scout the wing beforehand. Following his instinct he snuck around the hall using the stealth
techniques Sheik taught him a while ago. Staying balanced on the balls of his feet, he silently
investigated the corridor.

A few people seemed to still be up although it must be past midnight. Candlelight stretched out
from under a few doors into the shiny, tiled floor of the hallway but most doors were dark. The
hallways were chillier than normal and when he passed Sheik's door, the chill picked up. Link
froze; beneath the door was a dim blue glow.

Without thinking, Link pushed the door open and slipped inside. The room was about as plain as
his own and smelled just slightly of the incense Link had long associated with the Sheikah. He
found the form of Sheik on his bed – and a blue, misty form hung over him, casting a shimmering
glow around the room as though they were underwater. Sheik looked uncomfortable and tense,
lying so still it sent a clench of fear through Link's chest. A moment's inspection longer revealed shaking shoulders just barely noticeable under blankets as a spotlight of blue centered on his companion's chest.

"Sheik!" Link shouted, rushing towards the form and slashing out, but his dagger passed through its ghostly form. "Sheik, wake up!"

The Sheikah remained unconscious.

"Dammit, Sheik!" he growled, reaching out to shake him, but receiving a sharp shock the moment his fingers made contact. Link grunted in pain as the energy knocked him several steps backwards. Adrenaline chugged in his veins as he watched Sheik's skin going gray in the moonlight through the window and the fog was growing brighter, as if it were sucking him dry.

Link struggled to remember his magic training with Zelda and, in a desperate attempt to do something useful, grasped onto a spell she taught him to push enemies away in a forceful blast. He had only done it once and even then he had overdone it, lacking control. But Sheik's life was in danger – even if Link sent his friend across the room as well, at least the spell might be broken. He focused hard on the flow of energy in his mind, murmuring the incantations under his breath, and holding his palms towards the bed to focus. With a grunt of air, Link released the spell, pushing the blue mist so hard against the wall it disintegrated into fine sapphire dust.

Luckily Sheik was spared the blast and gasped for air a few moments later, yanking down his cowl.

The moonlight spilled through the window and cast Sheik's face into shadow. Link let out a sigh of relief, feeling Sheik's gaze snap over to him in confusion; whatever that was, thank the Goddesses it hadn't done any severe damage. Sheik quickly pulled the cowl back up in a movement that almost looked involuntary and ran his hands through loose blonde hair.

"What happened to me?" Sheik demanded, still breathless.

Link shook his head, leaning against the wall in exhaustion. He had nowhere near the stamina that Zelda or Sheik did when it came to magic. It was something he was working on, but it took time to build up huge stores of Mana. If he had tried any more than what he had cast, it would've drained from his life source. And it wouldn't have been pretty.

"There was some sort of mist hovering over you. It was casting blue light onto your chest...I don't know what it was doing, but it was clearly harming you. Do you feel okay?" Link asked.

"I…think so. Link, could you light that torch above you?" Sheik said, sounding shaken from the ordeal.

"I would, but I used all my Mana on that thing. Got any flint?"

Sheik nodded and pointed to the small desk in the corner. Link lit the torch and felt instantaneously more comfortable as light filled the room. Sheik carefully left the bed, moving as if he were expecting something to go wrong. His thin tunic was slick with sweat and Link purposefully looked away, feeling like he was watching something intimate.

The Sheikah seemed to look himself over for a moment, unraveling the bandages to check his arms, and running his hands over his chest. Sheik's eyes met his again and Link realized he'd been
staring despite his efforts to look away.

"I do feel strange, but I don't think it did anything permanent," Sheik trailed off quietly, sitting down on the bed and staring at Link with an intense concentration. "Describe it to me."

"It was maybe an arm's length, translucent, and blue. It might have been the size of a small child. It cast some sort of light on you and when I pushed it away, it hit that wall," he pointed to the wall across the room, "and turned into blue dust."

Sheik's eyebrows furrowed; clearly he didn't like what Link described. He leapt up and moved around the bed in one graceful movement and knelt by the wall where the blue dust had settled. Link, less graceful and a bit slower, followed and squatted beside him. There in a messy pile was the remnant of the mist and it seemed hard to believe that something so benign was the epilogue to something so powerful. Hesitantly, Sheik reached down and pinched some grains between his fingers, studying them for several quiet seconds – it looked more clay-like as it seemed to clump and stick to his fingertips. He rubbed them together and carefully sniffed, his eyes going wide.

"This is ancient Chaos magic," Sheik said in quiet awe.

Link started. "What?"

Sheik turned back to him, pivoting on one leg in his crouch. "It smells like sulfur. No other magic does something like this and leave this type of residue behind."

He didn't doubt Sheik – Link had learned to trust Sheik's knowledge while fighting Ganondorf's minions and in his exploration of the various temples – but he didn't know what it meant. And he couldn't imagine anyone using such volatile magic would have pure intentions.

Who made it and why did they target the one person in the castle that, to some, didn't even exist? Many people beyond those he lived in the castle weren't aware of Sheik's position to the Queen, nor did they even notice his presence during Zelda's meetings, ceremonies, and parties. Sheik's own ceremony last year had been small and less grandiose than Link's, so many were ignorant to his presence or simply forgot about it. And Sheik wouldn't leave any of his enemies alive for retribution, either, so who would dislike Sheik enough to attack him like this in his sleep?

"I can't think of who would do this. Do you have any ideas?" Link voiced.

Sheik shook his head. He went around Link to his desk and dropped the grains on a small plate near some delicate-looking equipment Link had seen only in potion maker's shops. Sheik had extensive knowledge of magic and potions; Sheikah were just as – if not more – magical than Hylians. In truth, Sheik's knowledge could almost rival Zelda's, a fact that was sometimes a source of contention between them when they didn't agree on an equation or enchantment.

"I don't know right now. But I'm sure I'll find some hints the more I examine this."

Link started to nod and rise from the floor when he saw it through the thin fabric of Sheik's tunic, a shadow centered at the base of his neck.

"Wait, Sheik, there's something on your back!" Sheik froze and gave Link an intense look over his shoulder.

Link carefully pulled the collar of his tunic down and frowned at the tan skin beneath. The shadow
wasn't on his back – it was in it. As though it were inked, a black crescent moon lay in his dark, smooth skin. He touched it carefully with a finger and found no difference in texture of warm flesh.

"Link, if you don't tell me what's on me, I'm going to harm you," Sheik warned in obvious irritation, a rare lapse in patience for such a calm warrior.

"There's a black crescent moon on your back. Like it was inked in," Link told him quietly. "Right here." He traced a finger around the shape of the moon, baffled and worried about its sudden presence. Link had seen his companion shirtless a few times to know that this was something completely new.

There was a sharp intake of breath from Sheik. "How…?"

"Skin ink takes time to heal and even then, you can feel a difference in the skin. This is…flawless," he continued. He coaxed Sheik closer the torchlight and the other obliged with tensing shoulders. Even in the brighter light it was obvious that magic had put it there, not needles. "I don't know what this means, Sheik."

Sheik turned, his muscles locked and eyes hard. "I don't know either. I've never heard of magic leaving a mark like this. This is foreign, even to me."

"Why would someone use Chaos magic for this?"

"To mark me?" he suggested, shaking his head slightly.

"For what?"

Silence filled the room as neither of them could fathom the answer. Sheik reached his hand back to feel the mark, but came away with a confused frown – the skin was normal to the touch, just as Link had claimed.

"I guess we'll have yet something else to search for in the Great Library," Sheik decided, ending the worried silence between them. "You should eat and sleep, Link. Your Mana is dangerously low and you will need your strength tomorrow. Thank you for helping me."

Link sighed, wishing there was more he could do, and nodded. "Okay. Let me know if you need anything, though. I'm worried about you," he added hesitantly, glancing around the room as if another mist of Chaos was going to appear any moment. "Put up some wards...just in case."

"I will," Sheik assured him.

Link left the Sheikah to his study of the blue dust; it was doubtful Sheik would find sleep again, not after the attack and not with this new mystery to puzzle over. Link stole his way to the kitchen, prepared to dodge a few guards to raid the massive pantry. Now that Sheik had mentioned eating, he realized that his depleted Mana had left him starving. Link slunk around five guards that were nearly nodding off even though it wasn't as if they would stop him – he outranked all of them now – but he didn't want them putting on their reports in the morning that the High Royal Guardsman was in the kitchen in the wee hours of the night.

When he got to the kitchen, Link found it was not empty as he had suspected. At a small table near the window, where the cooks normally sat on breaks, was Zelda. She was in a simple white nightdress that only went down to her knees, not even a robe over it as though she had completely
forgotten to slip one on. She sat in a chair and leaned against the window, a steaming cup in her hand.

"Zelda?"

She jumped a bit and turned to look at him with raised eyebrows. She was bare-faced, the products slathered on by maids long washed off – Link had never understood why they were necessary in the first place. Her skin was always flawless and her lashes impossibly thick. The only difference being the more natural red blotchiness in the skin tone of her cheeks, a common trait among the fair-skinned Hylians. Her hair was twisted in a thick braid along her spine and it was obvious by the puffiness around her eyes that she had fallen into the habit of rubbing them in exhaustion. Despite that, she was beautiful, as always. Although he knew much of it was her lineage to the Goddess Hylia, it was a beauty that resonated out of her as well and comforted him with just one soft small.

"Why are you awake?"

Her surprised expression shifted into a light smirk. "I could ask you the same thing."

"Hungry," he supplied, giving her a sheepish grin and easily skirting around the real answer. "Again, why are you awake?"

Her face fell a bit. She propped her bare feet on the rail under the chair and sighed. "Can't sleep. I'm too worried about this meeting. I thought some tea might help."

Link snatched up a bowl of fruit and some stiff biscuits before sitting across from her. "Talk."

They'd been doing this for two years. Link was probably the closest person to her, save Sheik, but that was a different relationship altogether. They had been telepathically linked for a year and grew up together when her, Impa, and Sheik hid during the war. They knew each other so well but Sheik's solemn nature and natural aversion to physical contact kept them from being like siblings. Link and Zelda, however, were like siblings with the way they teased one another. It was organic as though they were always meant to be close like this. Link was usually the first one to know when something was troubling her and he was the first person she would admit her problems to.

Zelda just sighed, "This meeting tomorrow…it's with some alchemists that are working on a new discovery…a very dangerous discovery. I don't know all the details, so it's nothing I can really tell you about right now." She took a moment to stare at the table in thought, her fingers rubbing nervously into the rough ceramic of the cup. "It's big enough to really worry me, which you know I usually never let these things get to me. This discovery is valuable. It could put our kingdom in the crosshairs of quite a few other countries if news of it were to leak – which may have already happened considering the feelings I've been getting lately..."

Link listened patiently, his mind winding in thought with this new information. Is this what Queen Evanna was talking about? What could be so valuable – other than the Triforce, of course – that it had the potential to bring war to Hyrule? Was all of this connected? He wanted to drill her for answers, demand that she disclose everything she knew…but he knew she wouldn't tell him or appreciate his probing. Zelda knew how dangerous the information was and, maybe for the best interest of the country, it was prudent that he didn't know for the time being.

Link nodded. "I understand. I hope you will tell me once you know more about the situation."
"You know you'll be the first one I go to. You and Sheik. You've both become my personal advisors," she confided with a tired smile.

"Be careful who you say that to – your actual advisors may not like to hear that you value the opinions of an orphan and an anti-social Sheikah more than them," Link teased.

Zelda rolled her eyes. "What are they going to do? Send me to bed without supper?"

They both laughed and the conversation bled into something more light-hearted. Link made sure only the most light-hearted things became their subject matter, like Captain Vega's rampage after the ceremony. He only heard about it via a friend of his in the First Garrison, but apparently Vega went on a shouting spree in Castle Town after the ceremony, of which spirits were most certainly involved. At some point, Guardsman had to remove him from the pub and it resulted in a very sloppy wrestling match on the cobblestone square.

"I'm going to have to demote him," she said with a sigh. "And hopefully he won't take that as badly as he took your promotion."

Link just laughed. "I don't understand why he hates me so much."

Zelda gave him an incredulous look. "You do know his brother is Ingo, right?"

"Wha…Oh," he said, staring open-mouthed at her. A moment passed and he broke into laughter. "I can't believe I didn't realize it! They look so similar!"

"Shh! Keep your voice down, Link!" Zelda giggled, putting a finger over his mouth.

For one brief moment she was leaned across the table, face coming close to his and her slender finger against his lips in her attempt to silence him. They stared at each other for a few seconds, before she pulled away with carefully controlled grace as he sat there feeling a blush creep up his cheeks. Zelda just gave him a shy look and went back to her tea, glancing out the window. "Only five more hours til sunrise," she said softly. "You should sleep."

Link just nodded, trying to figure out what had just happened and why his heart was beating so fast. Zelda rose, stretching her arms above her head with a yawn. He watched the lean muscles in her arms flex – Zelda may appear to be dainty when dressed in her gowns and finery, but she went through plenty of grueling combat training every day, and it kept her deceptively strong.

Zelda did not believe in being a weak Queen – Link admired her for that.

"Goodnight, Guardsman," she said with a smile, reaching out to touch his knuckles lightly before returning to bed.

Link sat there for a few minutes, slowly gnawing on his biscuit and thinking about the conversation that had transpired. He would be the first to admit that having skipped seven years of his life definitely made him rather naïve about interpersonal relationships. He wasn't accustomed to much physical contact that wasn't the result of a battle so his reaction to a light touch or a hug always left him a bit off-axis. But he wasn't quite so naïve to think he was exempt from romantic feelings. With all the missing experience, every intimate interaction left his heart stammering, platonic or not. Maybe he was just finally starting to become aware of his feelings what with the war over and the waters calmed.
Nonetheless, Link shook his head vigorously to disperse the thoughts. What was he doing thinking about romance? Hyrule was in danger and he needed to rest if he wanted to stay awake during their journey in a handful of hours. There was no time for this.

With a resigned sigh, he finished his food and took himself to bed and away from such trivial thoughts.

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Thanks for reading and a big thanks to my betas for tolerating my use of "beauty" over and over.
III.

The ride to Kokiri forest was a two-day journey, Lake Hylia a day beyond that. They had agreed that they would push right through to the meeting with Evanna after spending the night in Kokiri – it was going to be a tight timeline. Dawn struck like a symphony and Link beat Sheik to the stables, which was rare. A few minutes after sunrise, the Sheikah slipped into existence next to Link, silent and invisible as a shadow. He looked rather tired, something Link had to tease him about despite his own weariness.

"Up all night with that dust?"

Sheik just rolled his eyes. "Shall we?"

So they rode, Link on Epona and Sheik on his stallion, Kronos. Castle Town was quiet, only a few early risers setting up their stands for the day. Link had left a message with the new Captain of the Guard for Zelda, stating he and Sheik were going on an official visit to the village at Lake Hylia and would be gone a week. It was a lie, but Link couldn't tell the Captain what was actually going on. He left a more personal note for Zelda, hidden on her desk. He told her that, like her, he knew certain things that were happening that he couldn't disclose. Link only said that he and Sheik would be gone for a week and not to worry.

But she would worry nonetheless. If Zelda had any weakness, it was her boys leaving her for extended periods of time.

It wasn't until they were well into the field that real conversations came about. Link appraised Sheik on the conversation he had had with Zelda at the wee hours of the morning. Sheik seemed troubled by it – Link sharing the sentiment as soon as Sheik told him what he learned in his night of study.

"All manifestation magic needs a base, contrary to reaction magic such as your blast from last night. Reaction magics only draw from your Mana or life force, therefore requiring no base. Though manifestation magic isn't as common, most people in Hyrule use herbs or flaked ores from Death Mountain as a base. In the desert, we would use black sand from The Sea of Din or ores from our mountain. There are also a few compounds found in the forests and in the water of Hyrule; these are all very natural, viable bases," Sheik explained.

Link nodded. He was just getting to this point in his teachings with Zelda. She thought it prudent that he learn more reaction magics first and that definitely worked out in Sheik's favor considering the night they had had.

"The primary compound within the base of that Chaos magic...I've never seen it in my life. I consulted the library again and the only thing I found was a study on the powder form of a very rare, almost mythical ore brought into the world by a man named Foursky."

Link felt the tug of familiarity. "Foursky," he repeated, as if tasting the word. "Why does that sound so familiar?"

"Because it's a child's tale. It's rarely told anymore, but many still know it. Like all children's tale, it
stems from vaguely recorded events," Sheik explained.

Then it clicked; Talon had told Link and Malon the story on one of the cold nights he took shelter at the ranch. "Wait, isn't that the Goron that went to another dimension or something?" he asked incredulously.

"He wasn't actually a Goron. It's been adapted for Hylian children to teach them about Gorons and their contributions to Hyrule – it was meant to help quell racism. The original account claims he was actually a Human with no magic in him at all. Foursky was fascinated with Death Mountain, specifically a large hole towards the base on the north eastern side of it. He went there to study it and, as fate would have it, fell in."

"Of course," Link commented.

"Anyway, he fell into what the texts claim is the Nether and he had many a misadventure there. Foursky the Goron brought back a magical stone that cured a sickness that had befallen the Hylians and thus the races became comrades. But the truth to the tale is that Foursky found an ore he called Vaspra, an ancient word for divine. It had magical properties and some say it's what created Chaos magic. Or at least the first form of it. It's evolved since then."

"So, you were attacked by the father of all Chaos magic?" Link quipped, raising an eyebrow.

Sheik shrugged a little. "It's a bit more complicated than that, but yes, in a sense."

"This has to tie in with Evanna somehow," Link said resolutely. "She's the only wild card in this entire situation."

A soft wind touched the field, pushing Sheik's stray hairs into his face. He brushed them back with a slight impatience and said, "Would you then imply that Evanna was responsible for the attack?"

Link gnawed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, weighing his words. He had never been the type to throw around accusations without substantial proof, but they were blind. There was nothing else to go on and, in his travels, Link had found that the most obvious answer was usually the truth. "I don't know. But she's connected – the timing is too perfect and we can't ignore that. There are no other suspects right now. Whatever Zelda's alchemists found, whatever attacked you, and whatever this danger is…it's all connected."

Sheik had no comment for this; he agreed, of course, Link knew. They agreed on nearly everything except maybe combat forms.

With plenty to haunt their thoughts, they rode over the sloping landscape of Hyrule's fields in familiar silence. Death Mountain watched their backs as they crisscrossed paths and took turns sharpening weapons, much to the annoyance of their horses. Link had sent word ahead that they would stop at Lon Lon to deliver some things while they were passing through and Malon would probably bully them into a quick meal too. She had taken quite a liking to Sheik, though not as distastefully as the ladies of the court did.

Malon, amazingly, got so quiet around Sheik that Link's jaw nearly hit the floor the first time it happened. Nothing shut Malon up except the Sheikah, apparently. Sheik was oblivious, Link didn't have the heart to meddle, and Malon didn't have the nerve to ask. Link was glad for her hesitance because he worried what the answer would be – Sheik had never shown any interest in being with anyone. Link wasn't even sure if Sheik would ever have any interest; the only people he dedicated
his time to were Link and Zelda. He more-or-less avoided everyone else.

Lon Lon was reached by midday. They arrived to find a mare running loose and the moment she saw Epona, Link had to dive off his stead to avoid getting caught in a very violent and loud reunion. He heard Malon laugh before he saw her come around the corner as the two mares pranced in circles and whinnied like foals.

"Hey Fairyboy!" Malon called, using the nickname he would be stuck with for assuredly the rest of his life. She was determined to call him that even though Navi had long since returned to the Forest to help the Deku Sapling. "Sorry about Dinah. She's been pretty unruly lately." Her eyes flitted over to Sheik and her expression shifted in only a way Link would notice after being her friend for so long. "Hey Sheik."

Sheik just bowed his head to her and dismounted next to Link.

"I've got your stuff," Link started, gesturing to the pack full of leather and small metal bits for saddles. The blacksmith in Market Town had an arrangement with Talon, a pact made from years of drowning in spirits together. As her father got older, Malon started making the trips to Market Town on her own and the protective instinct in Link reared up despite the dark times being long over. Anytime he could spare her the journey, he did it willingly.

"And your food is ready," Malon chimed in, grinning. "Are you ready?"

Also, her cooking was a huge factor. The castle cooks had nothing on her, Link and Sheik had both agreed.

He just laughed. "Of course."

They made their way inside to wash up and relax. They wouldn't have the luxury of couches when night fell in the field, so they sat gratefully while Malon rounded up plates. Talon came in right around the time the food made it to the table and he elected to over-inform them all of the hardships of horse breeding, a topic Link desperately wished to stay ignorant of. Sheik was quiet through all of this but Link could tell by his eyes that he was amused.

Dinner was finished quickly and before they could leave, Malon pulled Link aside, making up a hardly-convincing excuse for him to look at something in the barn. Link knew where it was going instantly and he prepared himself for what was to come.

In the dimness of the barn, Malon fidgeted, hay crunching beneath her feet. She was stunning; she had been since their first meeting at seven years old. Her face was sun-kissed and full of freckles, her hair wild and as red as dawn. She was so strong and tall and lean from her work on the ranch, and much Like Zelda, nothing about her was that of a damsel in distress. She'd be the first to get into an outright brawl if someone had the audacity to start problems with the people or animals she loved. As Link watched her push her hair out of her face, endearing in her nervousness, he almost didn't understand why Sheik wouldn't want her-

"I've been meaning to talk to you about something for a really long time, Link," she began, holding her hands tightly behind her back and looking more unsure than Link had ever seen her. "I know this isn't a good time, but in your life, it's never a good time."

Link furrowed his brows. The conversation he had predicted was beginning to unfold very differently. "What do you mean?"
"You're always off saving the world," Malon clarified, giving him a knowing look. "Like you are now, I'm sure."

He shrugged. "I don't know about saving the world," he muttered. "But look, this isn't about me. If you like Sheik, maybe you should just tell him, Malon."

She gave him a puzzled look, brows knitting together deeply. "Wait, what?" For a long moment, Malon appeared utterly stumped and Link would've laughed at the expression if he weren't so confused himself. Then it passed and she broke into laugh. "Oh, no. You think I have feelings Sheik?" She shook her head. "No, Link. It's you I have feelings for."

He couldn't help but stare in shock for a few moments. He really was as thick-headed as Zelda told him he was when it came to emotional matters. All this time…he thought it had been Sheik. Well, that's what he got for missing seven years of his adolescence. A hot flush invaded his face and he could only manage a strangled groan paired with a palm slapped to his forehead. "Malon, I'm such a moron. I'm sorry. I saw the way you were looking at Sheik and I thought—"

Malon shook her head again and smiled in a reassuring, shy manner. "No, Link. I was looking at Sheik like that because I'm still not comfortable around him – not like I am with you. We've been friends for years. I've only known him for a little while. And I honestly didn't expect you to notice, Link. It's okay. You've always had a lot going on, too much to notice a farm girl. But I just wanted to… I just wanted to know if you…if you…"

She became too flustered and Link felt a pang of sadness. Malon was being so honest and was so unsure and he didn't know if he could ever give her what she wanted. And he was still reeling over the idea of someone really feeling that way about him. Forget the vagrant ladies of the court; this was more real than they could ever be.

Malon took a breath to steady herself. "I know I'm not Queen Zelda, but you've been my best friend for a long time. I don't like not telling you things, Link, and I've been keeping this from you for ten years."

Link didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to make her happy, how to not hurt her, or how to explain that all of this was so new to him and that he didn't know what to do with it. But it was Malon and he had to try. After all she had done for him, she deserved it. Link let out a long breath and Malon just watched him, visibly teetering on the edge of happiness and disappointment.

"Malon, of course I care about you. You've been a part of my life for a while now, in the most confusing and scary times I've ever had." he started, watching her face slowly start to fall. "I think…I could I feel the same. But I'm honestly not sure. I keep forgetting that I'm missing a huge chunk of my life. I missed the years where I learn about love. I'm not good at any of this stuff. The only thing I'm truly good at is starting a fight."

Malon laughed, the hurt leaving her eyes and understanding replacing it to Link's relief.

"I'm just now starting to understand what all…this means," he waved his hand, circling it around them. "So, please don't think I'm just rejecting you, Malon. It's nothing to do with you. I'm just… not ready."

Link didn't know what else to say, so he shut his mouth, Malon staring at him for a moment, face unreadable. Then she broke out in a heavy smile, full of sadness and disappointment, but it was
clear she understood. Link knew she did. She wasn't happy with his answer, but his honesty had lessened the hurt somehow and he was grateful for her maturity.

"It's okay, Link. I do understood," she said quietly. "I forget, too, that you missed so much of growing up. You act so mature and I know the war had a lot to do with it. I think part of me disregarded it because I was afraid you would fall for the Queen. I know you and her are close. I guess I've just been feeling sort of jealous. And now with you being her Guardsman…" Her eyes went wide for a moment. "By the way, Link, I'm so sorry I couldn't make it to the ceremony!"

Malon was rambling and Link had only heard her do it a few times either from an unexpected compliment or in her rare moments of clumsiness. He grinned at her and shook his head. "It's fine, Malon. You have a ranch to run."

Malon nodded, wrapping her arms around her waist and giving him an anothershy look. The feelings were out now and he could feel an almost real tension between them. A nagging part of him wanted to do something, anything to wipe a bit of that dismay off her face. He didn't know the first thing about romantic relationships, but he could start with familiar ground.

Link crossed the distance between them in two strides and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close like Zelda did to him on rare occasion. Malon went rigid with shock, her hands flat against his chest as though she were about to stop him. Then, after a moment of hesitantly settling his arms around the curve of her waist, she seemed to come back to herself. Her arms went around his shoulders and she pressed her face into his collarbone, her warm breath on his skin, sending chills up and down his spine from the newness of their proximity. His whole body reacted to the embrace and he suddenly felt like he was buzzing.

"I'm sorry I can't give you what you want right now, Malon," Link whispered between them. "It's okay, Link. This is enough for now," she replied, her lips moving against his tunic.

Letting go was hard and when they parted not much space separated them. Malon's hands lingered on his chest, her fingers tangled in the strap of his baldric and the folds of his Guardsman tunic. She stared into the fabric, as though memorizing its color and texture. Finally she met his eyes, a surprisingly attractive blush on her cheeks and before Link could say a word, she rose up on her tip-toes and softly kissed his cheek, whispering, "Please be safe, Link."

Then she was gone, leaving him stranded in a dim barn to watch her soft dress sway as she walked out the door.

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Later, back on the path to Kokiri forest, his mind kept wandering back to his conversation with Malon, the way her body felt against his. It was almost embarrassing how well he could determine every line of her form from their contact and it ignited a heat in him he was unfamiliar with but could only assume was desire. It was a feeling he had never explored, both due to the war and then his duties thereafter. Many Guardsmen had attempted to take him to brothels, to rid him of his virginity as though it were a burden to him, but he found no appeal in his first experience being with a stranger. Now, having had his first real experience of the exhilaration and excitement of being that close to someone…

He almost wanted to turn around and go back to Malon. But then, something about returning to her, touching her, kissing her...it didn't feel right. It didn't feel wrong, either, but something within
him couldn't picture her at his side as a lover. Then again, how would he know? He had just had his first experience with romance; perhaps he needed time to sort through his emotions.

"Link?"

He snapped back to attention for the umpteenth time. "Sorry."

"Something occurred between you and Malon," Sheik finally stated, the man knowing him all too well.

Link sighed and gave a short nod.

"If it's troubling you and you'd like to talk about it, I will listen," Sheik supplied. Link knew the request came from a place of friendly concern but it also came from Sheik's deep inquisitive nature. But he wouldn't pester Link like Zelda would. He didn't know if he wanted to tell Sheik what happened…but the man was his closest friend. If anyone would be able to understand lack of social finesse, it was Sheik.

"She has feelings for me. I've never encountered any sort of romance before so I'm very out of my depth. I don't want to hurt her feelings but I don't think I can return them," Link said, watching the sun sink below the mountains in the distance, the descent casting a cacophony of rose and copper across the dome of sky above them. "I feel like a child."

"You're not a child. Even if you had been awake those seven years, you would not have had time to mature in that aspect considering the war."

"Did you?"

Sheik shook his head. "It's not the way of the Sheikah to focus on such things. Like all people, we crave companionship and love, but it's not the core of our culture. I was far too busy training with Lady Impa and keeping the Queen – then Princess – safe. I was kept in isolation. I was never exposed during that time to relationships with people other than that of which I had with Impa and the Queen."

"What about before the war?" Link probed, shocked that Sheik was for once opening up and not wanting to let the oppurtunity go.

Sheik gave the horizon a long look, silence stretching between them so long that Link thought he might be ignoring the question. But then he let out a quiet sigh and said, "Before the war started, before Impa summoned me to serve the Royal family, I was living in what was left of the last Sheikah tribe, beyond the desert."

"What was left?" Link interjected. "You mean even twenty years after the Sheikah genocide, your numbers still dwindled?"

Sheik nodded. "Many of the women were under great strain from the genocide and the Great Civil War– it left some of them barren. Even a generation later, children were scarce and our bloodline was waning. There weren't many children for me to play with and Sheikah training starts at age seven." He paused to push his hair back, the evening breeze pulling it around his face; Link idly thought how glad he was that Sheik stopped hiding it under that wrap.

"There was a girl named Kalyh. She was the most powerful fighter, even before we began our
training. We were drawn to each other, training together whenever we could. Our elders saw how close we were and joined us as warriors. We were very compatible, both in personality and in physicality."

Sheik had always presented himself with the title the last of the Sheikah; Link almost didn't want to ask what happened to her. He wondered if there were still any other Sheikah out there, the title just a saying, but held his tongue to avoid ruining the rare moment of reveal.

"If the war hadn't happened, I'm sure we would've married. But as it was, the war did happen and my village was destroyed. Impa, my aunt, came to look for survivors. She found me miles from the village, covered in the blood of my people and the blood of the monsters I had slain. The last person I saw die before I was driven from the village was Kalyh, felled by one of Ganondorf's monsters. It is Sheikah way to abandon those who fall, to not allow them to weaken one's resolve. But..."

They rode in silence, the unspoken heartbreak in Sheik's story almost too much. Link knew there was nothing he could say to make the quiet any better. They would soon be stopping for the night and Link wondered how many nights Sheik dreamt of Kalyh, if he would dream of her tonight.

It surprised Link when his companion suddenly continued.

"It was painful. But it was a necessary evil. The anger of her death drove me to focus on my skills, in hopes I would avenge her one day. Over the years, however, I grew and the horror of my loss dulled in comparison to what I saw in the face of Ganon's true evil and savagery. I realized revenge was an evil just the same. I still miss her, but it gets easier every day. Since her, I have not pursued another romantic relationship. Not that there are none I admire, but the opportunity has never seemed right and I've never been sure if I'm ready. Between the war and my nature as a warrior, I don't know if I could ever keep the darkness out of a relationship with someone."

"Thanks, Sheik," Link said after a moment of hoof beats and the snorting breaths of their steeds. "Thanks for telling me all that."

"Anytime," he replied, some of his amusement slipping into his voice.

They made camp for the night and, if anything, Link felt more distracted than before. Not only was he analyzing still what happened with Malon, he was now thinking about what Sheik had said. Curiosity gnawed at him as he tried to figure out who the Sheikah admired. There were plenty of Ladies of the court that were smitten with the both of them, but Sheik had never seemed interested with them. It was entirely possible that some of the males were candidates too, but Sheik didn't speak with many guards or Lords.

It wasn't until they were settled around the fire under a small oasis of trees, dried meat now smoking over the flames, that Link finally asked.

"I've never heard you gossip before. I have no intention of telling you that," Sheik replied with a bark of laughter.

"Oh, c'mon, Sheik," Link nearly whined. "I don't gossip."

"But you do tell the Queen everything under the sun," he said with a quirked eyebrow.

"Because she's one of my best friends, just like I tell you everything."
"Which I still think is inappropriate."

"Why?"

"Because eventually she will have to marry. When she does, you will no longer be allowed to be so close to her," Sheik explained patiently.

"I'm aware of this. Hence why I'm enjoying the time we still have." Link felt a spark of annoyance. Of course he knew Zelda would marry. It would most likely be arranged by the Cabinet and made to be beneficial to Hyrule and whatever country she married with.

"Regardless, I'm not going to tell you who the candidates are."

"Give me a better reason than 'you'll gossip' and I'll leave you be," Link teased,

"Because it's not relevant. I may pursue it at some point, but for now, there are far more important things going on," Sheik said with a finality to his voice.

"Fair enough."

They fell into a comfortable silence, watching the meat slowly become edible. Sheik reached forward to turn the stick when he said, "So. What are you going to do about Malon?"

Link let out a disbelieving noise. "Hey! If you get to be evasive, so do I." He elbowed the Sheikah in his side.

"But I'm not the one who had a secret meeting in a barn with a pretty girl."

"Don't turn this into something perverted. We just talked. She told me she had feelings for me," Link said defensively, kicking some more branches into the fire, coaxing it higher.

"And?"

Link gave him an incredulous look. "And you say I like to gossip! I gave her a hug, told her that I'm not ready for a relationship and that was that!"

Sheik just gave him a skeptical look.

"You're terrible!"

He got laughed at for this comment and Link really couldn't help but join in eventually.

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As always, huge thanks to my rockstar beta's Cherry (sheikofthesheikah on tumblr) and the mysterious buttmunch. And thank you for reading and supporting this nonsense. The response so far makes me feel like the year I spent writing this was well worth it. Chapter 4 is being edited as we speak and should be up shortly.
sincosma on tumblr if you wanna say hi!
Chapter 4

IV.

The morning brought rain, much to their aggravation. Being awoken by a downpour wasn't the best of alarms but they hurried to pull on their cloaks and head for the forest. Epona and Kronos snorted at the humid downpour, not thrilled to be leaving the modest coverage the small copse of trees had offered them through the night. Thunder rolled through the air as they began the last leg of their journey to Kokiri Forest.

A few hours before they reached the tree line, the rain let up and the sun warmed the muggy air, making the humidity so oppressive Link wanted to take off anything that wasn't strictly necessary. Sheik appeared just as unhappy as the moisture ensured he stayed damp – specifically his cowl. Link's hair stuck to the back of his neck and when they finally reached the instant cool of the forest they both sighed in relief.

Link had not been back to the forest in two years. He snuck back in once to see Saria at the temple right after the war, but it took too much of her power to cast a physical form so he visited her in his dreams instead. It was a skill Zelda taught him and, now that he had mastered it fairly quickly to speak with his friend, he also used it to communicate with Zelda herself. It only worked if the other person was asleep as well – sages excluded from that stipulation considering they were technically always asleep now – but it was still useful nonetheless.

Sheik let Link lead the way. Regardless of the fact he was not a Kokiri, Link still had a connection with the forest that took years to develop. He knew every twist and turn and how to recognize the playfulness of a skull kid trying to get them lost versus a Stalkid trying to lead them to an early grave. The forest was mischievous and Link knew it better than any other place in Hyrule. If anyone went in without knowledge of it, the forest would spit them back out or throw them right in the mouth of a monster. Because of this, Sheik followed Link carefully through the trees, the hush of the brooks and the rustles of the leaves clearing their minds.

The village drifted into sight and Link prepared himself for the chaos their arrival would bring. Outsiders didn't visit the Kokiri because outsiders couldn't find the Kokiri. And hardly any of the children even knew people existed outside of their isolated lands. Link was the first outsider to ever be raised among them and, in a way, he was a liability to their secrecy – it was a point Mido had always insisted on raising. As they moved through the trees, Link wondered if Mido would even recognize him now. The last time they had interacted, Mido had been far too distracted with the monsters attacking the woods to realize it was Link. There were pros and cons to both sides of revealing himself but, as it turned out, Mido decided it for him.

"What the-?" came a loud, angry voice from the left of their position, right before the clearing of the village. "What are you doing back here?"

Little Mido popped out of nowhere with an angry scowl on his small face. He held a slingshot pointed right at Link's head, a gesture that hadn't scared Link even when Mido was a larger adversary. Now it was just laughable – the threat of a mere child.

"I need to see the Deku Sapling," Link replied, hoping to convey in his tone that his reason was not up for debate.
"Hah! Fat chance, loser. There's no way I'm letting an outsider see the Deku Sapling! I can't even believe you have the guts to show your face here!"

Link let out a sigh and swung off his horse. He strode up to the child, snatched him by the front of his shirt and pinned him with ease against a tree. Mido tried to squirm out of his grasp, but Link just held tighter and brought their faces close. "Listen, Mido. I really didn't want to have to bully you like you bullied me. But regardless of what you say, I'm seeing the Great Deku Sapling. I've seen him before – he knows who I am. So how about we save everyone some time here and you shut it?"

Mido's green eyes widened. "I'll send Skulltulas on you if you go. I'll send Deku Babas."

"And we'll slay them all and you'll be left to clean up the mess."

"You can't just barge in here and see the Great Deku Sapling!"

"But I am."

"You're not even a Kokiri!"

Link sighed and let Mido fall back to the mossy ground. The Kokiri toppled over with a cry and Link went back to his horse. "Let's go, Sheik."

Sheik made sound reminiscent of a chuckle and they continued through the foliage and into the village. Sheik's head was a swivel – he had never been this far into Kokiri forest and seeing it for the first time had to be breathtaking. The way the sun glared through the layer of mist overhead, the glowing motes that floated through the air, the startling green of the trees and grass, and the wild vines that wrapped around nearly everything were sights reserved only for those with the mind to keep it hidden.

Mido followed behind them, rousing everyone in the village as they trotted towards the entrance to the Deku Sapling's domain. "So much for quietly getting into the Great Library," Sheik commented, giving Link an irritated look. "I can't believe you lived here with that moron for as long as you did."

Link shrugged, glancing back as Mido chased them, the guy huffing and puffing in exhaustion. Faces were appearing in doorways and windows as they passed the market, the children all too curious to see what Mido was having a tantrum over now. They wouldn't be able to take their horses beyond the gates, so they dismounted to tie them at the shop. Mido finally caught up, roaring on about Kokiri ways and repeating "No outsiders!" until Link was certain it was all he could say anymore. Sheik actually looked truly annoyed now, his wrapped fingers twitching towards his knives. Link let out a grunt and unsheathed the Moon Blade, whirling around and pushing it to Mido's throat.

The very last thing they needed was a little Kokiri opening his big mouth to the wrong person and revealing their little side-stop on the way to Lake Hylia. Evanna seemed to pull information out of thin air and Link could easily imagine her getting word of the visit to the library. Most of the children would shy away from outsiders but clearly Mido had no problem screaming about it. Though it would bring him some satisfaction, Link didn't necessarily want to resort to violence. However, if it kept the little pipsqueak quiet and their plans safe, he would do it.

"I'm here on official business from the Queen, Mido," Link snapped. "I know you know what that
There were whispers around them of What Queen? and Queen of what? The Elders – a group of older Kokiri including Mido – new what lay beyond the reaches of the forest. When Zelda had been crowned two years prior she made a personal visit to the forest to meet with Mido and the other Elders to speak of security around the Forest Temple. No one was to go near it or even speak if it anymore and the Sacred Meadow would be guarded at all times so as to avoid any further infestation of evil. So Mido knew Zelda – she had apparently made quite the impression on him considering his reaction to Link's words:

Mido froze, fear in his eyes and his breath caught in his throat.

"I am the High Royal Guardsman to the Queen. Move from our path," Link's voice left no room for argument, pushing the blade a little harder against the boy's neck. "And you will keep our presence here a secret," he added sharply.

Mido let out a yelp that made the child in Link grin. Finally, the bully of all bullies had some of his own medicine. Link withdrew the blade, satisfied with the fully intimidated look in Mido's sea-green eyes.

"Jerk," Mido sniffed, rubbing at his neck and stomping off before anything else could be said. Onlookers had watched the whole scene unfold, some even laughing as Mido stalked back to his house, others nervous of the newcomers that so quickly resorted to violence. It was common knowledge though that the red haired Kokiri was not the best leader to preside over Kokiri Village. Thankfully, the other elders and the Great Deku Sapling kept him in check.

"You're such a bully," Sheik teased quietly.

"Oh, I know," Link agreed with a grin. "I know revenge is evil...but man, that felt good."

They proceeded down the passageway to the Great Deku Sapling. What they found amongst the motes in the Great Clearing was not a young tree – instead they found a trunk already half the size of the original Great Deku Tree. His face was younger, however, and his eyes bright like fresh amber sap. Link led the way into the clearing and bowed, Sheik following suit.

"Great Deku Sapling, please forgive the intrusion. We ask for audience with you. We come on important business."

"Hello, Link, Sheik," the tree greeted the pair of travellers. "I'm pleased to have you here. You are welcome to intrude today in light of your quest. I knew you'd come back to see me eventually, though you've made a quite a fuss in the village."

"My apologies. Mido can be trying."

"This I know," the Great Deku Sapling laughed, the leaves on his branches shaking in a short cadence before he cut straight to the point. "You've come for the Great Library."

Link nodded. "I know it's presumptuous of me to come asking for the key. And I know it's for Kokiri only…but there's information I need that-"

The Great Deku Sapling made slight tut, interrupting him. "I'm aware of what's going on in Hyrule and of your situation. I have deeper premonition than my predecessor did. I will give you the key."
Link raised his eyebrows, glancing at Sheik who also looked just as surprised.

"You did not expect it to be so easy?" the Deku Sapling asked with a hint of amusement.

"Nothing is ever easy for us," Link admitted.

"Then allow me to be the harbor in the storm." A long vine descended from the emerald leaves, dangling a large, ornate, brass key before them, glowing dully in the muted light. "I have sensed unease near the Library's entrance and your presence is more opportune – I do not wish to send one of my children to investigate in case danger waits for them. I would ask that you, both being warriors, ensure its safety. In return for this favor I am allowing you access to its knowledge. Remember that nothing must leave the Library. Whatever you find in there must only be shared to those who are trustworthy enough to hold the information close."

"Of course. Thank you, Great Deku Sapling, for your kindness and understanding," Link replied, bowing again.

"Oh, and Link?"

"Yes?"

"I am sorry to say it, but this is the last time you may enter the forest. Your energy is a disruption to the life here." His limbs creaked and something resembling remorse passed over his wooden features.

Link felt a whoosh of pain go through him. It wasn't a shock – he was Hylian and put out a very different, potent energy that would undoubtedly disrupt the delicate balance of the forest. During his childhood, strange things always occurred around him because of the yet unknown difference, though he didn't understand that concept at the time. Monsters would always pay him more mind and several times would stallkids try to lead him off into the darker depths of the forest when they never bothered any other Kokiri. It was yet another trait that made it obvious he was not Kokiri at all. He and Sheik had left ripples that would be felt for days after their departure. He'd always known in some way his complete banishment would happen, but it didn't make it hurt any less now that it had come to pass.

That forest had been his home, even despite the not-so-great memories.

Link grew up there. He learned how to speak to the trees and make the glowing motes dance. He and Saria climbed round branches and fat houses, whooping and running like wild things. But between those happy times Link fought with Mido nearly every day and any time without Saria made him miserable. He never went without bruises or cuts, his upbringing defined by violence. His ears were shaped differently, he didn't have a fairy, he didn't have green eyes, and he was growing; these were all features that cemented his fate as an outcast.

But all the same, being told to never come back was heartbreaking.

"Yes, Great Deku Sapling. Thank you for your lenience this one last time." Link couldn't keep the pained inflection out of his voice, bowing once more.

And so they left.
As they made their way back through the village, children watched them from the windows, too wary to come out anymore. Their eyes widened at the key in his fist and Mido's angry red face appeared in one of the windows, but there was nothing he could do — only the Deku Sapling could lend that key, so it was clear they had permission.

Link lead the way into the Lost Woods, his mind lost in sadness as he followed the path through the trees that he'd travelled for years. His hands passed over leaves, saying his silent goodbye to the woods he had always fled to when reality became too difficult, even during the War.

"I'm sorry, Link," Sheik whispered, following closely behind.

"I knew it was coming," Link stated, his tone clearly closing off the matter for discussion; he needed to focus.

Their passage through the forest was a quiet one. Creatures steered clear, most likely due to the energy disturbance a Hylian and a Sheikah were leaving in their wake. Now, whether or not that would attract other creatures, he wasn't sure. His experience with monsters in those trees…well, he didn't have the best track record though he had been a small vulnerable child then. The thought of such small creatures now taking the risk to attack two grown men was laughable at best.

The Sacred Meadow was deserted. There were no guards, as there was meant to be and the pair exchanged worried glances. Was this what the Deku Sapling had sensed? Grass and leaves swayed in the breeze, the emptiness in the clearing unsettling.

Without a word, Link drew his sword and Sheik lined his knuckles with knives in preparation. They crept through the meadow, bodies coiled to spring at first attack.

Through the gate, they came to the great forest maze. Link went for the ladder hidden around the corner and to pull himself up it in two quick, silent movements, Sheik following suit deftly. From on top of the maze Link could see only vague haze in the direction of the Temple. And the maze was quiet in a way that reminded him of the War, a shiver running along his shoulders at the implications.

"Something's happened," Link said quietly under his breath. Sheik just nodded in agreement, eyes narrowed as he too scanned the mist.

Then, a soft breeze blew over them and the thick smell of smoke assaulted their noses. It startled them both and nearly sent them into coughing fits. They shared a brief look of confusion before taking off, bounding over the tops of walls and feet brushing through the thick foliage. The closer they got to the Temple, the denser the air became and the harder it was to breathe. And even despite the thick air they saw a column of smoke stretching into the pale blue above, the color black as ink.

Something in the forest was burning.

Link's stomach dropped at the horrid stench surrounding them. They leapt off the maze wall and hurdles towards Library, whose door sat behind one of the great trees at the entrance of the Forest Temple. When they cleared the long hallway of trees and emerged in the clearing, they finally saw the guards.

They were no more than ten men piled high, lifeless and just starting to attract flies.
At first glance there was no sign of blood but their eyes were drawn away quickly as the source of the smoke demanded their attention.

The Library had been burned.

Link sprinted for the yawning black doorway and covered his nose and mouth with his palm as he peered into the great chamber. The fire had clearly devoured the Library in record time; they had only seen the smoke a league back. Whoever had set the flame had obviously been highly skilled in magic to so quickly reduce such a massive chamber's collection to heaps of crumbling ash.

All the priceless information needed, the hope to aid Hyrule, had been destroyed.

Anger enveloped him. Coupled with the still fresh wound of his banishment, Link let out a roar of words he rarely used, only ending when he slammed his fist into the stone wall beside him.

"Whoever did this was quick," Sheik's analytical voice spoke from behind him. Link turned to find his companion examining the bodies. "Their expressions are not that of horror. That means that the assailant not only killed the guards quickly, but did it in such a way that others did not notice until it was too late. What's more there isn't a single mark on these men that I can spot. Perhaps the damage is internal, but I see no entry wounds or even signs of poison. They were killed instantly. I cannot image how anyone could manage this sort of attack."

Link scrubbed his face to try and work past the rage still seething, scanning the clearing in growing confusion. "No tracks, either. It's almost as though this were the work of a ghost."

"This is clearly the work of powerful magic or poisons...and I don't know any spell or potion that wouldn't leave at least some trace." Link could hear the growing darkness in Sheik's words; his companion was finding this even more disturbing given his vast knowledge of magic and alchemy.

"There has to be some sort of clue here," Link murmured under his breath, searching the dim clearing and trying to find something that could shed some literal light on the situation.

And then he saw it.

It glittered dimly in the meek light coming through the smoke from the library, visible between two bodies. Without thinking, Link shoved his hands between stiffening limbs and grasped at what felt like sand on the ground below.

Blue dust from Chaos magic filled the lines and calluses of his palm. Sheik, who had come closer to see what the fuss was, pulled Link's hand closer with a surprised yank.

"It's the same compound."

"Someone used Vaspra to kill these guards?" Link asked incredulously.

"The evidence would suggest it," Sheik replied, seeming not to want to believe his own words. "I just don't know how. This makes no sense."

Link's mind went numb at the prospect of such death by magic. It reminded him chillingly of Ganondorf's reign. Everything about the scene before them spoke of evil. Why would someone go to such lengths to kill so many and destroy a library?
The only suspect in Link's mind, however, was Evanna.

"We should burn the bodies and be on our way," Sheik said solemnly, casting his eyes back to the cold bodies of the guards. "We must return the key and tell the Deku Sapling what happened here."

They made quiet work gathering branches and dead foliage to burn, setting it around the bodies – nine in total – and set it alight via magic. It took a while to fully catch, but time passed and they watched the flames take life, carrying the men to what they hoped would be a final and peaceful resting place.

Unfortunately they had done this too many times before.

Before they left, Link cast one last look to the charred remains of the Library, where thousands and thousands of years of knowledge were now clumps of ash. He would have to hand the key that now led to nothing back to The Great Deku Sapling and speak of the great loss of knowledge. It was a burden he wished so desperately to escape.

They made their way back through the woods in silence, through the village, and back to the clearing where the Great Sapling waited. Their return passage had been mostly uneventful but now, gathered around the tree, sat the entirety of Kokiri village. The moment they appeared, the children got to their feet and swarmed them.

"What happened?" they all asked. "What happened to the Library? We saw smoke rising above the trees! Did you see who did it?"

Link found himself grateful that, for once, the Kokiri didn't hold him immediately responsible. He shook his head at them and looked up at the Sapling, bowing and holding out the key. "I apologize, Great Deku Sapling. We were too late to save the library and the men guarding it."

A hush filled the clearing and the pain was evident on the Sapling's face. "I feared this."

"The Library can't be gone!" Mido cried. "That has all of our history!"

"Calm, Mido," the Deku sapling said soothingly. "The information can be summoned again. It will take half an age, but I can bring the Library back."

Link presented the large key and that same vine curled down to take it from his fingers. "Thank you for putting the dead to rest, to both of you. I'm sorry you were unable to get the information you needed."

"Thank you for the opportunity." Link bowed for the final time. "And thank you for my time living here and the kindness you and your predecessor have always shown me. Farewell."

"Farewell, Link, Hero of Time."

And with that, Link left the Kokiri Forest for the last time.

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Things are getting spoopy. Thanks for reading, chapter 5 soon to come.
Thanks to my betas Cherry (stoneofagony on tumblr) and Sage (sagesins on tumblr).
I'm sincosma on tumblr - come say hi.
Sheik and Link camped on the outskirts of the woods that night, backs against enormous trees and their faces warmed by a small fire. They had been quiet during their travels out of the forest, both lost in thought and unsettled by what they had seen at the Library. Link hoped he would get the chance to speak with Saria that night in his dreams and share with her what happened to the Library, if she didn't already know.

He couldn’t even fathom her sadness now, learning that her favorite place in the world had been destroyed.

Saria was one of the few Kokiri that actually went into the Library for enjoyment, as if it had been built just for her. The Great Deku Tree must have known her fate as Sage because he gave her the key almost before the moment she asked – perhaps, deep down, she had known it too. Mido had been infuriated that he wasn’t allowed into the Library but his affections for her redirected his anger to hitting Link without any real cause.

Link always wished he could go with her – the hope of perhaps someday being permitted to spend time in a huge old library, reading about the outside world was one that warmed him on the cold nights he spent listening to her talk about the things she’d learned while nursing his bloody lip or a broken rib. But Link wasn’t allowed and he was never in the presence of The Great Deku Tree until he was seven and placed with the greatest burden of his life – despite the old tree’s insistence, never once had Link felt he was raised by any of them. From the beginning, he was the orphan and the outcast, forever excluded from the privileges of being one of the forest folk. Mido would never allow him through the gate, let alone to the classes and stories the Tree held for the children once a day.

“We make for Lake Hylia in the morning,” Sheik said quietly, interrupting Link’s musings and turning a skinned rabbit over the fire. He sat cross-legged, his eyes flickering in the flames like the red stained-glass in the chamber he stood in just a few days ago for the ceremony.

That’s when Link really noticed it, sitting there and watching the fire in Sheik’s eyes. It was a distinct creep up his neck, his senses picking up on minuscule movement about five hundred strides back into the woods behind them. The light in Sheik’s eyes shifted as he picked it up as well. They shared a look of understanding and Sheik silently pulled out a long dagger, laying it against his leg. Link pulled a similar weapon out of his boot and followed suit.

“Perhaps we should move out into the field. The Deku Tree wanted the forest to be free of our energies. Sitting on the edge of it is probably not what he had in mind,” Link suggested.

Sheik nodded. “That’s probably for the best. He showed us great kindness today despite what happened. We should respect his wishes. Let’s put out the fire and move to some cover in the field.”

They shared one more look of understanding; they would be forcing their follower (or followers) to chance it in the open; sitting there would only be advantageous to the shadows stalking in the dark. The rabbit was now done so Sheik wrapped it in cloth as Link stamped out the fire, covering it with
dirt and foliage. They left nothing behind them as they trekked into the black field, only guided by the sliver of moon left in the sky. Listening closely behind them, they tried to catch whispers of footsteps on grass blades; the silence of the night pressed against them revealing nothing of their pursuers. They walked no more than a mile into the field before finally setting up camp once more. The new fire they made was smaller this time and they ate the rabbit in silence.

“I’ll take the first watch,” Sheik said once they finished.

“Are you sure?” Link asked dubiously, giving him an unsure look. Between both of them Sheik was far more sleep deprived.

The blonde nodded with a frown. “I’m wide awake.”

Link cast a wary glance back in the direction from which they came, seeing no signs of movement. Reluctantly, he assented and lay out next to the coiled warrior, his own body never quite relaxing. He was sure the tension would keep him wide awake, but before he even felt his eyes close, Link was being roused.

“What? What’s happening?” Link demanded lethargically, sitting up and looking around wildly. The sky was dark blue now and he was surprised to realize how much time had passed considering he hadn’t planned to even sleep.

“Nothing, Link, I just need rest,” Sheik answered in a calming voice. Link could hear the smirk in there, too. He nodded and sat up, unsheathing his Moon Blade and laying it across his lap as Sheik curled up where he had been. “Thank you.”

“Of course. How long did I sleep?” he asked.

“Four or five hours.”

“Anything exciting happen?”

Sheik let out a soft snort. “A confused Stalchild wandered around nearby for a while, but he never saw us.”

“How nice. Sleep well, my friend,” Link chuckled.

The watch into dawn was long and it reminded Link inevitably of the war, as all things seemed to do. He and Sheik had done this so many times, though it had taken them a little while to build the amount of trust they had now. Years of battle could make any warrior jumpy about sleeping, especially in an open field, however as he glanced back he found his companion was already asleep. Link had always liked how peaceful Sheik managed to look while at rest. It still sort of amazed him that he even got to see the warrior like this; Sheik was the most guarded and secretive person Link had ever met and the fact that he managed to make Link look talkative spoke for itself.

Before he knew it Link realized he had spent a good ten minutes staring at Sheik and quickly redirected his gaze to their surroundings. The field was silent and unmoving and the sky was lighting up, a lazy parade of forget-me-not blues, dark reds, and light pinks. Many times had he and Sheik watched the sun rise together. They had a tradition of meeting on Zelda’s private balcony – though she tended to sleep in and ignore their invitations to join – watching the sun blaze over the mountains. It almost didn’t feel right watching this one without Sheik awake to enjoy it with him.
A stirring of movement near a far-off copse of trees stilled his thoughts. Link grinned to himself; their tail was sloppy – he and Sheik would’ve never have had that sort of slip-up.

…unless it was a diversion.

Within seconds Link was on his feet, Moon Blade at the ready as he dropped into a defensive stance. Adrenaline pumped through his veins as he scanned the perimeter – nothing could be trusted in the field, even in the most peaceful of times. The monsters were deceptively quick and, despite it being an open plane, his paranoia had always served him well in the past. Better to be safe rather than sorry.

“Link,” came the low, quiet voice beside him. Sheik had rolled to his feet and, despite the shortness of his sleep, was alert and armed.

“Movement to our six o’clock,” Link murmured, glancing behind him.

Sheik nodded, moving so they were back-to-back, and they stayed like that for almost twenty minutes. The sun rose and bathed them in blinding red light, the air sticky with summer humidity as gnats started buzzing in their faces.

“Perhaps we should move on,” Sheik recommended softly, finally sliding out of his crouch and cracking a stiff neck. “Whoever this is, they do not plan on attacking now.”

“I have the same feeling as I did when we found the bodies of those guards,” Link muttered, reluctantly re-sheathing his sword and stretching out his own muscles.

“Are you suggesting our company may be responsible for the Library?”

Link ran his eyes over the tree line of the forest and the broad expanse of field between them and Lake Hylia. Everything before him seemed to move with blissfully unaware life or malicious intent. One thing he hated more than walking into something blind was doing so in broad daylight. While Sheik was a bit better with subterfuge, the war and its play on his sanity (especially the Shadow and Spirit Temple) had shifted Link into a face-value sort of fighter – he’d rather charge a beast head-on than play mind games.

“I am,” he told his friend. “I think we should proceed with extreme caution.”

“And extreme haste.”

“Agreed.”

They packed up camp and called the horses, which had wandered off since their adventure into the Lost Woods and their restless night. Nothing was more comforting to Link than sitting soundly in Epona’s saddle – he felt as if he could handle all of life’s problems from a higher vantage point. Tensions died down as their steeds carried them safely through the field, the presence looming behind them much less threatening as the duo rode together. They shared a hard biscuit and finished off their canteens before refilling them along a little brook.

As they moved into midday it became clear that while they were still being tailed, their stalkers were following with no intention of attacking. Link began to wonder if they were affiliated with Evanna – but what did that mean if they were? He was still partially convinced that those shadows were the very same who slayed the guards in the Lost Woods even if he had no proof. Did it then
mean that Evanna had destroyed The Great Library? What was she trying to hide? And how did she even know they were planning to go there?

Maybe their shadow had been watching them a lot longer than they had originally thought.

Link brought this all up to Sheik during their journey, hoping he could help solidify all of the loose thoughts. The Sheikah was quiet for a moment at this information until he seemed to sort out his thoughts as well. “There was something vague I came across the other night in the Castle’s library. I didn’t think anything of it…but now it’s starting to make sense.”

Link leaned forward, waiting for Sheik to continue.

“Termina has a story much like the story of Foursky. You’re familiar with Termina, right?” Sheik inquired.

“You’re talking about the parallel world,” Link clarified. “Zelda told me, according to myth, it could accessed beyond the deepest doorway in the Lost Woods.”

“Yes. It’s a world that lives, more or less, on top of ours. The doorway isn’t very accessible, but a few travelers have gone back and forth, so Hyrule and Termina have a vague awareness of each other.” He paused to take a drink of his canteen, a task that he managed to perform without revealing his face much to Link’s disappointment. “Their creation story is much different than ours. Hyrule seems to always follow a pattern of threes; the Three Golden Goddesses or the three Spiritual Stones. Termina, however, obeys the rule of fours – they believe the world was created by four sky giants.”


“If you dig deep enough, there’s an ancient story of a man arriving in Termina with a blue stone and incredible powers. He completely overturned what was considered the Old Religion – which some believe was similar to that of Hyrule – and he was revered as a god. There are some in Termina that believe this man was actually just a mortal that tricked the people into believing that he summoned four sky giants to create the world and he was just returning to reclaim it as god.”

After a pause to allow the information to sink in, Sheik went on. “Now, the only reason I was even looking into this was to consider the possibility that the Eastern Kingdoms Evanna claimed to hail from could actually be Termina. And what I found was…” he trailed off, eyes squinting at nothing in particular, “inconclusive. There is just not enough text on those lands.”

Link furrowed his brows in thought – so far it seemed that Foursky was a pretty impressive character considering it’s believed he was only Human and naturally had no magic in his blood, though Link had no idea what connection he had with the immediate situation. And parallel worlds were still a rather abstract concept even for the most knowledgeable of scholars. The idea that all of this was coming from other worlds – Vaspra from the Nether and Evanna from the dimension of Termina – made it all the more confusing and worrying.

How did all of this line up?

“Have you ever heard of the Order of Hexa?” Sheik asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Link shook his head.
“I’m not surprised. It’s actually an old and forbidden Sheikah word but I found it referring to a group of people in an old text among the very little information recorded from Termina. It speaks of an Order of warriors that are elusive as shadows and as deadly as assassins. They originate from somewhere in the dimension of Termina but even some texts in Hyrule’s history mention a league of men who are skilled in subterfuge. It makes me wonder how these people chose such a word as their own...they must have some connection to Hyrule. It’s possible they are somehow involved considering their fabled skill-set.”

“Are you implying that the Order of Hexa – or at least a member belonging to it – could be following us?” Link asked. “Why didn’t you mention any of this sooner?”

Sheik shrugged. “It was all just a guess and, now experiencing the elusive nature of who’s following us, I’m growing more convinced.” He shifted a bit in his saddle, glancing behind them simply out of habit. “But we need to know more before we really start implying anything.”

Link nodded absentmindedly, still trying to stitch together the tale that Sheik was only handing him threads of. Sheikah were not only fantastic warriors, alchemists, and spies, but they also take a great pride in the collection and passing on of stories. Link wasn’t surprised that Sheik had worked out so much of the tale so far, especially considering it had a small tie to Sheikah culture, but he was surprised that his companion had been withholding it. It made him nervous because Sheik only reserved information when he himself was nervous.

But Link wasn’t the only one perturbed by all of this – that was some comfort, at least.

“What do you think happened to Foursky?” Link asked after a while.

Sheik cast him a curious glance. “I would assume he died like anyone else. The stories must be several hundred years old.”

“And what do you think happened to the Vaspra he had with him?” he continued, feeling like he was broaching on something important to add to Sheik’s theory.

The stare he got from the Sheikah was worth the entire trip – it wasn’t often that Link was on the receiving end of such an impressed look. “You think that, if Evanna really is the enemy here, that the Vaspra fell into her hands?”

Link sighed, feeling overwhelmed from trying to keep the whole theory straight, but nodded. “I think it’s a very real possibility. And it would tie her to your attack and what happened at the Library.”

Minds heavy with confusing thoughts, they ventured through the fields under the baking sun. The horses snorted in frustration at the stifling heat and their gear clanked dully with the sway of each stride. There was always something hypnotizingly rhythmic about travelling like this across the field and now, thankfully, it was helping calm their minds.

They would make it to Lake Hylia late, by a little before sunset. It would be an insult to Evanna, Link was sure, but what they learned at the Library was invaluable and well worth the risk. Even despite the loss of information via books, it seemed they could operate without it.

Link only hoped he could be more helpful than just asking questions – Sheik had all the answers for right now.
It was decided that Link would appear alone to Evanna while Sheik would linger in the shadows. She seemed to trust Link to some extent between speaking to him on the balcony and cornering him for a spell-binding dance, for whatever that was worth. It was agreed that they should attempt to get as much information out of the woman as possible before they attacked.

And they would probably have to attack.

Evanna, governed under the laws of Hyrule, would be arrested and tried for her crimes against the High Royal Bodyguard if she truly was involved. Though the tattoo had not bothered Sheik since the other night it was something on his and Link’s mind. What was it? What was it going to do to him? Why had they put it there?

The sky was turning a dusty orange by the time they reached the rocky gorge that led to the lake’s valley. The air was growing warmer and drier the further south they travelled, only a hint of the deserts that lay beyond the mountains fencing the lake in.

Sheik tied Kronos to the gate in front of the passage and scaled the cliff wall, ready to fall into position near the tree in the center of the lake. Link watched him in slight awe, Sheik’s agility still never ceasing to amaze him. He couldn’t imagine how the Sheikah was going to get to the tree without being seen – there wasn’t much cover once in the valley itself – but Sheik would find a way, he always did.

On he rode and evermore did his worries grow. Nothing about any of this was at face-value. What was Evanna was after and was the same thing Zelda was concerned about? Did Evanna want this new discovery? That was the only thing that made sense, but he couldn’t find the connection between it and Vaspra. And clearly Evanna had some of the material considering the traces Sheik had found in his room. If Vaspra was so powerful already, what could she possibly want from Hyrule? She had said Hyrule possessed something that would save her Kingdom and that had been lost on him since the evening on the balcony…

But then it hit him: what if Zelda’s alchemists had found more Vaspra? What if they had discovered the fabled entrance to the Nether? Suddenly, as if he didn’t already hate where it was all going, he felt dread blossom in his gut.

Link dearly wished Sheik was still travelling beside him – he wanted to share this theory, but he endeavored to keep his apprehension in check, continuing quickly on.

He would just have to see what information he could get out of Evanna before he could confirm anything.

The pathway twisted and turned and Link had the distinct feeling that he was being followed once more and not by Sheik. He thought about the fabled Order of Hexa. Was that who was tailing him? What they had done – if it was them – to the guards had been horribly impressive. He wondered idly if he would have issues taking them on if they attacked without Sheik for back-up; he’d fought hordes of monsters all at once plenty of times. But he still couldn’t beat Sheik in even a hand-to-hand spar and if Sheik spoke of the Order of Hexa’s assassin-like skills with such reverence…
maybe it wouldn’t be as easy as he thought.

One last turn and the spectacular mirror of Lake Hylia unfolded before him. It was a soft orange, reflecting the turning sky almost perfectly. The cascade of mountains sloped down around the valley, nestling safely the waters and small village along the bank. Though the people there were still rebuilding slowly from the war none of its beauty was left marred. It was still one of his favorite places even if Link hadn’t found time to visit outside of the reconstruction, though he supposed he wouldn’t find the time soon with what awaited him on the island.

Even from the opening into the valley he could spot her. He knew he was late – she had said just past midday and here he was arriving just before sundown. They hadn’t expected to spend so long in the forest, however, so he was going to have to come up with some reason for being late. By the time he reached the wooden bridge, he saw a flicker in the tree and took solace in knowing Sheik was nearby. Evanna stood calmly in the grass by the monument swathed in a verdant green velvet cloak despite the heat. Her hair hung in an impossibly long and intricate plait over her left shoulder, tapering off just past her hips.

“I apologize for the delay, Your Highness,” Link called as he stopped several yards from her, offering no good excuse and hardly caring. He owed her no explanation.

Evanna gave a feline smile and shook her head. “Worry not, High Guardsman. I appreciate you coming at all.”

Link dismounted and sent Epona back across the bridge to graze on the grassy banks. He forced himself into a moderate bow despite the anger that flared up towards the woman. “Of course, Queen Evanna. I assume we’re where no ears can reach us. What did you want to discuss?”

With a graceful wave of her hand, Evanna summoned an ornate, black iron chair and sat gratefully on it. Link found the extravagance of it almost comical, the ease of the motion almost insulting. He hadn’t realized one had been summoned for him as well until he felt something hard against the backs of his knees. It was such a flagrant display of magic, one clearly meant to intimidate under the guise of courtesy. He had no intention of sitting, but the look on Evanna’s face clearly said, If you don’t sit, I don’t talk. So, begrudgingly, he took a seat though his back remained rigid, hand prepared the reach up for the Moon Blade at a moment’s notice.

“I’ve been busy these past few days. I’m made tired by my tasks,” she said with a soft sigh. Evanna leaned over and rested a pointed elbow on her crossed knees. Her thin cheek pressed to her fist and she fixed him with yet another patronizing smile. “What I need is simple. The task of getting it, however, will not be.”

“What is it you want, Your Highness?” Link asked.

“Are you familiar with the blue ore?” Evanna inquired, voice like spider’s silk. “I believe Hylians call it…Vaspra?”

Link contained his reaction but just barely behind a steady voice. “I’ve heard of it.”

“It is endearing what an open book you are. I would assume you know at least how valuable it is,” Evanna laughed and Link bristled; even with his years of learning to conceal his emotions, this woman could read him so easily. “Do you know where it comes from?”

“The Nether.” He saw no point in dodging her questions, for now, lest he test her patience.

“Very good. Of course you have a brain on those shoulders,” she said, voice kind and venomous all
at once. “Vaspra is the only thing keeping my Kingdom alive and despite our years of searching, we’re running out of it. We will fall without it. I heard whispers that a group of alchemists found a small vein of Vaspra in the rock of Death Mountain. I have come to barter for it and arrange for more to be taken from the Nether, no easy task for the commonplace soldier.”

The last puzzle piece was snapped into place and Link tried desperately to get one step ahead of the conversation. What did this mean? So the discovery Zelda had been speaking of had been Vaspra and Evanna was seeking it. But…what did that have to do with destroying the Library and attacking Sheik?

“Why drag me into it?” Link demanded. “This is a negotiation that should be happening at the Castle, not Lake Hylia.”

Evanna shook her head, braid swaying against her body. “I’m waiting for my…protection. There are many that would like to overthrow me and usurp my throne, and even more who would race to seek this ore as well. I would assume you know of discretion.” She leaned back and watched Link down her long, thin nose. “I require the services of a person of exceptional ability and divine talent to even dream of completing this task.”

She looked up at the tree and smiled. “Would you like to join us, Sheikah?”

Link wasn’t surprised that Evanna was aware of Sheik – they had even discussed the possibility of it. With a soft thump, Sheik was out of the tree and crouched on the grass. He straightened and leaned back against the trunk, fists lined with knives. His eyes were like fire as they flickered to Link, then back to Evanna. “Your Highness,” he said shortly.

“Despite the impressive skills of your friend here, I’m more or less decided that it will be you, Link, who will descend into the Nether. That realm is not a place for subterfuge; brute force and courage will be needed to conquer the End of Creation,” Evanna purred in amusement, eyes gleaming despite how black they looked in the fading light. “Unless, of course, the Sheikah would like to follow you there to his death.”

“Why would I descend in the Nether? It’s not like you’ve done me any favors thus far, what with your unwarranted attack on Sheik,” Link almost snarled, rising to his feet and glaring down at that preposterous woman. “Tell me what your intention was in marking him like cattle!”

For once, surprise crossed the Queen’s face, followed shortly by great amusement and interest. “I truly have underestimated you, Hero of Time. You give the illusion of being a blunt-headed warrior. You must have been coached to do that intentionally.”

“What is the tattoo? Why did you attack him?” Link went on, even surprising himself with the heat of his anger.

Very suddenly, Evanna was on her feet and matching him in an unexpected explosion of anger. She was taller than him, which was quite a feat considering Link was very tall already, and would’ve been intimidating if Link hadn’t spent over half his life battling things hundreds of times larger than himself. They shared a truly venomous look.

“I did not attack him, Guardsman,” Evanna growled menacingly. “I saved his life.”

“What could you have possibly saved me from?” Sheik called from his spot against the tree. Link could tell by his crimson glower that Sheik was growing more and more angry. “And why mark me?”
Evanna just glared and reached into her cloak. What she pulled out was absolutely revolting: a clump of midnight black ichor dripping with black smoke sat in her palm, the gore spilling out of her hand and over her fingers.

“This is the sickness that lay in your lungs. I saw it in you at the banquet after the ceremony. Had I left it, you would’ve died in less than a year. It would have been a horrifically painful death as well. Left as nothing but an invalid after a slow descent into sickness, your lungs would fill with liquid, forcing you to drown within your own body. Not, I would think, the dignified death for a loyal Sheikah warrior to the crown.”

Sheik just stared with an expression not that of shock and Link felt horror sweep through him as he realized that Sheik wasn’t denying it. Sheik had been…dying? Had Sheik really known?

Evanna made a disapproving noise. “No gratitude? Don’t lie to us and say you didn’t notice your shortness of breath, your increasing exhaustion, or those stabbing pains when you took full breaths. You may have hidden it very well from those around you, but you couldn’t hide it from yourself, Sheikah.”

Link had never seen Sheik pinned to the spot by words. There was no real fear in those eyes but there was a sort of reaffirmed look there, very much like something he’d feared had then been finally confirmed. It rooted Sheik to the ground as he stared at the rotten substance that would’ve killed him.

“This sickness…I used the last of my Vaspra to summon a familiar and take it from you. The mark is a ward against the illness growing once more.” Evanna put the gore back into her cloak and her hand came back clean. “Though my intentions are self-serving, this is my gift to you. Consider it an exchange. Will you help me save my kingdom?”

Link didn’t know how to speak; he was too lost in shock and sorrow that he had nearly lost the most important person in his life. He just stared, trying very hard not to imagine Sheik stiff and cold and pale in death. The mere thought of Sheik gone…was unbearable. Sheik, however, had come back to himself and asked, “Why does your kingdom depend on Vaspra? Does it lie in the same world as Termina?”

Evanna, anger gone and point made, settled back in her chair and fixed the Sheikah with an interested look. “Very good. I understand why you and the Hylian stay close. I’ve underestimated you both-”

“We need no condescending flattery. I appreciate your kindness in saving my life, completely. But we will not help you if you are not wholly honest with us,” Sheik interrupted, voice hard and clear.

“Of course,” Evanna replied softly. For once, her mischievous smile left and she looked almost pleasant again. “My kingdom is called Amrita. It is a land that lies east of Termina. It is a desert land but we have built an oasis among the sands and slopes. Amrita is a place of power and eternal life, the very word meaning Immortal in our tongue. It was created on the very foundation that is the power of Vaspra. And it has never escaped me that a man from Hyrule is the cause for everything I know.”

“Foursky,” Link said quietly. “The Human who fell into the Nether and first found the Vaspra.”

Again, Evanna looked impressed. “Yes, Guardsman. His name is Foursky and he is the origin of our bloodline. But he is not Human; he is a man of your desert here.”

“Foursky…was a Gerudo?” Sheik asked in shock. “The records say he was Human.”
“I’m sure they do. The Gerudo had exiled him despite how they required his seed to continue their race. It would not surprise me in the least if the Gerudo worked hard to alter stories to exclude his origins from their record. His crime, in my eyes, was not worth the exile…but exiled he was. So he travelled Hyrule in a time of chaos, a societal pariah but curious about the world nonetheless. When he discovered the entrance to the Nether at Death Mountain and survived the journey, he knew that the governing powers of Hyrule would destroy themselves if they acquired this most precious ore considering the wars that have happened over your Triforce.”

No. He just wanted the power for himself, I’m sure, Link thought dubiously.

“So he escaped into the world of Termina,” Sheik wondered out loud. “Gerudo know little magic – Ganon was an exception. How could he have learned to use Vaspra? There are records of a sorcerer named Foursky who claimed to be God over those lands…but how would he have learned any skill in magic to even be considered a sorcerer?”

“Because the first people to take Foursky in once he arrived in Termina were the Sheikah, quite the race of magic-experts,” Evanna answered, giving Sheik an expectant look.

“There are Sheikah in Termina?” Sheik asked incredulously, body suddenly off the tree and straight like a line. “Pure-blooded Sheikah?”

“Have you lost faith in your people’s persistence? Do you really think all Sheikah perished in the great genocides the Hylians have inflicted upon your people? Five times have your people been nearly destroyed, even despite the supposed protection of your Goddess,” Evanna said idly. “The Sheikah that have survived have escaped over the past three generations from the dark hand of Hyrule and in Termina a great tribe of them lived when Foursky arrived.”

Sheik again seemed glued to the spot. Link could only imagine the feeling of sorrow and happiness his friend felt – his people were not all gone. He was not the last of the Sheikah as he had said so often during the war.

Evanna continued. “Foursky learned the way of magic and, thus, created the Chaos magic from the Vaspra. And from it Foursky created our kingdom.”

“Foursky is the creator of Chaos magic?” Sheik demanded, even more incredulous as his eyes grew wider. Link shook his head at it all. The Gerudo Kings, it seemed, were always destined to do powerful things.

“I still don’t understand, though,” Link interjected. “How is Vaspra keeping your kingdom alive?”

“It’s the Gerudo bloodline,” Sheik answered. “A male will only be born every hundred years and must ensure the continuation of the Gerudo people. His crime must’ve been extreme to justify exiling the future of their people. It is a powerfully cursed bloodline and he will pass it into his offspring. The people of Amrita are that of the people of Gerudo, aren’t they?”

“They are. He took a Human woman when he first arrived and from there, he created Amrita in the deserts.”

“I still don’t understand. This was hundreds of years ago. Foursky would’ve fathered plenty of children. Amrita would have continued even after his death,” Link reasoned.

Evanna gave him a haughty look and laughed. “Guardsman, you know nothing of the power that Vaspra gives us. Foursky lives. The King still lives and I am his Queen. We always have been.”

“Foursky is alive? Does Vaspra bring immortality?” Sheik demanded. “If Foursky still lives…I
still don’t understand why your kingdom is in danger. You could live long enough to ensure more males are born. You could even make your people immortal if you possess this power!”

“Because it uses a large quantity of Vaspra to make a being immortal. And there is a cost, like all things in magic,” Evanna snapped, annoyance crossing her face. “Foursky’s seed will not conceive in our women. It makes us sterile. That is the cost of immortality. So Foursky uses Vaspra to create conception. We will not give immortality to all of our people because we have been using the remainder of it to conceive.” She fixed Sheik with a piercing look. “And I used the last I had saving you.”

Link leapt to his feet. “Lies!” he bellowed. “You used Vaspra to set The Great Library aflame and kill its guardians!”

“That,” Evanna said in a quiet, deadly voice, “was not I.”

“We found blue powder left over from Chaos magic, just as the powder in Sheik’s room. The attack showed every indication that it was you. Or did you decide to keep your hands clean and employ the Order of Hexa or some other paid sword to-”

With a thundering boom of magic that shook the very ground on which they all stood, Evanna was back on her feet and a blue glow was emanating from her hands. The water of Lake Hylia rippled away from the tiny island and birds took to the sky in an eruption of angry cries. The wooden bridge swayed and the leaves of the tree above them shivered.

“The Order of Hexa is not of Amrita. They go by a name out of their league, adopted after they defected and betrayed the crown. They operate under their own authority. It was a crime worthy of death that they stole Vaspra from Foursky and fled the kingdom. I know not where their allegiance lies, but I can assure you it has nothing to do with myself or Foursky. If they are here, it was undoubtedly their wicked doing.”

“Then why would they attack The Great Library?” Link asked, looking to Sheik who had his brows furrowed in confusion.

“The Order of Hexa may be trying to get Hyrule’s Vaspra as well,” Sheik suggested.

“All the more reason to take the Vaspra back to Amrita. Perhaps the Order will follow us back and we can finally try them for their crimes,” Evanna insisted. “You see? Everything I ask will only benefit Hyrule.”

Link and Sheik shared another look. Should they trust her? Should they help her? Vaspra was far too powerful. If Link had any say in it, it should all be dumped in the Nether and the entrance sealed off. He didn’t know what the Nether was like, but he doubted he would want to go if Evanna was calling it “End of Creation”.

He felt somewhat for Evanna and the people of Amrita, although it was a predicament that was the fault of Foursky himself. And even still she had come to Hyrule to find a way to bring them life. But something about Vaspra bothered him. Magic functioned strictly off the rules of an energetic exchange. That was why a magic-user would tire after much spell work, a feeling he was far too familiar with in his own studies.

What sort of trade was happening when one was made immortal? How much energy could that take? Evanna wasn’t tiring from her magic use; did she still have a little Vaspra with her or was she just that powerful?
There was something very wrong about the theory of it all and Link couldn’t get behind it. He couldn’t trust such a complicated story – it all seemed too convenient, too conniving, too dangerous.

With that, his decision was made.

“I can sympathize with your plight, Your Highness. But there must be another way rather than using Vaspra. There is something fundamentally wrong with the mechanics of that magic and I wish to have no hand in it,” Link said resolutely. “Your actions have not made you the most trustworthy of allies, despite the service you did for Sheik. Had you been candid from the beginning, perhaps we would be more believing. Your story is still a little too convenient – there must be a less ambitious method to solve your problems. As High Royal Guardsman, I cannot offer the services of Hyrule. You may consult the Queen, but I’m sure she’ll agree with my council.”

Evanna leaned back to make an expression that gave Link chills across his neck. The air seemed to crackle with energy. He cast a worried glance to Sheik; this couldn’t be good.

“Oh, Hero of Time,” she purred, sauntering close to Link, her long-nailed hand coming to touch him. He backed away which only amused her further. Evanna leaned forward and said, “What a valiant and diplomatic speech. But, you see, you actually don’t have a choice.”

Withing seconds, Link unsheathed the Moon Blade and prepared for a fight. “Is that a threat?”

“How easily did I lure you two from the Castle. You’ve impressed me in every way but in coming here. Why would you leave your Queen while such important things are happening there?” Evanna cackled. “The occupation of your lands was far too easy, your borders open as wide as a mother’s arms. My protection has planted itself in the castle as you traversed the fields.”

The Moon Blade was at her throat in seconds, resting again delicate skin. “What have you done?” Sheik was suddenly crouched behind her, knives against her back.

She raised her hands, amusement still painted on her fine face as though she were being threatened by children. “Nothing. As long as you cooperate, nothing will happen to your Queen and her kingdom.”

“How have you occupied our kingdom?” Link demanded.

“My forces surround your castle from every direction. Our weapons are locked on its walls and our men are within the castle keeping watch. Queen Zelda is aware. Because of her compliance she is well and free to move about. It will stay that way if you comply. We want nothing but to work together.”

“You will withdraw your forces and stand down,” Sheik said in a low, dangerous voice.

“But you’ll what? Kill me? I cannot be killed. I will fall and rise once more in seconds,” Evanna cried in laughter, her angular face tipping back with mirth. “I am of Amrita, immortal.”

Link caught Sheik’s gaze, wishing they had mastered Mind Speak – Zelda had been teaching them, but it was long process. He still tried nonetheless and was only able to sense Sheik’s trepidation – Link didn’t know what to do and neither did Sheik. They were both looking back to each other for guidance and there was none.

“I believe,” Link said after a long, tense moment, “we should go back to the castle for negotiations. Now that your protection is in place.”
“That sounds like an advisable and wise suggestion,” Evanna agreed.

Link lowered his weapon and Sheik, begrudgingly, followed suit.

“I suppose we’ll all see each other again in three days’ time,” she offered, waving her hand, the chairs dissolving into smoke. “I know of your proclivity to make side-stops. But perhaps, this time, you should endeavor to be on time.”

And then, quite suddenly, Evanna was gone.

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Sorry for the delay - I got pretty ill for a week or so. Many thanks to my betas whom I still haven’t chased off yet with my ridiculous mistakes, Cherry (stoneofagony on tumblr) and Sage (sagesins on tumblr). I’m sincosma on tumblr and this is also posted over on AO3 if you prefer that format. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 7

VII.

Link and Sheik hurried their way along the bank of the Gerudo River, the ticking of the clock nearly a tangible sound in between their steps. They moved through the deep canyon towards the Gerudo Fortress, hoping they could find answers and be well on their way before midnight. It was decided several minutes after Evanna left them that they needed more information.

Namely, Foursky’s origin and crime.

It took two hours to get to the Gerudo by river, scaling the rocky gorge with ease in their haste. If they had entered from the field it would’ve taken five. They were exhausted now, but relieved to see the flames of the Gerudo Fortress between the cliff walls.

The Gerudo women were ruthless and hard, but given all the help Link and Sheik had provided them since reconstruction had started and the minor treaty between them and Hyrule, they were confident they would get the information they needed. The smell of spices and sand met their noses as the full moon settled above the cliff tops, the Fortress bathed in silver light as they approached the guards.

“State your names and purpose!” shouted one of them in common Hylian. Anyone who was ignorant to the Gerudo would’ve thought it was a man speaking. She pointed her spear threateningly towards them, squinting into their faces. Recognition passed her eyes and she pulled down her purple mask. “Link? Sheik?”

The Gerudo and Sheikah were descendants of the same bloodline. Naturally, their languages were very similar as well; the Gerudo woman now spoke in an old desert language, a common dialect between the two races. It didn’t surprise Link that he would be excluded from the conversation considering the tension still lingering between Gerudo and Hylian peoples. Sheik had become somewhat of a bridge in communication now. She spoke with the same sort of accent as Sheik but with an altered lilt to it. Sheik had once described it as speaking with someone who spoke only in slang – challenging but understandable.

But Link loved listening to the Sheikah language or any variant of it. Sometimes during their travels, Link would ask Sheik to recite Sheikah stories or poems. He was also a good singer, Link had learned by accident, but no matter how he asked – or begged – the Sheikah would not sing for him. Regardless, listening to the Gerudo and Sheik speak was a little calming after such a tense day.

An agreement was reached and the Gerudo said now in Hylian, “Come this way. You must eat while speaking with the old woman – you both look exhausted.”

As they followed her towards the Fortress Link watched the sway of her hips – distinctly feline – and the flow of her purple clothing. The Gerudo were such an interesting people. Since the demise and imprisonment of Ganondorf, the Goddesses had graced them with an early baby boy. Link could only hope this child would not turn evil or be exiled.

“You must see Blithos and give him your blessings, Sheik. And you as well, Hero of Time,” the
woman said, her voice cheerful now as they wove their way through passages, more women in less
dress than the guards weaving around them. They were all dark-skinned and lithe like Sheik. There
was still a difference, however, in the yellow of their eyes, their round ears, and the color of their
hair.

“How old is he now?” Link asked.

“Almost three years,” she told him proudly. “I am his aunt.”

As they moved through the corridors, Gerudo watched them curiously or even sometimes with
distrust. Some Gerudo still had issue with the Sheikah, even despite their dwindling numbers.
Many still had issue with Hylians as well.

Gerudo, by nature, seemed to have issue with everyone.

They emerged out of the dark hallways and into a well-lit dining room. It was obviously intended
for the higher-ranking Gerudo judging by the fine silver and plush rugs and pillows. The guard –
whom he still hadn’t learned the name of – sat them at a table before an incredibly old Gerudo
woman with white eyes.

This was Nameth.

Nameth was well-known in all of Hyrule as being its primary record-keeper. Despite her obvious
blindness, she wrote on scrolls with precision, documenting every event that came to pass and
every event that was to come. She was an incredibly old Seeress and one of the oldest Gerudo in
history.

They sat before Nameth, who smiled at them. Her complexion was so gray and wrinkled, the smile
almost hidden under folds of sagging skin. Sightless, stark-white eyes stared blankly at them as she
spoke, “I sense weariness in you both. Please, eat. Then I will tell you what I know of Foursky.”

Link and Sheik shared a raised eyebrow but were honestly not surprised that Nameth was aware of
the reason for their visit. They ate as commanded and found their strength once again in heavily
grained bread, rice, and vegetables. The flavors danced on Link’s tongue and made him want more.
He’d only had a little of desert food over the years and found that it was among his favorite. Maybe
the cooks at the castle could manage recreating it for him.

The castle. Zelda.

Anxiety bit at his stomach and chased away his appetite. He sat back and watched other Gerudo
eat, all stealing quick and curious glances at him and Sheik. After a while, a small boy was brought
into the room and, for a breathless moment, Link thought he was seeing a young Ganondorf. But
after a moment of examination, he saw the nose shape was softer, the eyes a little darker, and a big,
happy smile on his face was unlike an expression he’d ever seen on Ganondorf’s own.

Blithos was still very young and very shy. He wouldn’t go near Link or Sheik instead opting to stay
tucked against his mother who sat not far away glancing at them warily.

Nameth sat quietly before them, bringing shaky spoonfuls of soup to her mouth. Link wondered
idly how much soup the woman was actually getting considering how much slopped out.

“Would you like to assist me, considering you have lost your appetite?” Nameth asked.
Link chuckled. He forgot how well Nameth could read minds. “Of course.”

He moved closer and fed her patiently. Midway through the task he realized that Sheik was watching him. He met the red-eyed gaze and saw a strange respect there. Sheik had often said one of the best ways to judge a man’s character was to watch how he treated an elder – Link supposed he was passing some sort of test.

Soon Nameth could eat no more and settled back against her pillows as a hot breeze twisted through the open windows and across their faces. Link resumed his spot next to Sheik and waited for the old Gerudo to speak.

“It seems the golden waters of Hyrule will never settle,” she said finally, voice like old parchment and a crackling flame. Link could hear the decades she had lived in the timbre of her voice and it sent shivers down his spine. “The ripples start to die and new ones take their place...especially when someone interferes with destiny,” she mused. “You wish to know of Foursky and his crime against the Gerudo people?”

“Yes, if you will tell us. It will help us understand what threat we truly face,” Link replied.

Nameth nodded and crossed her thin arms, papery brown skin hanging off the bones. “Perhaps, to put it into perspective for you, it is best you understand that Foursky is Ganondorf’s grandfather.”

Link had never thought of it that way and the realization made his heart leap. “Are you suggesting that Foursky was part of the reason for Ganondorf’s nature?”

Nameth made a clicking noise with her tongue and said, “Foursky, himself, was not the same as Ganondorf, but his nature had the same roots. It was as though the evil and mirth followed the bloodline. He was very narcissistic. I believe that was something passed through the blood. We pray for our little Blithos and fight to make him humble.”

Blithos squirmed at being mentioned and hid his blushing face in his mother’s side.

Link nodded, more to himself than for anyone else’s benefit. He could see how narcissism would cause what Ganondorf became. “So, what did Foursky do to become exiled?”

“He was very fascinated by the dark, ancient magic that cursed the Gerudo bloodline, nearly three hundred years before his time. It was against our laws to perform any magic. While our bloodline was once dense in magic, as the Sheikah are today, we put it aside to protect our kind from any further damage. Gerudo are far too greedy and cannot be trusted with magic. It is our nature now as the greediest of ancestors bred that characteristic into our blood. Foursky was unfazed by this and pursued it in secret.” Nameth made a gesture with her skeletal hand and a Gerudo came to her with a blanket. She said something briefly in Gerudo and went on.

“Foursky, more than anything, craved immortality. He wanted power, as many Gerudo males do, but he thought that if he lived forever, the Gerudo would no longer have to worry about their bloodline’s curse. This was a folly,” she said gravely. “In one night, while attempting a powerful spell, he killed twenty Gerudo women as an unintentional sacrifice. Foursky knew so little of magic and did not understand there must be a physical exchange in all magics, even the darkest ones.”

“So, when he was discovered you exiled him?” Link provided.
Nameth gave a slow nod. “We had no choice. He refused to cease his dabbling in magic. He wanted to steal texts from the Sheikah and the Hylians to continue his research. While he was our King, the council still had power to impeach him and cast him away from our lands.” Nameth paused, brows furrowed like she was trying to remember though she had not been there herself. “He left so willingly, like he had been waiting for an excuse to leave. Thankfully, the male offspring – Ganondorf’s father – had come early that year and he left us with a future.”

“From there, he must’ve found the entrance to the Nether in his travels through Hyrule,” Sheik said quietly, eyes now cast out the window at the waxing moon.

“That is correct. The rest, you seem to know for yourselves. My powers, however, cannot reach that of Termina. I have no information for you, unfortunately, about what he did there,” Nameth said with regret.

“No, that is plenty. You filled in a large gap for us,” Link assured her, reaching out to lightly touch her hand. “Is there anything more you can tell us about his nature? Any weaknesses he had before he became immortal?”

“The magic he uses now – what later became Chaos magic – must be amplified by the ore’s power. Foursky, as all Gerudo, has little magic in his blood. Without Vaspra at his command he cannot wield any true control over magic. If you can find a way to drain him of the ore he absorbed to become immortal then he is nothing more than a very ancient Gerudo. He is over two-hundred years old.”

“Vaspra within him?” Link inquired.

“Immortality is not a natural state of being, Link. Such a condition is kept through constant and powerful magic. One must consume the ore to live forever though it will eventually drain if the user isn't careful. While they still cannot die, they are left in a dreamless stasis until given more power,” Nameth explained.

“So perhaps the real reason Evanna is scrambling for the Vaspra is to keep their immortality. Do you think she lied about Vaspra making Foursky unable to impregnate a woman?” Link asked Sheik.

“She did not lie. It will stall any reproductive processes; it locks on the body's growth in time so life cannot be created. But you are correct – I doubt that is his real motivation for seeking this substance is to continue his kingdom,” Nameth answered before Sheik could even open his mouth. Her gaze went out to the moon, as if she could see it. Link followed her gaze, wishing just briefly that he could know the world as she knew it.

“Wish not for power beyond your own, Link. It will devour you. The Goddesses gave you what you have for a reason. Wishing for more than you're given is the path to ruin.”

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Link and Sheik called their steeds once they reached the pass to Hyrule field. The horses met them at the mouth of the gorge, stomping in the grass and they hurried into the night. The moon guided their way as they jetted through the glades. They could both still sense the shadows that followed them, but they seemed not as eager to follow as they had been.

“We’ll have to ride straight through if we can,” Link commented, pulling his cloak tightly around
his body as the evening chill set into the air.

“What do you think awaits us?” Sheik wondered tensely.

“I can't imagine.”

Sheik was silent for a just a moment and then said, “We were foolish to leave.”

“We didn’t know that Evanna’s forces would manage to infiltrate the castle. We’re not the only keepers there,” Link assured him. “We will drive her away, I am sure of it.”

They rode on in silence, both lost deeply in their thoughts. Link turned over the story of Foursky in his head. Every step of the way they had learned more and more of Foursky and his questionable intent. His true identity had been buried under hundreds of years of story and fables. More and more it was sounding like this Gerudo was a power-hungry manipulator; he sounded like Ganondorf. Link wondered about how Nameth had described Gerudo nature, how greediness had been bred into the people. The Gerudo had always been called a clan of thieves or assassins. But also a people of the sword and loyal to those they trusted, a people in danger of extinction with an invaluable bloodline of the Seers, like Nameth.

It really made him wonder if these traits were perpetuated by blood or by culture.

His thoughts turned to the Nether; what if Evanna really cornered him into travelling there?

“Sheik?” The red eyes of his friend flickered to him. “What do you know of the Nether?”

Their steeds snorted, as if they knew what Link spoke of. The chill of the night seemed to deepen at his words and Sheik’s eyes narrowed. “It is a place of nothing. It is a void.”

“A place of nothing? But does Vaspra not come from there?” Link inquired, becoming equally confused and disturbed.

“It’s not nothing as we know it. The Nether is the opposite equivalent of the Sacred Realm. The Nether is, more or less, the dump yard of the living world. It is where all things banished from our world reside. Everything from materials left over from the creation of Hyrule to the evilest of creatures sent there by our ancestors. It lies between dimensions. It is considered timeless and endless.”

“It sounds like a hell,” Link said in confusion.

Sheik shook his head and stared up in the stars bitterly. “No, Link. Hell is said to be for the dead who have sinned while the rest move on into their next lives. The Sacred Realm is the world of the Goddesses, Sages, and the Triforce; it is a place of creation. Think of the Nether as a dead end. Anything not needed is dumped there. So it’s said, anyway…”

Link shook his head. “So what in the world is Vaspra doing in there?”

“My guess?” Sheik sighed. “Vaspra was put there because of its unlimited power. Not only does it violate the basic laws of nature but it is far too powerful for anyone to possess without corruption. The Goddesses must have known its danger and more-or-less banished it.”

Link gnawed on his lip as he felt a dark thought growing in his mind. “But if that’s the case, how
“Perhaps it’s so powerful that it forced its way into the entrance at Death Mountain and grew into the rock.”

“Are you suggesting Vaspra is sentient?” Link asked incredulously.

“I don’t know what I’m saying, Link,” he replied, his voice a defeated sigh against the wind of their canter through the field. “Again, this is all conjecture. But Vaspra is not good news. For anyone. It’s too much power, too much temptation. It will lead Hyrule into ruin, just as Nameth said. I fear bringing it into this world. And I fear allowing Foursky to wield even more of it.”

Again, they fell silent. Link agreed with Sheik, of course, but he wondered what Vaspra could do for the reconstruction of Hyrule. Maybe it could heal the sick and it could keep their kingdom safe. It could be a power to command respect and peace between the other kingdoms…

But how could someone not be corrupted by something so strong and limitless?

Nameth was right – power would lead them all to ruin.

When dawn broke, the horses were swaying unevenly so they stopped by a noisy brook and refilled their canteens. Epona and Kronos drank eagerly from its currents while Sheik and Link sat tiredly against a tree trunk. The sun had still not heated up the field so they enjoyed the cool air while it lasted. A soft haze hung over the slopes and dew wet their behinds as they sat on the moist grass.

“I think we should enter the castle using the western passage,” Sheik suggested after a while of resting.

“What makes you think they won’t know about that passage?” Link inquired.

“Because there’s no record of its existence. We found it by accident, remember?” he replied.

Link nodded. They had been doing a mixed spar – hand-to-hand combat, weapon combat, and magical combat. It was getting a little too rowdy for within the castle walls so Zelda sent them into the field like an exasperated mother. Link had thrown Sheik through foliage long-grown on the old wall and clean through the stone itself. There they had found a passage of great age with no mention in any text.

They theorized it was an old escape tunnel for the Royal Family that had been forgotten through time and decided they would keep it to themselves in case of times they would need to be discreet. The passage led to Zelda’s study – it would be interesting to see how suddenly appearing in her chambers would go if the Queen was in there.

After their respite, they rode on. They took turns sleeping restlessly in their saddles, heads against scratchy manes. The summer sunshine turned into afternoon storms as the great castle came into sight on the horizon. It looked calm against the gray skies and Link tried to imagine that nothing was wrong there, that the Queen was fine and the kingdom safe.

As the day drew to a close and night chased their heels, it became clear the horses needed rest when Kronos tripped over a stone and actually fell to his knees. Sheik leapt off and helped the stallion back up, rubbing his bandaged hands over his hide soothingly. “We must stop. We all need rest if we’re to be of any use tomorrow.”
Link agreed and went about setting up camp. Sheik tended to the horses, eyes skimming the dark landscape for a long time before he spoke. “I don’t feel the presence anymore.”

As he lit the fire, Link focused on the energies around them, feeling for the shadow that had been stalking them from the forest. “Neither do I.”

Their anxiety was not quelled, however. They could barely relax as they ate more hard biscuits and cooked a small goat they saw on a hill earlier during the day. Fueled by their paranoia, every noise was an enemy about the pounce, every movement a monster ready to strike. But nothing ever did.

“What do you think awaits us at the castle?” Sheik asked once again, voice nearly lost in the buzz of crickets around them.

“A very tense occupation,” he replied. “I can’t help but feel like our hands are tied.”

“I don’t understand,” Sheik said, a hint of frustration in the deep timbre of his voice. “She’s out of Vaspra, yet she could perform such magic. I fear we’re no match for her.”

Link nodded, also thinking of Evanna’s flagrant show of magic; she made it look so effortless. He still needed so much mana and concentration to perform magic, the threat of dipping too far into his life force very real every time he cast a spell. But even Sheik and Zelda couldn’t perform magic with such reckless abandon, never bothering to learn spells that offered no use – summoning chairs wasn’t necessarily a life-saving skill.

Then he remembered what happened on Lake Hylia, the moment where Evanna revealed that she had saved Sheik’s life. He still hadn’t brought it up; there was plenty to distract from that particular conversation. But now, on the cusp of the unknown, the moment seemed better than any other.

“Sheik, did you know…did you really know about the sickness?” Link asked quietly, thinking he sounded much like a child in the darkness.

Sheik’s eyes were hard and unreadable, boring into the fire with a faraway concentration. For a moment, Link wondered if his query would be ignored; Sheik used to do that often when Ganondorf’s evil still reigned. If the question was too emotional it wouldn’t be answered. But eventually Sheik replied, “I noticed the pain, the shortness of breath, the weight on my chest. The first day I noticed it was when we helped Duchess Morsa carry her things to the twelfth floor, probably six months ago now.”

“You thought not to tell Zelda or I?”

“It is not the way of the Sheikah to ask for help in such things.”

“Bullshit!” Link shouted, suddenly on his feet and fuming. “You are my best friend and invaluable to the Queen. You can’t just deny yourself help when so many need you. Zelda could’ve helped you somehow and you know that. So what’s the real reason why you would keep this to yourself?”

Sheik looked shocked. And maybe rightfully so; Link rarely had an outburst since his time recovering from the war when anything could set him off. Wide red eyes locked with his and for a moment, Link saw an expression frozen with indecision and uncertainty.

“I was afraid,” Sheik finally admitted, dropping his gaze to the ground. Link could no longer see
his friend’s eyes, but he didn’t think he wanted to. The pain there would eat him up and there was already a very long list of things exceeding at that. The hot air long deflated, Link sat back down and stared sightlessly at the fire.

“You could’ve spoken to me. You didn’t have to be afraid on your own,” Link said quietly. “After everything you did to help me after the war…”

“It went against my nature, Link,” Sheik insisted. “Besides, there was plenty for you to deal with—”

“Again, bullshit,” Link interrupted a second time, more composed now. “I swore myself to Hyrule so long ago, but…there are two people whom are my real and only priority. Maybe it’s heresy, but you and Zelda are the only people I truly fight for. You both are the only people who keep me grounded in a time where I couldn’t be more uncertain. So, you must understand, the idea that you were dying and I ignorant and unable to do anything to—” He found himself unable to force the words out of his throat. Link swallowed and just said, “We fought alongside each other throughout the war. We protected each other, though more often than not it was you protecting me.

“You must understand why this upsets me,” Link finally finished, feeling he had said more than he’d ever revealed before in any of their many talks. He and Sheik were not men of words by any stretch of the imagination. But he felt it had all needed to be said.

Sheik stared at him now, eyes more open and surprised than Link had seen them in a long time. A moment passed and they stared at each other, as though they were only really seeing for the first time. Then, slowly, Sheik extended his wrapped hand palm down.

“I’m sorry, Link,” he almost whispered. “Forgive me for my negligence. I should’ve told you.”

And Link realized he could never even be truly mad at his friend. He grasped Sheik’s warm wrist and squeezed, Sheik mirroring the gesture.

“All has always been forgiven, Sheik.”

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Many emotion, much angst. Thankeeeee for my betas Cherry and Sage. I hope you enjoy!
Chapter 8

VIII.

It was a few hours past noon when they reached the passage. Tensions had grown in the morning when they awoke to see a light column of smoke rising over the castle. It rushed their steps and brought them to the tunnel much quicker than they’d estimated.

Since finding it, they had cast a permanent illusion on its entrance; all they could see was old stone and creeping ivy. After a moment of focusing, they saw past the trick and could sight the hole Sheik’s shoulder had left in the ancient wall. They sent their steeds back into the fields to graze and wedged themselves one at a time through the rather small space, both just barely fitting.

The air inside was dank and rotten; who knew what had died in the tunnel? Sheik illuminated the way with a small flame he held on his palm as they skirted past Skulltulas and unintelligible remains. It reminded Link far too much of the Shadow Temple, a feeling that hadn’t lingered in the air when they first investigated it. In their initial scout, dust had clouded the air and adrenaline still pushed through their bodies from the excitement of the spar and the potential adventure of discovering something long lost.

Sheik was the first to see it, a detail they had clearly overlooked months ago; halfway through the tunnel was a rather small, crude painting on the wall. Almost completely obscured by cobwebs, Sheik brushed them quickly out of the way to reveal what appeared to be a message. It was the Sheikah weeping eye, the very same Sheik wore emblazoned on his armor. Below it was jagged red-brown letters, the paint – or blood, Link mused quietly – flaking away. He doubted it could be anything good but waited for a translation given Sheik could even bear to share it.

“Never trust the Royal blood that runs through Hyrule.”

Chills crept up Link’s back as Sheik went silent, reaching out to press his hand to the cold stone wall where the words flaked. The flame in his other hand wavered and Link was left wondering how something like that made Sheik feel.

Everyone knew of the Sheikah genocides from over twenty years ago. It was a sordid piece of Hylian history. It had happened some years before Sheik’s birth but most of his extended bloodline had been killed during the genocide and then later with the rise of the Evil King.

It still amazed Link that Sheik and Impa would remain in the service of the Royal family. In fact, Link didn’t really understand much about Sheik and his childhood aside from the most recent story about Kalyh. Even before the genocide, not much was known about the Sheikah people and that secretive nature remained strong in Sheik. It was only known that many of them swore fealty to the Royal Family as charged long ago by the Goddess Hylia.

“Sometimes I forget how devastating the genocide was for those who lived it,” Sheik whispered even though it was just the two of them, like he was afraid to speak such heresy. “The Royal Family is so different now, so far from killing the tribe who served them until death. It’s hard to imagine what it was…nothing made me gladder than the death of the King.” Before Link could even think of a response, Sheik led the way onward.
So he let it go; they had enough before them to concern themselves with. But he wouldn’t forget the truth of Sheik’s words nor the deep pain that laced through them.

It took twenty minutes to reach the entrance to Zelda’s study and when they slid from the space in the wall and into the closet the space was hidden in, their weapons were drawn.

They fell silent, sliding into their old rhythms of stealth as Sheik scouted ahead to clear the corridor. They quickly made their way into the hallway and headed for the throne room. After the first turn, a maid passed them looking unperturbed and Link and Sheik shared a glance. As they moved through the halls, people bustled around them like any other day in the castle.

“You both missed it!” came a high feminine voice.

They turned, wild-eyed and fingers twitching towards the weapons they had decided to sheath. Duchess Morsa was flitting towards them from down the hall, her blonde hair in elaborate braids and dress brushing the polished floors.

“Queen Evanna was demonstrating some amazing fire tricks from the Eastern Kingdoms a little while ago!” she prattled on.

Well, that’s where the smoke was coming from.

“Where is Queen Zelda?” Link demanded, feeling too impatient to deal with her.

She looked a little shocked at his brisk tone but thankfully answered, her voice a bit smaller than usual, “In the map room, I believe.”

Link thanked her as he and Sheik took off for the large space behind the throne room. As they hurried down the halls, eyes switching from left to right, they met no sort of resistance from unfamiliar warriors. They passed royalty and guards and maids and butlers; all people they easily recognized.

“What kind of occupation is this?” Link hissed, just loud enough for Sheik to hear. “I don’t trust it.”

“Neither do I,” Sheik replied as they slipped into the throne room only to find it empty.

They paused outside the map room to share a brief look of indecision. Link couldn’t imagine what lay beyond the door other than what the room had always been: a dark and quiet place dedicated to strategic meetings and hearings. In the center, an entire table showcased an enormous topographical map of Hyrule and the charted surroundings. There was no way to prepare for what might be beyond that door so they drew their weapons in silence as Link pushed the door open.

Sitting before it was the Queen, looking unscathed and blank-faced at the head of the table. Across from her, on the other side of the enormous map that covered the surface, sat Evanna. The tension between them was nearly visible.

“Ah, and there are our boys,” Evanna said happily.

Zelda met Link’s eyes and for just a bare moment relief filled them. And then she went back to her perfectly composed, regal face.
“And much more punctual this time, which is impressive. How was your brief visit with the Gerudo?” she asked, her voice like quicksilver. Neither of them could muster surprise; of course she knew. How she did was unclear, but not surprising nonetheless. “Please. Have a seat.”

Link and Sheik shared one more look. If there was anything neither of them could stand it was not being in control of a situation. Their jaws tightened and, cautiously, they sat themselves on either side of Zelda.

“No, Link,” Zelda insisted quietly. “Don’t.”

Evanna smirked. “The Hero of Time, always a slave to your kingdom.”
“I’m no slave,” Link barked, hatred flooding his mind. He felt Zelda’s hand leave him, most assuredly from the now twisted expression on his face. “I go because I will ask no one else to take my place. Unlike you, I would sacrifice myself for the greater good of my people.”

Evanna’s eyes flashed darkly, just a fleeting window into the boiling rage that seemed to underline everything she said. “You think my being here is not sacrificial? Do you think this is not a danger for me to be here, so low on magic?” Completely contrary to her words, with a flick of her fingers, the image above the map was gone and she folded her hands. On her pointed face was calm that managed to be more menacing than any other expression could be. “Despite the corner I back you into, you know I come from a place of desperation. You all know my situation.”

Horribly tense silence filled the room for several moments. Like breaking a spell, she then leaned back against her chair with a sigh, her slim body a languid line among the dim light. Despite her relaxed demeanor, Link could still feel the power spilling off her in peals of energy. “In a way, I’m in as much of a corner as you. You don’t know the power of Foursky.”

Link felt no sympathy for her. This was a life she had willingly allowed herself to become consumed in and now she dragged the fate of other kingdoms in the balance. He glared at her and she met the look with hard black eyes.

“You have three days,” she said shortly after a pregnant pause that sucked the energy out of the room. With a sweeping motion, she rose and left the room with a swish of long green skirts.

Silence only lasted in the room for moments.

“She must really be running low on her magic if she walked out,” Sheik muttered in possibly the closest thing Link had ever heard to sarcasm.

Link watched the door slowing close with a soft thump, trying to comprehend what he had just agreed to. His mind revisited all the things Sheik had told him of the Nether. And it wasn’t that he was terrified it; Link feared very little save the safety of the people he loved. But what could he possibly expect of a horrific place deemed the “end of creation”? Did he really have the power to survive such a place? How would he bring back the Vaspra? How much was she expecting him to glean from that place? Where would he even find it?

“Link,” Zelda interrupted his thoughts, her voice sounding a hint frantic. Link focused on her again, finding the Queen turned in her seat and grasping at his arms. “Link, no. You can’t agree to this.”

“It’s done,” he told her softly, gathering her hands in his. “I’m sorry, Zelda. But I won’t allow her to destroy us all.”

“You don’t have to be the martyr, Link,” Zelda insisted. And Link realized her eyes were starting to water. He hadn’t seen her cry since the day Ganon was defeated. Even in the most stressful days of her rule thus far, Zelda had never faltered. But the panic in her was so strong now he could nearly smell it in the air, like the prelude to war. “You’re always sacrificing everything you have and you don’t have to. You’ve already done enough for Hyrule.”

“No one said I had to, Zelda. Well, aside from Evanna.” He held her fingers tightly, shaking them for emphasis. “I choose this. She will kill everyone I love. This is not about Hyrule. This is to keep you safe. And Sheik as well.”
Zelda blinked, a bit of moisture betraying her normal, regal calm. “Link…”

Sheik stood up silently and gave him a pointed look. The relationship Link shared with the Queen was largely different than that of her and Sheik. The affection and the deep trust remained the same between them all, but Sheik was far less understanding and delicate with emotions like this. The Sheikah would leave them to the conversation and meet with Link later, most likely on the training grounds – it was always a place of solace for them after tense meetings.

Link nodded as Zelda wiped the hint of moisture from her eyes. Sheik was gone just as quickly as Evanna, leaving Link with a distressed but recovering Queen. Because even if Zelda did panic, it was to be short-lived. That was the way she had always been, with a Sheikah warrior tending to her since her birth. The Sheikah discipline had wormed its way into Zelda’s mind and Link watched her reach for it now.

“I’m sorry, Zelda,” he whispered softly, squeezing her hands again. They were bare. Normally, during important meetings, they were gloved in white satin. She only took them off in battle; magic was easier to control with nothing in the way.

“During the war…it was so hard to know you were in those temples. We didn’t really know each other back then, but I was still so worried for you – and not just for Hyrule. I feared for you. For Sheik, too,” she explained, eyes fixated on their hands. “And then, after the war, you both became the only people I could truly confide in since Impa became a Sage. You’re so important to me, Link, to Hyrule. I don’t know much about the Nether, but what I do know…is horrifying. I can’t let you just walk into that.”

“Zelda…” Her words set a small fear in him once more, the unknown terrors of the Nether threatening his calm.

“Sometimes, when you and Sheik would go off on your campaigns, touring Hyrule and helping with repairs, I’d have dreams that you were killed. I knew they weren’t actual visions, but they felt so real,” she continued. “Of course, you’re the Hero of Time, and if even Ganon couldn’t destroy you there’s very little else that can. But this is different and I can’t even describe how it scares me, Link.”

Link frowned. “Who would go in my place? Who could you condemn to death? If anyone has a chance of making it out of there alive, you know it’s me. Maybe I’m just full of myself,” he chuckled humorlessly, “I think you believe it too.”

“I know that. But losing you is not an option, Link,” she said quietly, eyes now suddenly hard and unwavering in their intensity as she finally regained control of her emotions. It wasn’t a statement of sentiment as much as it was of command. Of course it had occurred to him that she could simply order him to not go…but Zelda knew, deep down, he was right.

“It’s not going to happen,” he assured her anyway. “You know I’ll make it out of there.”

Link couldn’t handle much more of the same, circular argument spinning between them. He had his own trepidations and thoughts to attend to and, considering Zelda had still made no move to give him an order, he needed all the time he could manage to prepare for the task ahead. With another squeeze, Link let go of her hands and headed for the door. Now he would find Sheik – they needed to discuss the Queen’s safety in Link’s absence and what would be needed for him to traverse a nightmarish realm no one had any real information on.
“Link, wait.”

The irritation he felt might have resembled a child’s as an overprotective mother fussed, but he obeyed and glanced back to find her following him. Perhaps Zelda was going to order him to stay…an order he would ultimately have to ignore either way.

As though his thoughts were audible, she said, “I’m not going to order you to stay. It’s not as though you follow those anyway. So, at least…let me give you all the help I can.”

Before Link could inquire, she placed her right hand over his heart and her left on the crown of his head. Warmth radiated from the contact and a surge of hot, spastic energy jolted through his body. The sensation was nearly unbearable as their bodies both tremored but was then promptly gone, only lasting moments before the feeling left and Zelda staggered back. Whatever she had cast, it had been enormously draining for her and Link instinctively reached out to steady her.

“I’m fine,” she assured him, shaking her head. “That was the first time I’ve ever tried that. I was worried it wouldn’t work but, thank the Goddesses, it did.” A small smile curved her face and Link felt a bit of relief despite his confusion.

“Congratulations…but, um, what did you do to me?”

The heavy door of the map room swung open and thumped softly against the wall. A servant stood nervously in the doorway, eyes widening when he seemed to realize that he had clearly interrupted both the Queen of Hyrule and the Hero of Time in a private moment.

“F-forgive me, Your Highness,” the man began, but Zelda cut off what would most assuredly be more bumbling apologies as she visibly straightened.

“There’s nothing to forgive. Go on.” Her tone was patient despite the sweat at her brow and the exhaustion now in her eyes.

“The Cabinet, my Queen. They demand to meet with you. They’re on their way-”

The poor servant’s words were ended as two richly-dressed men Link recognized as Cabinet members pushed past him roughly. They looked tense and stressed, their expressions turning severe as they spotted Link.

“Your Highness-” one of them started.

“Take a seat, Bilios.” The order was short and precise as Link watched all that he knew Zelda to be disappear behind the walls of monarchical discipline. The men complied and Zelda turned her gaze once more to Link’s, her face the antithesis of what it had been only minutes ago.

“I’ll explain later. I have work to do, as do you.”

And Link could do nothing but nod and leave, skirting between the still-alarmed servant and more Cabinet members as he hurried for the training grounds.

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IX.

He found Sheik on the training ground’s armory, grabbing some things from the cupboards there. It was just a small out-building, but it was where Sheik liked to store some of his weapons. He tended to spread his things throughout the castle so he’d always have access to something – it was one of the uniquely thorough things about Sheik that had become more endearing than worrying to Link. A small satchel hung over his shoulder and he loaded it with throwing knives.

“Sheik?”

His friend glanced back, giving him a once over, then going back to his task. “I’ve haven’t seen her that worked up in a long time.”

“Neither have I,” Link agreed, leaning against the doorframe. He watched the Sheikah work efficiently, everything about his body language submitting that there was some sort of preparation happening. “What are you doing, exactly?”

“Just getting things together,” Sheik answered somewhat innocently.

Link gave him a glare, the purpose of his companion’s movements suddenly clicking into place. “You think you’re going with me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Link matter-of-factly.

“Of course I am.”

“You are definitely not,” Link deadpanned.

Sheik closed the satchel and faced Link with skeptical red eyes. “You truly think I’m going to let you walk into the Nether? Alone?”

“Yes,” said Link matter-of-factly.

“That’s not happening,” Sheik said shortly, moving past him and back into the sunlight laying a wave of heat over the training grounds. The three acres of dirt was empty, too bright and too hot. Link could feel sweat prickling at his neck as he followed his friend back out, exasperation bending his breath.

“Who’s supposed to keep Zelda safe while we’re gone?” Link demanded. He was going to the Nether for Zelda and for Sheik. To keep them safe. How was he supposed to do that if Sheik went with him? “I can’t allow you to--”

Sheik, in a flash of movement Link nearly missed, dropped the satchel and charged forward. Link avoided the attack by a hair’s breadth, ducked into a crouch and groaned. It was pretty common for Sheik to start unwarranted sparring when he felt Link was being an idiot. And this time Link wasn’t up for it. “Come on, Sheik. Don’t start this with me right--”

But it was too late. Sheik had knocked him down with a leap Link didn’t even see, a knee planted on his chest and hard eyes surveying him as though a point was made. Link let out a cough, the air
all but knocked out of him, and glared up at his assailant.

“You need rest if I can knock you down that easily,” Sheik warned, looking a bit amused despite their argument.

Link squinted in the brightness and said, “You’re not going with me, Sheik.”

“Too bad you don’t have a choice,” Sheik said easily.

“I outrank you. Don’t make me order you,” he shot back, shoving Sheik off of him and clambering back to his feet.

“I won’t let you go alone.” Sheik was still standing close enough that Link could see the tension now building in his shoulders.

“I won’t let you go down there with me and get yourself killed! Why are you arguing with me about this?” Link growled, his voice rising with each word. He just wanted to keep everyone safe and no one was letting him do that.

“Because you’re being a hypocrīte!” Sheik barked, making Link flinch. Sheik rarely shouted and sometimes Link forgot just how powerful of a voice his friend really had when he put it to use. “You preach to me about friendship last night but you reject it now when it’s convenient for you! Maybe Zelda is right. Maybe you really do think you’re a martyr.”

Link froze. Did he actually think that, somewhere in the undercurrent of his mind? He was so used to having to put everything aside for divine prophecy. In fact, his whole life was built around it.

“Evanna needs the Vaspra. She isn’t going to endanger the kingdom until she has it. So stop acting like you have to do this alone. This isn’t a temple, Link,” Sheik finished, voice returning to its customary volume. “This isn’t prophecy.”

Red eyes urged down his heart rate, but Link still growled in frustration. Sheik wasn’t going to drop it – that much was clear. But every time he imagined Sheik descending in the Nether with him, Link’s stomach twisted and panic scattered rational thought.

Link didn’t want Sheik down there. He couldn’t lose Sheik. Knowing he almost had once before had shaken him enough.

“I know,” Link sighed, running his hands over his face. “I know, Sheik. But if we go down there and you die…” He found himself repeating Zelda’s words and suddenly realized exactly what fear she felt. It was consuming and demanding. It was like the war all over again.

The fear made him feel so weak, a commonality for Link since Ganon’s Fall. It reminded him of the uncontrollable terrors, triggered by the slightest pin-drop, and grueling moments of defeat when his mind conquered him. As hard as he had worked to find his strength once more the mere thought of a new, higher stake and his loved-ones caught in between destabilized him.

Movement broke his thoughts – Sheik snatched Link’s left arm and, in a quick motion, pulled off his gauntlet and glove. The spider-thin outline of a small triangle was still a hazy glimmer on fair skin; the last vestige of the time a piece of the Triforce was his. “You had this for a reason. Put those fears to bed. We don’t have time for them. We are going down there to save Hyrule. But if you really think I don’t have the same fear of you dying...”
Sheik let go just as roughly, scooped up his satchel and said, “then you are being an absolute moron.”

And then he left.

Link stood there brooding, which wasn’t exactly normal for him. But he couldn’t help the frustration he was essentially marinating in. Being backed into a corner from every direction wasn’t helping his calm. Between Evanna’s threats, the impending journey to the Nether, the complicated emotions coming from every angle, and Sheik insistence on following…he needed to break some things before he snapped at a person instead.

Link did himself – and everyone else – a favor and punched a few posts on his way back to the castle. By the time he was back inside, Link felt much better despite the fact he knew there was now zero chance of talking Sheik out of going. Even if he spoke to Zelda and had her try to convince him…well, Sheik rarely listened to Zelda when it was in conjunction with Link. It was one of the only ways in which the Sheikah would disobey a direct order, much to Impa’s boiling anger.

Sheik was indeed found in the library, back on the couch with several books scattered around him. The day was fading behind him through the window and Link thought back to the evening just a week ago when they were researching Vaspra, blissfully unaware of Evanna’s motives or the enormity of what was about to happen.

“I take it you’re looking in historic accounts for anything involving the Nether,” Link offered, unstrapping weapons and excess armor to lay them on a table next to Sheik’s own pile.

“How pleasant.”

The book was mostly lore and there were no accounts of actual people going into the Nether. There were plenty of stories, however, accounting the times in history when the Nether was torn open and the beasts of the realm invaded Hyrule. It seemed to happen every couple of centuries and, unsurprisingly, it was always someone conveniently resembling the Hero that would close it back up.

“My ancestors have been closing the Nether for,” he checked the dates, “eight-hundred years. And then here I am, the first imbecile to go waltzing into the Nether.”

“I suppose it had to happen sometime. Not every Hero is as intelligent as the next,” Sheik quipped casually and Link ignored the bait to continue reading.

“The beasts were of all shapes and sizes. The most notable ones looked like naked men with too-long limbs. Their skin was dripping with dirt and blood and hung off their bones. Their claws were razor sharp and they tore my townspeople asunder. They let out a high-pitched wail that burst the ears of children and animals alike. We called them Baltas and prayed we’d never need use the name again.

The Hero saved us all from their horror. The number of the lost is great, but the Nether is sealed. Pray it never opens again,” Link read out loud. “How pleasant.”
“About as pleasant as this,” Sheik agreed. “The flying creatures were the first sign of the rift in the Nether. They were oversized birds with red and gray feathers. Their beaks were sharp and agile, their eyes strong and unforgiving.

Once they spotted you, it was over; they would do everything within their power to devour you. They vomited a blend of blood and acid on their victims to incapacitate them. Once the body was dead and prematurely digested by the acid, they swallowed it whole...they called them Blood Backs.”

“Maybe we should start cataloguing these creatures,” Link offered tightly, reaching for a roll of parchment and a quill.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Sheik agreed. They shared a brief, grim look – their quest was beginning to sound more nightmarish than any temple or dungeon they’d challenged.

The rest of the night was spent listing all the creatures of the Nether and separating them by accounted speed, size, and attack method. In addition to Baltas and Blood Backs, they also found accounts of troll-like creatures called Mriths that would tear away flesh to specifically eat the bones of their victims. Then there were Vogs, a canine-like giant that could spit explosive fireballs and its scent could detect anything alive in a twenty-league radius.

By the time midnight was looming ahead on the clocks, they had a formidable list of adversaries to churn their stomachs. But still no idea what the Nether itself would be like.

They called it a night and put all the books back tiredly. Neither had adequate sleep the night before and their beds beckoned them. Without any more discussion they headed back for their respective rooms and delved into much needed rest with thoughts of the Nether’s vile creatures swimming in their heads.

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Come morning, Link found Zelda and Sheik talking quietly in her private dining hall. Stress hit him with a force he didn’t appreciate. He could guess at what the subject matter was between them, but he found food was a much larger priority. They fell quiet as he sat down and dug into his own plate.

“Good morning, Link,” Zelda said quietly. “Evanna has left the castle.”

He paused, looking up at them in surprise, the news erasing any anxiety he’d been suffering from. They both looked exhausted, just as he felt; last night hadn’t brought him pleasant visions and he imagined it was much the same for them. “Without word?”

Zelda nodded. “I don’t know about her forces under the castle – I’ve tried to conjure a similar scry she used but it’s really only helpful when you know the auras of her soldiers. Either way, the sentries saw her riding off early this morning before dawn.”

“So where does that put us?” Link asked wearily.

“I can’t even sense her presence in Hyrule…I’m not sure. Sheik thinks it’s possible she may have gone back to Amrita.”
“I can still sense something nearby that’s not of Hylian nature. I think her forces are still present,” Sheik supplied. “Though, honestly, I’ve been sensing several different presences for six months now.”

“For six months now?” Zelda asked in surprise, Link mirroring her expression.

“It’s not uncommon,” Sheik defended. “We get visitors from places like Termina or even here in this world often. Tradesmen, politicians, royals…I don’t know if there’s anything to it. But regardless,” he insisted, giving them a look for derailing the conversation, “I think she has people in the castle providing intelligence. It may explain how she constantly seems to be so well-informed.”

“Well, Evanna knows how much Vaspra we found and she knows where it is,” Zelda explained, her voice going even quieter. “It’s been stored deep in a vault in the side of Death Mountain. I was supposed to be the only one in Hyrule to know the combination of spells to open it.” She paused, raising her tea cup to her lips, poised to take a sip. “It’s gone as of this morning.”

“Brilliant. So this is why you think she went back to Amrita. With the Vaspra,” he said slowly, looking back to Sheik, who gave him a nod.

“We assume she wanted to take it before we used it against her,” Sheik provided.

“Despite the threats that still loom, however, this has created an opportunity for us now,” Zelda continued, trying to look on the bright side of a bad situation. “Evanna – from what I can determine after speaking to her – is not that well-versed on our origins and, by extension, the Sages. We now have the freedom to contact the other Sages.”

“You want to call them to…what? Seal her in the Sacred Realm with Ganondorf? Foursky as well?” Link asked incredulously.

Zelda gave a dainty shrug. “Something like that. But we would need to draw Foursky out of Amrita and into Hyrule. It seems, as of now, Evanna is doing his dirty work for him by coming here.”

Link digested this information. “Do you think Foursky plans on staying out of the picture entirely?”

Zelda gave him a very serious look that Link had learned to equate with the dropping of bad news. “It is very likely Amrita will attack us once they have their Vaspra. Hyrule is a valuable kingdom both in resources and this apparent entrance to the Nether. Whether Foursky graces us with his presence or not, we must be prepared for the possibility of a very dark future.” She paused, glancing around the room in what was clearly paranoia before leaning forward with her fingers laced tightly together. “Which is why you both must get some Vaspra for Hyrule as well. It will be our only chance to stand against such a threat.”

Link’s stomach turned, Nameth’s words of warning revisiting his mind. “Vaspra…is dangerous, Zelda. We would have to be careful with its use if we did manage to get any. It obviously twists minds, if Evanna is any indication of its effects.” Link trusted Zelda’s judgment, but his voice had dropped and the tone was very much so implying for the Sage of Wisdom to be careful. “Let’s say we do use it as a weapon – just as we know Evanna and Foursky will – and defeat them. Then what? We keep the Vaspra, a substance of unimaginable, unnatural power?”

“No. We’d put it back in the Nether, of course,” she assured him with a steady smile, like her answer was such a simple solution. “But more to the point, there must be a solution for these two...
tyrants. Nameth’s words confirmed what Evanna claimed – they are indeed immortal. Which means we must find a very permanent solution for them. If the Nether is what they seel, I don’t see why it shouldn’t be their demise. Nonetheless, the other Sages will provide more answers for us.”

“I agree. I think the Nether is our best option here. Put the Vaspra and those attached to it back where it all started,” Link said, sitting forward again and digging into his breakfast, the hunger starting to get to him. “And I suppose we’ll need Vaspra ourselves to even accomplish that task alone.”

“That’s a fair assumption,” Zelda agreed. “But everything will change as the situation develops. There are still a lot of things we don’t know. The portion of Vaspra we found was no bigger than your head, Link. What she can accomplish with that, I have no idea. And perhaps I’m completely wrong – maybe we won’t go to war with Amrita. I won’t have any insight until I confer with the others today.”

“Until we know what the Sages have to say, I think it best we attempt to find whatever spies Evanna has implemented in the castle,” Sheik added quietly, glancing around the room out of sheer habit of speaking so openly. “We might be able to catch one and cripple her web.”

“I agree,” the Queen said, “but more than that, the both of you need to prepare for what lay ahead. We need to learn as much as we can about the Nether and what you can take to carry the Vaspra back. We also need to write the contract for her terms. It will be the only thing protecting this castle while you both are gone.”

Zelda’s confidence was a relief to Link considering how unsure she had been the day before. Link didn’t know if he could handle any more of that pleading – it twisted him up to see her like that.

Their minds were spinning with plans and calculations. With so many holes still in the picture, none of them would sleep well for a while. What if Foursky came to Hyrule before they even left for the Nether? What if they didn’t find any Vaspra in there at all? What if it wasn’t possible to seal them both in the Nether? Historically speaking, they didn’t have the best track record with Ganondorf and he never had Vaspra in his arsenal. On top of that, none of them really had a scope on the real power of Vaspra. They only knew what Evanna could do and what old, flaking texts told them.

They had yet to find prophecies written about this one in which the Hero triumphed. No legends foretold of any victory. The Sages had never reached out to them with guidance. And every step they took had so far been met with destruction and utter resistance.

What if they couldn’t win this one?

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Thank you for reading! I’m sorry for all the slow plot development – stay with me guys. I promise this building to something really big. Bless my betas Sage and Cherry for their endless courage in tackling my bullshit.
Chapter 10

X.

After breakfast, Link and Sheik planned for their morning spar. Only, this time, it would be in a large dungeon just under the castle. They had no idea if there was any sort of light source in the Nether so they needed to prepare for anything.

They started with wooden swords and a single torch. They would, of course, light anything they could find in the Nether. But it was still good to train in torchlight and, later, candlelight.

The dungeon was cold and dark, but soon both were sweating furiously as they leapt across the floors, going through a thousand forms and breaking several wooden blades each. It still impressed Link that, even though Sheik was not primarily a swordsman, he could very easily hold his own in a fight against Link. After a half hour or so they limited themselves to a candle about the size Sheik could produce on his palm.

Shadows stretched into the darkness of the dungeon and the dim yellow light reached only so far, making a small sparing ring the two fighters wove in and out of. They both tried to use the darkness to their advantage but always skirted back around swiftly into the light.

“Oh, this is not my favorite way to train,” Link complained, squinting in the shadows as they clashed and pushed each other apart in the frustratingly dim chamber.

“I pray it’s not this dark in the Nether,” Sheik murmured, suddenly behind Link.

He blocked the blow easily – long used to Sheik’s sneak tactics by now – and parried him backwards into further darkness.

“If only that damned library wasn’t gone. I’m sure there were texts on the Nether there,” Link growled.

“There’s no record of anyone going to the Nether other than Foursky. We would need his texts or spoken accounts.”

Another blow came from the right and Link, having heard the whoosh of air more than seen the wood, ducked out of the blow and swung his sword soundly against Sheik’s back. His friend gave an annoyed grunt and whipped around to land a blow in return to Link’s knee.

And it continued much like this. The only downside to sparring with Sheik was their teasing sense of revenge. Whenever one of them got a good swipe in that was more forceful than necessary, it suddenly became a childish game between them to see who could give the other more bruises.

When they had finally exhausted themselves after an entire morning of sparring, they headed for the kitchens to steal food and hole up in the library, which was now completely reserved for them. When they got there, however, Duchess Morsa was looking through the shelves.

“Milady,” Link said, setting the pack of food he’d been carrying and extending an arm for her. “This library, unfortunately, is off-limits today. Sheik and I require it for research.”
She jumped a bit at his voice, having not heard them come in, and made an apologetic bow. “I’m sorry, my lord. I just needed a book.”

Truthfully, Duchess Morsa wasn’t that horrible to endure. Despite Link’s exasperation towards her obsession with him, she was very sweet and respectful (when kept away from liquor) so he couldn’t find it in him to be mad. Her big green eyes begged his forgiveness and he barely contained a sigh.

Link learned just to play along with her since she had arrived.

“I suppose I can forgive you,” he told her.

She smiled widely and looked up at a shelf well above her head. “Could I request you get Mesingger’s Guide to Hylian Magicks for me? I’m unable to reach it.”

“Oh, of course.” He reached up and pulled it off the shelf with no effort. Morsa would’ve reached it on tiptoe but she liked to make him do things for her. “Here, Milady.”

“Why thank you, High Guardsman,” she giggled, hugging the book to her chest. “Would you possibly escort me back to the red parlor? I hate walking these halls alone. That Duke of Vihall still hasn’t departed and he follows me around like the dogs at the market.”

Link cast a look at Sheik, who made no attempt to hide a rueful smile from his spot on the couch. “Of course, Duchess. I’d be happy to escort you.”

And so he did. She kept her arm tightly around his as they made their way through the halls at a pace half that of Link’s normal stride. It was excoriatingly slow and Link grit his teeth as Morsa prattled on about a small party she had attended last night.

“You and the Bodyguard are rather close, aren’t you?” she asked, her sudden topic change bringing him back to attention.

“We’ve been brothers in arms for years now,” Link acquiesced.

“He’s so quiet. Does he even talk to you?” she asked. “And he doesn’t look like a Hylian. What race is he?” The last part was said in a tone that made Link bristle. There was still much superiority in royal mentality. Even in other kingdoms, races with lighter skin much like Hylians were considered higher in social rank.

“He is a Sheikah. They are a people highly skilled in subterfuge and magic,” Link informed her, trying to keep the annoyance away from his tone. “They are one of the oldest and most honorable races in Hyrule. They have loyally served the royalty of this castle for centuries.”


“There are others. They have left Hyrule, however.”

“Where do they come from, though?” she went on.

“The desert.”
“Is it true they founded the village Kakariko?”

“Yes. The village was founded by Lady Impa, Queen Zelda’s late bodyguard,” he supplied, patience wearing thin from her questionnaire. Thankfully, the parlor was only one more flight of stairs away.

“Is Sheik related to her?”

“She is his aunt.”

“You know an awful lot about him, don’t you?” Morsa accused, giggling a little and squeezing his arm.

“As I said, we are brothers in arms.”

“Why were you away? You left no word with anyone. None of us knew where you had gone. Did the Sheikah go with you?” she pestered.

“We were on official business for the Queen that is confidential in nature. And yes, Sheik accompanied me,” Link explained as they neared the door. He started to pull away, but she held on tight.

“Something bad is going on, isn’t it?” she suddenly asked in a very quiet, serious voice. Her face went severe as well, her mouth set in a frown. “I can feel it. I can tell by the look on your face.”

“Nothing you should be worried about, Milady. All is well,” Link promised, putting on a smile and patting her arm.

“You’ll protect us, right, Guardsman?” she asked in a small voice, still holding tightly to his arm. She was clearly not convinced; Link really could be an awful liar.

“Of course. I always will.”

Morsa nodded in one quick movement like a child and let him go. “Be safe, Guardsman. And I expect tea with you soon.”

“Good afternoon, Duchess.” And with that, he made his escape back to the library. Irritation bit at him – she had wasted a good fifteen minutes he could’ve been searching for more regarding the Nether. And Sheik was sure to give him hell about being an escort. Sometimes Link really wished he was in a position to shove Morsa off, but her father was in the Cabinet and it would create problems for Zelda if the newly appointed Guardsman was being rude to his daughter.

“Have fun?” Sheik asked in amusement as he plopped back on the couch and bit into some bread.

“Shut up,” he snapped without much malice, pulling open a giant book and pretending to delve into it.

“She’ll expect you to propose soon. You know that, right?” Sheik went on.

“I have neither the time nor patience for marriage – I carry no obligation to social expectations within the court related to marriage given I’m not Royal. Regardless, this is nothing I want to contemplate at the moment. The Nether is a little more pressing than courtship,” Link replied with
a sigh. “We’re in a tense occupation and you want to talk about women.”

“Don’t let the fate of Hyrule impede your love life, Link,” Sheik teased. “After all of this is over, you’ll have to start addressing the attention from your admirers. You may not be Royal but you are The Hero of Time.”

Link threw an apple at him.

They spent the rest of the afternoon flipping through ancient tomes. They also talked about their supplies and, of course, how they would transport the Vaspra when they found it.

Together, they ran over and over the logistics of the next two days; the calculated food and water stores, deciding the weapons that would be the most effective against the monsters in the Nether. Unfortunately, there was no way to test their weapons so they would have to bring a little of everything. There was also the question what the realm would look like. Was it a lightless void? Did it look like the living world? Monsters were one thing, but how could they prepare for a terrain they knew nothing about?

“Do you think Evanna will tell us anything about the Nether?” Link asked after a while, turning back to Sheik. It was clear by the look on his face that he too had been lost in thought.

Sheik rested his cheek on a palm and shrugged. “I don’t know. But it would be in her best interest to tell us if she wants that Vaspra.”

“I’ve never been so nervous about a task in my life,” Link admitted. “I would gladly battle Ganon again over this quest. I’d cleanse every temple in the world.”

“You’re blessed by the Goddesses, Link,” Sheik reminded him.

“That blessed time has passed. I’m not the Hero of Time any longer. I’m just a Guardsman. And we’re going to a place we don’t even know if we can breathe in.”

“We’ll improvise, like we usually tend to do,” Sheik assured him.

“I hate walking into things blind,” Link said with a long sigh, running a hand through his already tousled hair. “Sorry to complain. I’m just stressed right now.”

Sheik shook his head. “You will never owe me an apology. We’re brothers in arms. We share worry and burdens. Whatever you need to say, I will listen.”

“Thank you, Sheik.” He paused for a moment, glancing back at his friend skeptically. “So, are you not worried?”

For a moment, Sheik just raised an eyebrow and then laughed shortly. “I’ve never been more worried in my life. But there are no better challengers for such a task. Who else would have a chance? We’ve seen too much and lived through even more. There are no other candidates and, like the war, there is not enough time to prepare. So I just trust in our abilities, as I always have.”

Link nodded, eyes wandering back across the room without really seeing it. He had always been more grateful than he could express for Sheik’s companionship…but now he felt he needed it more than ever. A surge of relief ran through his body as Link reveled in the fact Sheik would be accompanying him and he wouldn’t be alone on yet another journey. His terror at losing his friend
was great and suffocating but how would he make sure Sheik stayed alive if Link was in the Nether
without him?

But then what if Evanna had used the trip to the Nether as a distraction to get the two most
powerful warriors in the castle for even longer so as to mount a real war? If Sheik remained behind,
perhaps the dangers would be just as present. There was no winning.

At least if he had Sheik by his side he could protect what mattered to him most.

And that very deep, almost abstract realization rattled him like a violent knock in the head, the kind
that kept someone spinning and shaky for the rest of the day. The confusion of it all surrounded
him and, for one singular moment, he wanted to just hide and never resurface.

But he was Link, the former Hero of Time and he was now the High Royal Guardsman. He held a
piece of the Triforce once. He was blessed by the Goddesses. His entire lineage was written in long
prophecy.

Even if he pined for cowardice, his bloodline would never allow it.

Link would live his lives always in war, never in the simple way Malon lived, and never in the
privileged fashion Zelda did. He would always be a soldier of war, clashing with titans and
carrying a nation’s future on his shoulders.

Maybe that’s why Sheik had become the closest person in his life. Because Sheik was much the
same: built to be a warrior, born to serve a kingdom until darkness, and constantly at the mercy of
the ebb and flow of time.

There was an unspoken understanding between them that couldn’t be found in any other soldier.
When they both sported dark circles under their eyes in the morning, there were never any
questions about the horrors that had plagued their dreams. When one of them jumped at a loud
noise or a voice in a silent room, neither of them brought to attention the level of distrust they
would always have from every person save each other and Zelda.

By all rights, they were damaged in many ways. But all heroes were, and this descent into the
Nether was only something a hero could do.

They didn’t really speak for the rest of the night save trading information from their books. Zelda
didn’t bother summoning them for dinner; an attendant knocked on the door and left a cart of food
for them in the hallway and they couldn’t have been more grateful.

When the moon had reached its zenith, they finally retired to bed.

And when they woke up, it was rinse and repeat.

Zelda was busy with the Cabinet, getting their supplies ready and working up the finer details of
their counterattack. It made Link nervous; where was Evanna? What if she came back *with*
Foursky? What if he came *instead* of her? There was no telling if the man was too superior or too
lazy or too weak to come to Hyrule when they knew virtually nothing about the Gerudo. Would
Evanna just continue doing his dirty work?

But they planned as best they could and sometime around lunch, sweaty and tired from sparring all
morning, Zelda pulled them aside.
“The Sages have been contacted,” Zelda said quietly, once they were safely in her study and the room sealed with her magic. It crackled behind her words and danced around the doorways and windows. “This is…prophecy.”

Link blinked, casting a shocked look with Sheik. “Prophecy?”

“Prophecy I’ve never heard of,” Sheik insisted.

“Nor I, Sheik,” Zelda agreed. “But alas, it is prophecy…just not ours.”

“Termina’s?” Link demanded.

She nodded and then began to recite it for them.

“In the time of the False God, a clash of worlds will arise. Violence will creep into the Royal Realm and wreak havoc on its people with the words of possession and death. The False God’s kingdom will rise with the power of forbidden ore and only a man displaced by time can conquer him. This man will banish the False God and his servants to the end of creation, returning balance to time.”

“The False God is Foursky, right?” Link questioned. “And this man is…me, isn’t it? Returning balance to time? I thought this was a prophecy of Termina. What am I doing in this?”

“It’s their prophecy, but there’s nothing stopping it from bleeding into Hyrule,” Zelda said slowly. “Violence will creep into the Royal Realm? I think this has been a plan slowly in the making. There may have been spies infiltrating the castle for a long time now, completely unknown to us, in preparation for all of this. The thought makes me sick!”

“We don’t know that,” he reminded her with a frown. “Again, this is Termina’s prophecy, not ours. Everything is up for debate.”

“Prophecy is prophecy, though,” Sheik interjected. “We must take it seriously.”

The room fell silent; of course Sheik was right. But none of them wanted it to be true. Now it wasn’t just another random threat to their kingdom; it was a prophesized event passed down by other Goddesses via the prophets of Termina.

“The prophecy claimed the False God must be banished to the end of creation.” Link said suddenly, Zelda’s word running through his head once more. “That’s not the Sacred Realm, that’s…”


They all shared grim looks.

“Banish him to a place that’s notorious for tearing open generation after generation? What a great idea.” Link said with mirth, turning to look uncertainly at Zelda. “I really hope we can seal it like you say.”

None of them knew what to say after that, so they parted ways, all lost in thought. If Link wasn’t worried before, he was beside himself now. He couldn’t believe he was getting dragged back into
divine duty…but then he sort of could.

That was his life and he really knew nothing else.

If anything, Link should feel more comfortable now that this was all familiar territory. He wouldn’t even be surprised if the Master Sword wasn’t shoved back into his hand and the Goddesses ordered him to collect more stones. The only comfort he garnered from this new information was the knowing that perhaps he was *supposed* to go to the Nether.

Huh. Some kind of comfort.

The day passed with much less bravado. More cataloging, more packing, more deliberating, more waiting. Link’s thought continued to revisit Evanna; was she coming back? What would they do if she didn’t? What if they didn’t go? What orders had she left for her forces most assuredly lying in wait below the castle?

With all the questions and no answers, Link sought out Saria in his dreams.

He’d meant to contact her since the Great Library’s destruction, but dream communication put him in a deep sleep that would’ve been dangerous out in the fields. Link made sure to let Sheik know what he was doing just in case anything happened – Sheik would be able to wake him with magic when little else could.

*Link!*

He stood in the Sacred Meadow, in *their* place. It was a version of it Saria had created for them to meet at. But it looked identical and the wariness fell off of his shoulders as she raced for him, colliding with his chest when he crouched down to meet her.

*I’ve missed you.*

*I’ve missed you as well, Saria.*

*You look so tired,* she commented with a frown. *I don’t like this look in your eyes.*

*Much has been happening,* Saria, Link told her with a sigh, feeling the weariness of the day reach him even in his dreams.

*I know. I heard about the Library…*

*I’m so sorry I couldn’t save it,* he said sadly.

Saria shook her head, forest green strands brushing her cheeks. *It will be revived. I’m sad, but not all is lost. You couldn’t have saved it…the Order is very strong. I fear what they would’ve done to you and Sheik.*

Link started for a moment, having forgotten about the Order of Hexa. *So the Order was responsible for the destruction? We thought it was Evanna judging by the powder left behind – she’s the only person we know that has Vaspra. Saria, what do you know of this Order?*

Saria folded her legs beneath her and perched on the mossy ground. Link followed suit as she spoke, *They are closer to Amrita than Evanna has claimed. They were once employed by Foursky.*
But Hexa is a word Foursky stole from the Sheikah people long ago.

Sheikah?

As you know, the origins of the Sheikah and the Gerudo are closely tied. When Foursky was studying of magic, he discovered the word in a text dating back to the oldest desert tribes. It is said he frequently visited the Sheikah despite their quarrels in search of someone to teach him the word. But Hexa is so ancient, many Sheikah don’t even know of its meaning anymore save the elders and even then, the word is strictly forbidden.

Link was still in awe of the information Saria had inherited from Sagehood, all the knowledge of her predecessors now hers. Do you know the meaning of Hexa?

She fixed him with a very dark look. It’s ancient Sheikah for Death. It was a spell of horrific ability. Only the pure blood Sheikah inherited its knowledge, though over time it was banned entirely. If the user was powerful enough, he could speak the word with intention and kill anyone he could see. Foursky would surely be fascinated by it. Of course, he had neither the power nor the blood to use it, but he sought the word nonetheless.

Link chewed on this for a moment. The bodies of the guards had been spotless, as though they had simply dropped dead. So…can the Order of Hexa use the word?

Saria nodded slowly.
Who are they? Link demanded. Who from Termina could use the word if not Foursky?
They are…Sheikah.

Link nearly jumped to his feet at this realization. True Sheikah? How? From where?

They fled from one of the Royal genocide generations ago. They took refuge in Termina. Since then, through wars and genocides, more have continued to flee, she explained, drawing her knees up to her chest and watching the beetles rummaging the moss beneath them. Saria looked so childlike in that pose – it was still so hard for him to believe she was a powerful Sage now.

Which follows the story that Foursky learned magic from the Sheikah there…What was the Order intended to do? Link asked, feeling overloaded again like he had earlier in the waking world.

Nameth isn’t sure – her reach doesn’t extend to Termina, of course. But from what she could gather they originally planned to assassinate the King of Hyrule and take revenge on their people. Over time Foursky changed that when he employed them as his personal army in an attempt to earn their trust and learn Hexa. But he was a tyrant and tried to destroy them when they refused him. I’m sure he’s their target now.

Link took a moment to digest it all, lining it up with the story that was being built in his head. So…was the Order of Hexa actually on their side, or did they just have the same enemy? Why would they destroy the Great Library? Link voiced this thought.

That I do not know. Some of the other Sages thought it to be Evanna at first, but she was not even in this world when the Library was attacked. Most of us think the knowledge of the words could have been kept there and that is why the Order burned it before Foursky or Evanna could reach it.

How could the Order have opened the door to the Library?
Again, we are not sure, but my theory is they found a way to control the guards and opened the doors.

Link shook his head. *What kind of spell could do that?*

*I don’t know yet, Link. I’m still trying to find the truth, just like you.*

Saria sat back on braced arms, apparently done with what she had to share. She chewed on her lip as they watched the spinning motes around them in hard thought.

*Zelda thinks this is an occupation long in the making,* Link offered after a moment.

*All the Sages agree. We’ve noticed fluctuations in the energies in the castle for a long time now. Changes so minute that even you, Sheik, and Queen Zelda combined couldn’t detect them. This really does feel like prophecy,* Saria mused, tipping her head back and frowning at the endless, pale sky above them. *We’re running out of time, Link.*

*Do you think Sheik and I have no choice but to travel to the Nether?* Link asked quickly, feeling his conscious mind tug at his unconscious one incessantly.

Saria nodded vigorously. *I hate it…but I agree with Queen Zelda – you must get the Vaspra to defeat Foursky. Things are about to get dark again, Link. Like the war.*

Link felt himself wince. *I don’t know if I’m ready for another war, Saria.*

The ground started to shake powerfully beneath them and Saria reached out to him desperately. Link grasped her arm to steady her, pulling them both to their feet. Saria wrapped her arms around him and her green eyes were wet as she stared up at him. *I know, Link. I know it’s not fair. But you can do this. You must do this.*

And then-

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sorrynotsorry. Much love 5ever to betas sheikofthesheikah and sagesins. They on tumblr, go follow them. Thank you for reading, chapter 11 coming shortly.
XI.

He woke.

Red eyes stared down at him with an intensity that thrust him into alertness. Light streamed through his small window and he saw Sheik standing tensely next to the bed.

“Evanna has returned.”

Link dressed and armed himself swiftly as Sheik paced in a way Link rarely saw. His eyes were hard and his shoulders wound so tight Link could imagine nothing breaking their form. They blasted through the halls, making it to the map room in record time.

Evanna sat languidly in her chair as Zelda and a few members of the Cabinet had convened around the large table. It was clearly only the select few that Zelda trusted but it still made Link nervous as he thought about the idea of any of them being Evanna’s own spies. Link and Sheik took the seats Zelda had saved for them on either side of her which prompted a grumble of dissent by a few Cabinet members who clearly felt their positions were being undermined.

“Now that we’re all accounted for,” Evanna started carefully, fixing her feline gaze solely on Link, “let’s talk about tomorrow.”

“Let’s talk about the vault in Death Mountain first,” Link immediately interjected, before anyone could speak.

He felt anger, but it was a calm anger he seldom felt. Link could sense Zelda tensing next to him but she wanted to know as badly as he did so she allowed it despite the possible insubordination.

“The Order of Hexa has struck again,” Evanna claimed calmly, folding her slender hands on the table and tipping her head so her eye lashes cast webbed shadows on her cheeks. “I was in pursuit of them. To no avail, I’m afraid.”

“How can we trust that?” Link shot back.

Evanna reached beneath the folds of her dress and brought out a bulbous, glittering blue rock – finally, the source of the entire situation was before them.

The energy in the room twisted as though the substance had disturbed the air and left him feeling nauseous even after she stowed it once more. “That is the last of the Vaspra Foursky and I have. I returned to Amrita to not only pursue the Order, but to ensure my people’s safety. I assure you I do not have it.”

“So now a group of mad Sheikah have even more of the most powerful substance ever found?” Link demanded.

He didn’t miss the shell-shocked look Sheik was now fixing him with but he couldn’t address it because Duchess Morsa’s father, Lord Bilios suddenly snapped, “I think you should stop speaking, Guardsman. The Queen should be the one conversing with the enemy-”
But Zelda shot him a look that resembled a steel trap.

“I don’t wish to speak with the Queen, as lovely as she is,” Evanna interjected before Zelda could retort. “I wish to speak with the now two gentlemen descending below. Because, in the end, they shall be the ones saving your luxurious way of life, my Lords.”

The Cabinet members bristled and if Evanna weren’t so abhorrent Link would’ve considered thanking her for the jab.

“How will we transport the Vaspra? I imagine it is not light,” Link asked a few tense moments.

“It is not. I have a satchel you may use. It will negate the weight of the Vaspra so you may carry it easily through the terrain.”

“And what terrain should we expect?”

“From Foursky’s accounts, it is an endless forest.”

“Once you have the Vaspra, you will leave in peace,” Link went on, his voice going harder and harder by each word.

“Of course,” Evanna promised, tilting her head and blinking like an innocent. “I care not for Hyrule. I only do Foursky’s bidding – I will leave the moment the ore is in my hands.”

“And your men?”

“As long as the Royal Army behaves in your absence, they will not attack needlessly. They are not like the Order. When all is completed, they will depart as well,” Evanna assured them. She sat back and gave Link a smug look. And for a moment, it was a bit of a staring contest until Zelda broke the tight silence that had stretched over the room like the head of a drum.

“Very well. We’ve reached an agreement, then?” she asked everyone in a cold voice.

Reluctant voices agreed and a contract of temporary peace was brought forward. From what Zelda had told them the day before, it was the closest thing to a written agreement she could coax Evanna into. The contract itself had little binding – it was hard to threaten an immortal women with imminent death if said contract should be violated.

For now, it was all they could do.

Evanna signed the bottom with a flourish, the parchment then passed to Zelda for the same. The Queen clenched her jaw tightly as her signature was finished and then stamped down the seal of the Royal Family beside it with a loud knock. The wax gleamed in the low lights around the chamber as Zelda sat back in her chair with a tired expression.

“It is done,” Zelda said shortly. “This meeting is adjourned.”

She had three more meetings to hold afterwards – there would be no discussion with Zelda until later. But Link and Sheik went out to the training grounds and took refuge from the heat in one of the huts to sharpen their weapons and keep from prying ears.
“What have you learned of the Order?” Sheik demanded almost the moment they entered the safety of the hut. “You said they were Sheikah.”

Link sat cross-legged in the corner with his sharpening tools and Sheik mirrored him. “Apparently, they are. I apologize for not telling you sooner, but I had only just learned this from Saria. The members of the Order are of the bloodline that fled Hyrule to Termina, generations ago and possibly even more recently as well.”

“So what is there purpose, then?”

Link regaled his conversation with Saria, speaking quickly of their employment to Foursky as he tried to obtain Hexa.

“Hexa,” Sheik breathed. Spoken in his accent, the word seemed to suddenly buzz with energy against Link’s ears. It didn’t surprise him that Sheik knew the real meaning of the word – he had an affinity for ancient magic but this one seemed to hit home. “They have the ancient power of the death spell. I thought their use of the word was simply a coincidence. Many have claimed that name but to actually wield it as a spell…” Sheik shook his head, an ill look passing his features.

“You know of it?”

“In my youth, the spell fascinated me but it is strictly forbidden in the Vala, our code and creed. It has never been difficult for our people uphold because it is nearly impossible to be performed without killing oneself; very few managed to do it without dying instantly and they were monstrously powerful magic-users to begin with. It’s far too powerful and will drain life force too quickly to intervene. Evanna said the Order stole Vaspra from their Kingdom…that must be how they’re accomplishing it.”

Sheik went quiet after that, focusing his attention on the scrape of whetstone against steel. Link could only guess at what his companion was feeling – Sheik’s people were everything to him. He had watched most of them perish as a child so the news of an entire tribe still in existence was probably a shock. But then to learn that they were performing strictly forbidden magic that went against everything the Sheikah believed? Link couldn’t fathom the weight of it all.

“I don’t think we should align ourselves with the Order of Hexa,” Sheik told him after a while of stone to metal. “It will complicate matters. I cannot anticipation their loyalties if they have gone against the Vala.”

Link nodded. “I’ll trust your opinion.”

The day plummeted into evening and Link and Sheik had spent most of the day resting to prepare for their descent. Night brought hardly any relief from the waking world – Link had managed sleep for only the moon’s travel from horizon to horizon. It wasn’t much and when he finally gave up, he set about repairing his armor until sunrise.

The morning brought several knots in his stomach as the castle awoke slowly around him. Evanna was in Zelda’s dining room for breakfast, much to his dismay, and Sheik was nowhere to be found. Zelda sat stiffly as she ate, face only lighting up when Link entered.

“Good morning, Link. How are you feeling?” she asked as soon as she caught sight of him.

“Well enough,” he replied tersely. More than anything he wished Sheik was also present to help
quell the anxiety Evanna’s presence brought.

Little was said aside from questioning Sheik’s whereabouts – in true Sheikah fashion, he was apparently in the armory packing meticulously.

After a tense and mostly silent breakfast he went to find Sheik. As Zelda had said, he was sitting there intently checking their packs for probably the tenth time. Link recognized both of their bags but not the blue one lying next to them like a deflated balloon.

“Evanna’s?” Link asked as he settled next to Sheik to go through his equipment.

Sheik nodded. “She kindly made it blue just in case we forget why we were there.”

Link snorted; at least Sheik’s dry sense of humor was back after such a stressful set of days. As they always did, they focused on preparations to keep their minds away from where they would be by the end of the day.

“How many arrows are we taking?”

“Twenty-five each.”

“How many potions?”

“Ten in total.”

“Evanna didn’t mention when we’re leaving,” Link prompted after a while. “Any word on when the travel party will be ready.”

“High noon,” Sheik replied, his voice betraying him a bit as worry crept in between his words. “I’ve never felt more unprepared in my life. We still hardly know what this place will look like. Will we even be able to draw energy for our magic?”

“We’ll have to make due, I suppose.”

The day seemed to drag by as they finished packing clothes and armor, trying to choose what would best suit a forest environment. After that they sat on the benches of the armory with fidgeting fingers and knees to wait. And it felt like waiting for a war – inevitable, but unpredictable.

Would they live? Would the depths of the Nether claim them? What about the prophecy? Would his death void it? Hyrule would be lost. Would the Goddesses even be watching over him in their proverbial trash can? All angles cycled through Link’s mind like a carousel, perpetuating themselves over and over with no answers.

And then it finally time.

“Link, Sheik,” Zelda said from the doorway. She was in her travelling gown and cloak. The hilt of her sword gleamed at her waist in the torchlight and her eyes were war-time hard now. Whatever emotions she’d been letting wild in the past few days were now shut away completely and Queen Zelda of Hyrule was all that was left.

They strapped on armor, weapons, and their bags. There would be no parade to see them out – they
took a back passage from the castle to Death Mountain. A dozen guards flanked them as they rode
snorting steeds down the path. Evanna rode next to Link, much to his irritation, but she spent the
time finally explaining what to expect.

“The transition will be unpleasant. Your body will be torn apart and put back together on the other
side, so prepare yourself for a good amount of pain,” she told him. “Though the Nether is infinite
and timeless, there are major veins of Vaspra running through the ground there, close enough to the
surface to dig to. You will be able to sense them. I trust you brought something to dig with?”

They both nodded.

“How will we know how much to take?” Sheik asked from Link’s other side.

“The bag I’ve provided will seal when you’ve harvested the proper amount,” was all Evanna said.

“You’re not going to tell us the actual amount?”

She then urged her black steed up towards the front of the party and Link stared at Sheik in
disbelief. “I really can’t believe her.”

Sheik just shook his head. “We will have to store a bit of it in one of our bags considering hers will
seal on us.”

Link just nodded, mind reeling at the completely unknown quantity of Vaspra they were going to
have to dig up. Evanna was telling them everything last minute – he supposed he should be lucky
she was telling them anything at all – and it was complicating things even further.

The sun had tinged the sky pink and purple by the time they reached Death Mountain. The volcano
itself was part of a larger mountain range that crept north into a neighboring kingdom – this
entrance was on the north side of the mountain according to Evanna, in a valley between the
volcano and the rest of the range. Though it was mid-summer, a chill hovered in between the peaks
as the volcano eclipsed the setting sun and a fog hung over the trees of the valley.

The mountain walls were sheer and gray on either side of them as they snaked through the
thickening woods. Evanna was now completely leading the way – she was the only one who knew
where the entrance lay.

 Darkness had almost completely fallen when they reached the side of the mountain, the forest
having become so thick they were forced to move forward on foot. Soldiers surrounded them as
they at last reached a clearing. Torches were lit and the flickering light revealed a hole no taller
than a child and no wider than a horse. The energy emanating from it was thick and sickening. It
would surely drive away any wanderer looking out of curiosity.

“This entrance opens to a tunnel. You will follow the tunnel a mile or so into the mountain. You
will then reach a volcanic tube. You must fall down the tube.” Evanna’s voice was almost piercing
in the eerie silence of the wood.

“And you’re sure we won’t just land in lava?” Link asked dubiously. “Volcanic tubes are part of
the volcano, last I checked.”

“This tube once led to magma but now redirects to a tear in the plane, much like the entrance to
Termina in the forest. I assure you it’s there.”
For a moment they all seemed to go silent, staring tensely at the gaping hole. Zelda and Sheik were far more skilled than he at sensing really anything…but Link couldn’t deny the very wrong feeling he felt deep within the mountain, resonating out through the space before them.

There was clearly something down there.

Evanna pulled something out of her robes and handed it to Link. In his palm, he found a moderately-sized brass bell. It was impossibly old and worn, the ancient words etched into it eroded but not beyond reading. To his surprise, he recognized it to be Sheikah.

“You have a Calling Bell. Why?” Sheik demanded, the accusatory tone unmistakable.

“It was a gift from one of the Sheikah when Foursky first arrived in Termina,” Evanna explained serenely, as though she thought it perfectly fine that she had an ancient piece of Sheikah history. “I’ll save its explanation then and allow you the honors, Sheikah.”

Sheik made a sound of dissent and Link pushed the bell into his companion’s hands before anything else could be said on the matter. Sheik should be the one to carry anything Sheikah, not Link. He was cast an appreciative look as the bell was tucked safely into a pocket.

“I wish you luck and good health on your journey.” Evanna gave them another too-sweet smile and stepped back to allow Zelda to wish them goodbye.

“Stay safe,” Zelda whispered, stopping before them both and a bare hint of emotion betraying her regal cover. “Remember why you’re going down there. Don’t let that place eat you alive.”

She reached out and took each of their hands, sending pulses of energy down their arms and surprising them both. But the look on Zelda’s face said very plainly, stay still and shut up. The warmth of it collected in their chests, heating up their entire bodies. It was the same feeling Link recalled from days ago when he and Zelda stood alone in the Map Room.

“Hum the lullaby to come home,” she whispered quickly.

Link didn’t know how Zelda could’ve developed such a spell, but he was grateful for it; they could return on their own terms and possibly hide their portion of Vaspra before Evanna knew what was happening. Sheik looked just as surprised as Zelda squeezed their hands again and shook her head just barely to quiet them.

Then Zelda stepped away, leaving them to enter the tunnel and begin their descent.

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The tunnel was dank and small. It kept them both in a slight stoop and the small flame on Sheik’s hand flickered against the black walls. The dry air within reminded Link of the desert save the lack of oppressive heat. For the most part they said nothing, both tense and focused on treading carefully over the uneven floor of the tunnel.

It was clear that the passage they were in now was also of volcanic nature; the floor crunched almost like glass beneath their boots and the taste of ash sat in their mouths no matter how many times they swallowed. The walls were rough and pock-marked with holes, dark as obsidian and as fragile as burnt wood.

They paused only once to sit on the floor and rest their legs – a mile was nothing for them in the field but in the cramped tunnel growing tighter and drier, it was draining them considerably. They took the smallest of sips from their canteens and rested their backs against the walls. Sheik let the flame go out and they sat in pitch black, the only sound that of their lungs working to pull at the thinning air.

“Sitting here isn’t going to make breathing any easier,” Sheik said quietly, his voice still loud enough to make Link jump a bit.

“Agreed.”

There was nothing left to say – the tension on both of them was words enough. They continued on their way, lit once more via Sheik. Periodically the tunnel would tremble ever so slightly; enough for them to feel but not enough to worry. Death Mountain had been active for centuries but it was the power of the Gorons that kept it from erupting, now even more so with Darunia as Sage.

Link wasn’t sure how much time had really passed, but it seemed like a night’s worth when they finally reached the volcanic tube Evanna had spoken of. It yawned above and below them, irregularly circular and black. The energy made Link feel nauseous and there was a strange, pungent smell there that Link couldn’t quite place and a glance at Sheik told him it was not his imagination.

“Do you think it’s the tear?” Link asked quietly, voice bouncing around the small junction. Sheik nodded.

“It smells like rot and…”

“Sulfur,” Link supplied.

Sheik just nodded again, leaning forward carefully to see down the hole, but there was clearly nothing to see. “I can sense the tear. It’s making me feel ill.”

“I can’t believe we’re just going to just…jump down there,” Link laughed, the sound more nervous than he would’ve liked. He reached up and tightened the straps on his gear. Fear started to bite through his gut and turned his limbs cold. “Every instinct in my body is telling me not to.”
“I think even the simplest of people would know better than to do this, just on instinct,” Sheik commented, letting the flame die so he could follow Link’s example.

They stood in the void and the cadence of their breaths echoing around the junction was a breathy cacophony in the small intersection of space. To be standing on the precipice of a hole that lead to the Nether in complete darkness…well, it was definitely testing every bit of mental control Link had ever built up over the years of the war. There was a shift of fabric and gear next to him and he assumed Sheik was giving his supplies one last check, his breathing muffled against his cowl and doing strange things to Link’s racing mind.

If anything could make him go mad, it was this.

Another moment passed and he felt Sheik grip his hand tightly, fingers lacing together rigidly like a lock. “Do not let go,” Sheik said quietly. “No matter the pain or confusion. There’s no telling if this thing will spit us out together.”

Link nodded, knowing Sheik couldn’t see it but not able to find his voice in the tension of his neck. He gripped the hand back as tightly as he could.

“Count of three,” Sheik continued, for the first time, his voice sounding truly uneven.

3

2

1

They leapt into open air and the horrible sensation of dropping gripped his gut as they plummeted. Link straightened out his body best he could as Sheik forced out a wildly flickering flame he held palm down to light their way. The tube was a bit uneven, but was relatively straight, alleviating the worry of colliding with anything. They dropped at a terrifying rate, shooting into the earth like arrows from a bow. Everything in Link’s body told him he was about to die. Because no one survived a fall like this. And in some ways, if the pain of going through the entrance of as bad as Evanna said it would be, maybe it would be like dying.

The time that passed could’ve been seconds or minutes, air deafening in his ears and gear convulsing painfully against his body. Adrenaline was warping his sense of time and every muscle in his body spasmed each time he imagined the bottom closing in beneath him.

“We’re close,” Sheik shouted, his voice hardly audible over the roar.

And he could feel that Sheik was right; below them, the very wrong sensation they had been experiencing since arriving at the mountain amplified exponentially. It took everything in him to not be sick – he was pretty sure that experience mid-plummet wouldn’t be pleasurable.

They seemed to fall for another few minutes – or maybe a few seconds? – and heat started to surrounding them, dragging the liquid out of their bodies and onto their skin. The nausea got worse and the heat intensified as a light appeared below them. Sheik let go of his flame as a strange yellow atmosphere seemed the radiate below them, morphing the tunnel walls into something akin to the molten rock one would expect in a volcano.

But this was not molten rock. It was otherworldly and Link grit his teeth, trying to keep himself
together.

His hand was completely numb, a tingle of static creeping up his arm, as they seemed to finally spy the entrance below them. It was so bright Link’s eyes watered as they raced towards it at alarming speeds.

And then-

The pain was unfathomable. It knocked the air out of him and ripped apart his connection with Sheik, no matter how fiercely he tried to keep it. He felt his throat let out a scream of agony but he couldn’t hear himself over a piercing whine of sound. It was multi-toned and omnipresent as he continued to fall and dissolve simultaneously.

Heat scorched away his gear and armor, digging into his skin with burning intimacy. Blunt blows snapped his bones and took away his sight, marooning him in vast blackness.

The pain was unfathomable.

He was no longer with his body anymore, suspended in a somewhere and waiting – praying – to recollect himself on the other side.

Because he had to get to the other side. Because he had to find Sheik. He had to make sure he was okay. If Sheik died, he didn’t know if he could even complete his task. If Sheik died, he might just break apart. If Sheik died-

Link was suddenly whole again, uneven ground beneath his back with a force that knocked his breath away again. He was overwhelmed with a myriad of sensations, all colliding with his senses and forcing him to register them all at once.

The smell of mud, grass, muted air, pine, salt…

The sound of wind through trees, the scrape of branches and leaves, the chatter of a nearby creek, his gasps for air…

The feel of wet dirt under his twitching fingers, the dampness that had set into his clothes and armor chilling his skin, the lasting nausea that filled his body…

With a desperate roll, he managed onto his hands and knees and retched. Still breathing heavily, Link felt infinitely better as he cracked upon his eyes and found himself near the bank of the creek he had been hearing.

It was a forest, much different from any he had ever seen, the color leached out of it by an overcast sky. The energy was flat and nearly nonexistent, the only clue eluding to the forest’s otherworldly nature. Link breathed in air so crisp and sharp, hollow breezies blowing his hair every few moments and drying the sweat from his skin.

He forced himself up into a crouch, surveying the area for foes or, more importantly, Sheik. He worked to focus his energy on sensing his friend but…there was nothing. Whether it was the strange energy of the Nether or just a lack of Sheikah in the vicinity, he was left with nothing.

Where had Sheik ended up? Was he okay? How far away were they from each other?
Worry gripped his stomach as he hurriedly checked his gear and his pack to ensure all of his supplies had made it and crept down to the creek. The water looked and felt clean enough after a hesitant dip of his hand, so he quickly washed his face and hands, scraping off any mud he could find. It was trivial, but the menial task was keeping him calm as he determined his next move.

Link really couldn’t sense any Vaspra, so there must not have been a vein nearby – he could never forget the intense aura in the map room when Evanna revealed the Vaspra. The hero part of him felt he should start looking for the Vaspra immediately – Sheik had that Calling Bell (which he had neglected to explain the purpose of during their tense travels into the mountain but Link could guess it was some sort of communication or method of travel) and they both had the spell Zelda had given him. Link had the bag for the Vaspra. By all rights, he could finish the task on his own.

But there was no way he couldn’t look for Sheik. The part that was just Link couldn’t let go of the consuming fear. He wouldn’t be able to focus on finding Vaspra until he found the Sheikah.

Suddenly, there was a loud, jarring ring, the sound so present it was almost in his head. It made him jump and he backed away as though it were coming from in front of him, nearly stepping into the creek. As it continued to echo in his skull, his head throbbed. If there was anything Link hated, it was things in his head. The moment he pushed it away, it was gone.

He looked around in confusion, drawing his sword and dropping into a crouch once more.

But there was nothing but the creek, the trees, and the mud. Muted clouds shifted over him soundlessly and he stayed that way for a few minutes, scanning the clearing and gripping the hilt of his sword so tightly his fingers went numb.

When it was clear there was nothing around him, he begrudgingly sheathed the Moon Blade and moved away from the creek. Without the sun to guide him, he knew not the direction he was walking and his compass just spun in circles when he pulled it out. He supposed it made sense – the Nether was infinite so directions probably didn’t exist in the way they did in the living world. Opting to hold a long dagger as he crept carefully through the thick forest, he left the mud and water behind him.

The forest was much like that of the living save the animals – nothing crawled in the underbrush, no birds screeched in the canopies, and no bugs flew in his face or buzzed in his ears. The occasional wind would whistle through the trunks and raise gooseflesh on his neck at the very unearthly sound it gave. Everything creaked and shifted with the air and every alien noise set Link’s teeth on edge.

Despite his tension and his constant crouch, his body began to grow cold from the temperate air and blunt, icy wind. The Nether was locked somewhere between autumn and winter, something instinctual telling Link that winter had not and never would never come.

He estimated he walked for a few hours, pausing every few minutes to call out for Sheik in the quietest of voices; he feared attracting a Vog or a Blood Back. Or anything else that dwelled in the Nether that was never documented. Link couldn’t deny that the lack of adversaries was making him all the more nervous.

Two more times did the ringing occur like near the creek bed. Each time it seemed to get louder and more insistent. Link began to wonder if maybe it was Sheik. He really didn’t know what the Calling Bell did nor would he consider the sound that of a bell, but he couldn’t imagine what else it could be.
Unless, of course, it was a method used by a beast to lure him to his death. There was no telling in such a mysterious place and Link was hesitant to respond…however one was supposed to respond to a loud, ancient Sheikah bell ringing in their head.

As time went on and the sky showed nothing to reflect it, Link began to feel a sense of hopelessness. Where was he going? He couldn’t sense anything and it seemed the harder he tried, the more numb he became to his surroundings. It was like trying to smell something faint after smelling something heady and strong. It made him feel blind and helpless. How was he supposed to find Sheik? How was he supposed to find Vaspra? Were the veins really so far apart or had he just lost the ability to sense them? Who knew what this place was doing to him?

A deafening screech filled the frigid air and Link slammed into the closest tree and into a tight crouch, eyes snapping up. An enormous, winged creature was nearly tearing apart the canopy as it landed heavily on the highest branches. Link’s stomach dropped as he spotted the red and dark gray foliage in the bland light.

Blood Back.

Instantly, his mind filtered through everything he and Sheik had learned about them – fast, enhanced eyesight, razor-sharp beak and talons, acidic vomit – and Link grimaced. His ears were still ringing from the initial scream when the bird let out another, this one pitched even higher. It was hard to see through the thick foliage (strangely thick for the cold weather) but Link could make out enormous black eyes and an even larger beak than he could’ve imagined. Its head snapped this way and that, surveying the area with a precision and intelligence Link could only pray didn’t involve spotting him through the leaves.

Minutes passed as it stayed perched on the waving trees, taking to preening itself after a while. Link barely dared to even breathe, his mouth pressed shut and his nostrils flaring. He knew nothing of the bird’s hearing, but he wasn’t about to chance it. It became clear, as he stayed tense against the tree, that the bird was simply roosting there.

But it still left him in a bind. Link didn’t know how long it planned to stay there, but he couldn’t move without starting a battle he wasn’t privy to instigating. It wasn’t that he doubted he could take it down, but there was always the risk of the skirmish attracting attention and bringing more monsters his way when he had done so well at avoiding them thus far.

So he stayed put, forcing himself to relax a little and just wait it out. Surely the bird would move on. Nothing above him indicated a nest, so the bird wasn’t actually roosting, more likely just resting.

Time passed and the bird went still. The trees creaked in the wind and Link fought shivers, gritting his teeth to control them.

Then, suddenly, everything was happening.

Screeches, just as damaging to his ear, filled the forest again and furious flapping littered him with leaves as another Blood Back clashed wildly with the one roosting. They grappled with each other, red and gray feathers scattering in the air and landing on him as well. A disgusting, revolting sound, much like a gag, met his ears and blood cascaded down from the canopy, landing on trunks, roots, dirt – and Link’s shoulder.
Instantly, the acid started eating at his pauldron. But much of it also splashed from his armor and onto his neck and collar. He bit harshly at his tongue. It felt as though he was on fire as the compound devoured his layers of clothes and then his skin. With shaking hands he snatched a rag out of his belt and wiped the crimson liquid off of him, nearly crying out from the pain the motion caused. As soon as he had wiped it all off, he had to drop the rag on the forest floor – the acid was eating through the cloth as well.

Never had Link seen an acid so potent. It had gorged halfway through his pauldron and a moderate sized chunk of his flesh was now gone at the juncture of shoulder and neck. He could only assess it through light touches of his fingertips, but he knew it was considerable. While it wasn’t going to incapacitate him, he knew the risk of infection was serious.

The birds continued to squabble above him and Link feared more acid being dropped on him…but he also feared moving. The only thing worse than having a Blood Back on his tail was having two. He kept his eyes glued to the canopy as he felt his way into his pack, trying to sort through things he could only feel, looking for any sort of cloth or gauze to cover the wound.

Much like their hearing, he knew nothing of their sense of smell and was not about to risk an open wound.

With a chorus of more screeches, the original Blood Back seemed to stand down and try to escape, the second one chasing it at a speed Link couldn’t believe. Birds didn’t move that fast. They just didn’t. But then he wasn’t about to really complain when, within seconds, the birds were speeding away.

Link let out a quiet gasp of relief and agony, the pain of his shoulder no longer masked by adrenaline. With a quick spill of his canteen, he washed away any residual acid and tugged out the cloth he had managed to find tearing it into strips to tie over the wound and under his armpit. The only advantage to an acid burn was its cauterizing effect; no blood. He could only hope the smell wasn’t strange enough to attract a Vog – according to records their sense of smell was formidable.

Tying off the last knot, he rolled his right arm, the movement pulling painfully on the wound. But it would do. At least it wasn’t his sword arm. Silver linings.

With a quiet huff, he forced himself to a stand and winced as his muscles protested against the stiff crouch he’d been trapped in for Goddesses-knew-how-long. The forest was silent now, the icy air still between the trunks. It was eerie. But the Nether, Link decided, was always eerie. He readjusted the grip on his dagger and continued on, head on a swivel.

Apparently, there were day cycles in the Nether, Link found as the light above him began to fade. It meant the temperatures would most likely plummet, something he was not exactly thrilled for. There was also no telling if the Nether held moon or stars, so he had assume there would be no light when night finally fell.

So he needed to start seriously planning where he would spend the night.

As Link walked onward, the terrain began to slope slowly up, possibly the prelude to mountains. But the forest was too thick and he had no concept of where he was. Maybe he could find a cave or thick brush to hide in for the night. He could get some rest (if his body would allow it in such an alien place) and reevaluate his plan in the morning. Walking around aimlessly wasn’t going to help him find Sheik. Link didn’t know any sort of seeking spells and he wasn’t about to activate the one Zelda had cast on him. Maybe he would climb a tree in the morning to scope out his surroundings.
He found he was willing to risk losing his head to a Blood Back if he could just get a better picture of the landscape.

Link kept these thoughts going, trying to stay optimistic as he stepped into an unexpected clearing. The trees had been so crowded and thick and then there were none. He froze at the edge of it, feeling a terrible jolt lock him in place.

A completely black figure stood in the center of the clearing, motionless and reeking of decay. It was shaped like a man but its limbs elongated in a disturbing way. For a moment, he thought it was a Balta…but Baltas were recorded as being covered in a mixture of mud and blood. This thing was black. And not even the color black. It was like looking at a human-shaped hole in the foliage.

With everything he had, Link wanted to draw the Moon Blade. But he couldn’t move, real fear settling in his gut as the figure started to shiver ever-so-slightly.

Link.

He took in air, mind exploding with a voice that was multi-toned and altogether frightening. More things in his head. Breaking free of his brief paralysis, he drew the Moon Blade with a loud ring and crouched at the line of trees.

The shape shivered violently now, its body twitching in ways that deepened his fear. Memories of the Shadow Temple gripped him, dredging back that empty, agonized feeling he remembered too well. But this wasn’t the Shadow Temple. In fact, this was much worse.

What do you fear?

“What are you?” Link growled, digging his feet in and preparing himself for anything.

I am a friend.

“I doubt that. Get out of my head.”

Then I cannot speak to you, Link.

Link let out a growl. “What are you?”

What are you?

Link didn’t know what to say. This was obviously another demon of the Nether. He should kill it…but he knew nothing about it. He’d never encountered anything like this. With no further information, he would have to keep it talking and hopefully distracted.

“I’m a Hylian,” Link finally replied.

I thought I smelled that of the living.

“What are you?” Link repeated.

I am a Void Walker.

“What do you mean me harm, Void Walker?” he asked carefully.
Why do you think I do?

“Because this is the Nether and I wouldn’t imagine anything but evil here.”

Evil? There is nothing evil here. Only creatures trying to survive, as anything else in the living world.

“Evil or just hungry, I hope to avoid any altercation while here. Will you let me pass, Void Walker? We can go separate ways.” Link doubted his reasoning would work, but he had to try. The Void Walker continued to shake and twitch, his arms swinging around his legs.

What is it you seek, Link?

“Passage. Nothing more,” Link pressed. He had no intention of revealing his quest…but he worried that maybe the Void Walker already knew. It knew his name and spoke in his head.

Sheik. You seek another living thing here. Why do you lie?

“Because I am not convinced you mean me no harm,” Link snapped, anger seething in him at the questionnaire their encounter was becoming. “Will you allow me to leave here or will you attack?”

It depends. What will you offer me?

“Offer you? I don’t even understand what you are or what you would want!”

Suddenly, the figure seemed to more or less teleport with a wild shiver, and appeared just feet from Link. It hulked over him, its form pitch black like the void of his name. It was like staring at an illusion he just couldn’t seem to wrap his mind around. The smell of rot intensified and Link felt nauseous as he held his ground, raising the Moon Blade higher.

I am a Void Walker. We devour bodies. We are the cleaners of the Void. We take the flesh and recycle it, building the body once more.

“The creatures here die?”

All things die, Link.

“You recycle them?”

We were once in the world of the living, charged to recycle the people there. But it twists the living into something the Goddesses didn’t like. We were sent here, a failed idea. The creatures here were once not so…crude. The recycling process has its disadvantages.

“I don’t know what I could offer you, Void Walker.”

I must devour to survive. You have nothing for me to eat?

Link’s mind flitted to the salted meat in his pack, but he would need those rations. He couldn’t afford to offer it.

I have forgotten the selfishness of the living. I am starving, Link. Will you not share?
“I cannot. I must survive here as long as I can. I must return to the living realm,” Link insisted. “I mean not to be selfish, but as you must survive, so must I.”

Pity.

And that was when Link knew it was over. Whatever strange and brief peace treaty they had been holding was now gone. He still knew nothing of the creature aside from its eating habits and could only hope it was a corporeal being capable of taking damage from a sword. Lightning fast, Link leapt forward and slashed through the Void Walker.

Well, it was definitely corporeal. It wasn’t, however, mortal. His blade entered it like flesh but was stuck halfway from neck to abdomen. The blade wouldn’t budge when he attempted to pull it out with all his strength and before he could give another tug, the Void Walker’s arms reached out and unseen needles in its fingers stabbed into Link flesh, rooting him to the spot.

I will devour you, Link of Hyrule. I will inherit your flesh, your memories, and your soul. I will rebuild you.

“No!” Link snarled, mind diving into overdrive as adrenaline had him tugging furiously backwards, abandoning his sword against every instinct he had. He unsheathed his dagger, tearing it through the creature’s arms, relieved them he found purchase there and its right limb seemed to dissolve. Nothing but a stump was left and he scrambled to pull the needle-fingers out of his shoulders.

As soon as Link freed himself and crouched to flip backwards away from the beast, a shape akin to a narrow dagger shot out of the stump on the Void Walker’s shoulder, piercing through his side and holding him once again captive.

The intense pain of the impalement coursed through his body, making him shout sharply, struggling to slide it back out. But the moment he touched the Void Walker’s flesh, he was electrocuted, his body convulsing against his will.

I was built to hold anything. Everything must be still so I may devour it. I was given these powers by the Goddesses. You mustn’t fight. You will be rebuilt.

“I don’t need to be rebuilt, you bastard!” Link roared, re-gripping his dagger and slashing through the limb impaling him as soon as his paralysis wore off. Needles had re-acquainted with his shoulder while he was convulsing, so he was back to square one. Link growled in frustration and pain, ripping his shoulder away painfully and making a desperate grab for his sword.

I will devour you. And I will find Sheik and I will devour him as well.

“No!” Link bellowed, ripping his sword violently out of the Void Walker’s body, almost losing his balance in the process.

Then, three different things happened.

One, the Void Walker seemed to expand, five other arms branching out of its hollowed body and reaching out for him as he reeled backwards into the trees.

Two, the horrible ringing filled his head again, blurring his vision in a frightening way.
Three, he heard Sheik’s voice in his head, painfully loud and more present than the Void Walker’s voice had ever been.

*Follow!*  

He had no idea what that meant. But Link was vaguely aware that the Void Walker now had him again, his back against a tree and needles in his arms.

*I will devour you.*

*Follow…ringing!*  

“How?” Link shouted desperately, trying as hard as he could to move, his flesh being ruined by the needles.

*I will devour you.*

**FOLLOW THE DAMN RINGING!**

Then, all at once, it clicked. He snapped his eyes shut and gripped his sword as tightly as he could. He let his senses blow out around him, searching for the source of the Calling Bell. Link worried he wouldn’t be able to find it, given the way the Nether numbed him. But thank the Goddesses he found it, leagues away, but the passage was clear. He recognized the feeling – it was much like that of a warping song. He just had to follow the trail.

*I will devour you.*

“*Rot in hell,*” Link growled.

And he followed the ringing.

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We finally made it to the Nether. Hold on to yer panties.
Chapter 13

XIII.

Warps were always disorienting. Even after travelling them for years during the war and in the
time after, he still wasn’t used to the twisting of his stomach and how it made him dizzy on his
feet.

But hey, anything was better than being devoured by a Void Walker.

Link was blinded by red light as his body was pushed and pulled through what felt like a straw.
And then, all at once, his feet were slammed into the ground with a force that brought him to his
knees. Even if he had been able to balance from the warp, he would’ve fallen anyway from the
adrenaline rush he was coming down from. His whole body shook as he braced the ground and
looked around wildly.

“Link!”

Sheik was suddenly in view, approaching him quickly in the small clearing that might as well have
been the same one Link had just escaped from; he was still surrounded by tightly packed trees and
darkening gray sky above. Sheik was assessing him with stressed, wide eyes, hands reaching for
his arms but hesitating at the amount of blood now coating them.

Link had several things he really wanted to say, but couldn’t find his voice at first. He was so
relieved, so damn relieved to see his friend alive and well. So relieved they were together now. But
all he could really think of was the last thing Sheik had told him to do.

“You let go, you ass!” Link complained.

Sheik gave him an exasperated look. “Goddesses, if you hadn’t already gotten yourself torn up I
would be kicking you right now. You moron, I rang for you four times!”

“Rang for me?” Link asked incredulously. “Maybe if you had told me what the bloody bell did I
would have known how to follow it!”

Sheik covered his face with his hands and let out a groan into the thin wraps around his fingers. But
it wasn’t a sound of anger but that of relief. When he removed his hands, Link saw the true depth
of his stress – Sheik had been worried just as sick as Link had been.

“Can you walk? Let’s get somewhere safe so I can see your wounds,” Sheik decided, taking a deep
breath and rising. He held out a hand, which Link took gratefully.

He batted away Sheik’s offer to support his weight – call him immature, but Link wasn’t going to
let his dignity be tarnished any more than it already had. His legs were still a little shaky but he
would manage. Link sheathed the Moon Blade, whose hilt was a bloody mess from his escape. He
 glanced down on at the hole in his side, grimacing at the steady drip of liquid it was allowing.
Thankfully, it didn’t go all the way through him and it was so close to his side, he had doubts it
had punctured anything too important. At only the diameter of two fingers, he determined he’d live;
he’d had worse. But Goddesses did it hurt.
Sheik produced a rag of his own and pressed it carefully on the wound. “Keep pressure,” he reminded, pushing Link’s hand to hold it there.

It was unnecessary to even say it, but Link had a feeling that the words comforted Sheik more than anything, so he didn’t make a smart remark like he wanted to. The wound stung horribly, but he bit his lip and followed Sheik out of the clearing and into the thick forest.

Maybe a few minutes later they reached a dried creek bed, the embankment rising up and dropping off to a tiny cliff. It was clear they were going to have to jump and Link wasn’t looking forward to the embarrassing way he was going to stumble when he landed. Sheik made the leap flawlessly – of course he did – and lined himself up to help Link’s landing.

Letting out a groan, Link reluctantly dropped off the edge. His feet slammed into soft earth and the shock, as expected, knocked him off balance. It wasn’t as bad as he expected, but it forced a pained grunt out of him as the impact jostled his wounds. Sheik steadied him before he could stumble and Link gave him a grateful look.

“I found this spot not far from where I was dropped,” Sheik explained, guiding Link’s to turn around. The wall of the embankment actually curved severely in, creating something of a roof for them to hide under. The creek bed was narrow and closely lined with trees, making the location as secure as Link supposed they could get in a place like the Nether. “I haven’t seen anything near here since we arrived, so we should be moderately safe.”

Link took tired steps under the ceiling and let his body more or less collapse on the ground with little grace. He bit back another groan as pain shot through his gut. Within moments, Sheik was pulling off his equipment and setting about helping Link out of his own gear. He wanted to laugh, but chuckling at a Sheikah playing nurse wasn’t always the best idea, he had learned in the past; it tended to encourage more painful methods of dressing a wound than necessary.

“What were you fighting?” Sheik asked as he finished helping Link with his armor and few layers of clothing. The cold was a relief on his heated flesh as he was left shirtless against the wall of the creek bed. The Sheikah poked and prodded at his wounds and Link tried to not smack him for it.

“I came across this…thing. It called itself a Void Walker. It wanted to devour me,” Link explained.

“That sounds unpleasant.”

“It, apparently, devours things and recycles them. It felt the need to do that to me,” Link explained with a sigh. “It had needle fingers and could transform parts of its body into things capable of impalement – thus the hole in my side.”

“And this?” Sheik nudged the wound on his shoulder a little harder than necessary and Link shot him a glare.

“Blood Back acid so stop poking it,” Link griped.

Sheik shook his head. “We’re here for not even a day and you’re already beat up.”

Link spied dried blood on Sheik’s wrist earlier and it became relevant as Sheik nipped at his ego. “Don’t start with me. You’re wounded too,” Link said, poking roughly at Sheik’s wrist. It earned him a wince and a glare, back-to-back.
“Baltas, in an unsurprising turn of events, aren’t fun to fight alone,” Sheik said tersely. Done prodding Link, he sat back and dug through his satchel for some red potion. They had split it up in vials to create small doses and stretch out their supply; Link was suddenly very glad that they did considering how hostile they had already found the Nether to be. And he almost wanted to refuse it, just to conserve their stores…but he knew the wound on his side was not safe to leave as it was. Who knew what an infection in the Nether looked like? He really didn’t want to find out. “The cuts aren’t too deep, so I won’t be needing potion. You, on the other hand…”

“Yeah, yeah…” Link said irritably, snatching the vial from him and downing it in one grimacing gulp. Potion was terrible. The effect was instantaneous, however, and the buzzing feeling that filled his body numbed the pain, allowing him to finally relax.

Link leaned back completely and took two large gulps from his canteen. “What a nice place, huh?”

“The energy here is…disturbing,” Sheik observed, nodding in agreement.

“I’ve been having a really hard time sensing anything here. I wasn’t able to sense the Blood Backs, the Void Walker, or even Vaspra. I feel blind.”

Sheik nodded. “I’m still able to sense…but it’s difficult for me as well. I’ve been getting just hints of Vaspra…but I think we’re far from a vein of it. We’ll have to do some more travelling.”

They both fell quiet after that. Sheik sat cross-legged in front of him, looking altogether as tired and stressed as Link was feeling, even despite the numbing effect of the potion. He glanced down at the hole in his side, two parts pleased and disgusted to see the skin stitching back together and scabbing over. He finally took real stock of his arms, holes and slices peppering his flesh, all in different states of scabbing and puckering. Overall, Link looked pretty gross.

But gross was better than dead.

The adrenaline rush long behind him, the chill set into his skin and Link quickly wiped the nearly-drying blood off his body. He re-dressed, disliking the cold, damp dirt against his shoulder blades. Wind whistled through the creek bed and Link scanned the trees, squinting in the dimming light for any threats. Throwing out his senses again, he came back with nothing like he had since he arrived.

Well, at least Sheik could sense more than him.

“I don’t think I need to convince you of the merits of avoiding a fire, do I?” Sheik asked with a touch of tired humor.

“Oh, I was thinking a bonfire, actually,” Link joked. “A bonfire and maybe some fireworks.”

Sheik allowed a short laugh and shifted so he sat next to Link against the curved wall. “I never in my life thought I would find myself here.”

“Yes, trash can of world was not on my list of places for a retreat, surprisingly.”

“What is on your list of places for a retreat?” Sheik asked.

“Well, going to Termina was once on there…”
They both laughed, much quieter than they normally would, but the sound was defusing their stress as the light faded quickly. They fell silent as they bit into jerky and hard biscuits, taking turns chewing so someone was always listening for approaching threats. And these were things that were just unspoken between them. Years of travel and dangerous times had trained them into this overly paranoid pair of veterans.

But, in a place like the Nether, who could really blame them?

Soon, they were left in a black so pitch Link couldn’t even see his own body. They remained quiet after their small meal, listening to the trees creak and the cadence of their breathing.

“I’ll take the first watch,” Sheik said quietly, nudging Link with his shoulder. “You need sleep to fully heal.”

Link wanted to argue but of course Sheik had a good point. Begrudgingly, he agreed and hunkered down, keeping his dagger drawn and tugging a blanket out of his pack to drape over himself. Just as Link had thought, night brought freezing temperatures in its wake. He really wished they had known what they were walking into so they could’ve worn the appropriate clothing; Evanna mentioned nothing about the chilly climate.

Though, Evanna hadn’t been the one to go to the Nether.

It took a while, but eventually he did finally fall asleep. And when Sheik woke him an unknowable amount of time later, he did feel marginally better than when he first laid down. Sheik risked a small bit of flame to check Link’s wounds, humming approvingly when they were almost fully healed. It would probably take a few more days for them to disappear, what with the small dose he took, but at least Link didn’t have holes in him anymore. He tossed Sheik his blanket and stared into the blackness of the night, feeling on edge as he listened to the wind.

Even when Link had woken from his stasis, seven years older, during the war he hadn’t felt as disoriented as he did now. To be in a lower realm, in blinding darkness, unable to sense a thing, and only listening for danger – he was going to go mad.

So, he decided to think about other things. Like Vaspra. Like Evanna. Like the enormity of what might soon happen. These were all things he should be contemplating, planning for. But he wasn’t, to his great surprise. Instead, Link sat there thinking about the Sheikah asleep next to him and the fact their legs were barely touching. Goddesses, maybe he really did need to take the advice of the guards who had tried many times to corral him into a brothel. Obsessing over his best friend – which was already confusing enough – was going to distract him on the battlefield.

Link needed to just find satisfaction in the close bond he and Sheik already shared. They had been through hell together – were going through hell together – and maybe his feelings were just… immense gratitude at having someone who understood how he felt?

That was weak.

Link needed to be thinking about Malon. She had confessed her feelings and such a strong woman was undoubtedly what someone like him should look for in a partner. Besides, Sheik probably didn’t have the capacity to be with someone, let alone the Hero of Time, the person he was originally employed to guide and protect.

But Link didn’t feel like he had the capacity to be with someone either.
There were a series of shrieks and bangs somewhere in the distance, making Link jolt painfully out of his thoughts. They were quite a distance away but it didn’t fail to get his heart thundering. It sounded like some akin to a battle, altogether very unlike anything Link had had the displeasure of hearing before. The commotion continued and Sheik stirred beside him.

“What’s happening?” he demanded immediately, voice thick from sleep.

“I don’t know, but it’s far off right now.”

They both fell quiet, listening to the skirmish with bated breaths. It actually seemed to be moving even farther away…but Link couldn’t find solace in that. Not in the Nether, where everything horrible seemed possible and probable.

But, thankfully, long minutes passed and the fight seemed to end in one final and resounding blast.

“I’m inclined to believe that was a result of Vog,” Link suggested, filling the silence. Those creatures did possess explosive spit according to the stories.

“Or something else never recorded,” Sheik offered in a grim tone.

“We should leave at first light…whenever that is.”

“I wish we had cardinal directions to follow. Maybe morning will give us an idea…” Sheik said, sounding hardly convinced as he leaned back next to Link. He could feel the warmth coming off the Sheikah, thawing out his left arm. Link almost moved closer but thought better of it for a reason he was unsure of.

“Not if the sky stays cloudy all the time,” he reminded him.

“What a terrible place,” Sheik complained.

They fell silent after that, staring sightlessly into the blackness of the night and waiting until dawn. It was clear that neither of them would be sleeping again, especially after listening to the far-away brawl from earlier. Eventually the quiet became too much for Link, however.

“What was your tribe like?” he asked, hoping his companion wouldn’t shut the question down.

He felt Sheik look at him despite the dark.

“It was…beautiful. Beyond the desert is a great mountain, Vrika. We lived in the shadow of it in white stone houses. It was still much like the desert you’ve seen, in between cracked dirt and hot rainforest. The days were burning but the nights were comfortably warm. It was in the rainforest that we hunted and collected our water.”

Link closed his eyes needlessly and tried to imagine it. Many times had he watched Sheik hunt and he could imagine other Sheikah sharing the same grace – he had most assuredly seen it in Impa – as they stalked through thick, vined forests. He tried to imagine what they would look like, but Link still knew so little of Sheikah traditional clothing, especially in a tribal setting. But he knew some of it branched from Gerudo garb. He’d seen Sheik out of his Royal uniform and in looser clothing (Zelda seemed more privy to his traditional clothing, demanding it of him whenever the opportunity presented itself).
“What of your parents?”

There was a silence after that and Link wondered if he really had pushed too far. What if Sheik had been an orphan, like Link? And why had they chosen his name? Sheik’s name was derived of the Sheikah namesake, of course. But Sheik had never explained why he was given it if his tribe was still alive when he was born. Link was bubbling with questions, as he always was, but feared it was too late to press for the answers.

“They were killed by a sickness when I was two. My nurse took me in once they were gone. In my mind, she was my mother. She could not conceive so she loved me as her own. I remember nothing of my parents,” Sheik replied, his voice solemn.

So Sheik was also an orphan. Perhaps it wasn’t as touchy of a subject as it was for Link. Being raised by rather judgmental Kokiri had left him somewhat bitter. But Sheik was loved and cared for during his childhood. The idea made Link grateful for that; Sheik deserved a kind upbringing.

“Why were you named Sheik?” Link inquired, again prepared to meet a dead end. He had lucked out so far, but surely Sheik was over the questionnaire by now.

“Sheik is not my birth name.”

Link gave him a confused glance he knew Sheik couldn’t see. The waiting silence, though, was question enough.

“I was given that name after the slaughter of my village. Lady Impa chose it. She thought I was to be the only one to carry on the Sheikah name. It is customary for a trained assassin to be renamed. It disconnects their past and protects their family from retribution,” Sheikah explained, shifting beside him. Link imagined he was in his curled-up position, much like the one in the library in the castle, what felt like ages ago.

“Would it be rude to ask what your first name was?” Link asked hesitantly.

“I haven’t said it since I was renamed…”

Link assumed this was undoubtedly the end of their conversation. It wouldn’t be out of character for Sheik to just stop speaking altogether. And he wouldn’t push Sheik when so much had already been shared. Even in the years they had known each other, Sheik had never been so revealing in such a short span of time. From talking about his relationship with Kalyh, to being orphaned and raised with a foster mother…Link was grateful for the admissions. It made him feel rooted; trusted.

“Ra.” The answer was abrupt, surprising Link a bit. “They named me Ra.”

“Din’s son?” Link asked incredulously.

It was a story in Gerudo religion, which branched sharply from Hylian, but it had reached the ears of many and was growing into a widely accepted story as part of the Goddesses’ mythology. Din had a son that she sent to the world to bring peace in a time of bloodshed. He was a valiant warrior, leading armies against evil forces for a generation where the Hero was unfortunately absent, the line of reincarnation not yet in its next cycle. When he died, he was adopted as the God of the desert sun. Many refuted that part of the story, however, saying it was blasphemy.
Regardless, the name was only given to those in high social standing in Gerudo culture; essentially royalty.

“My parents were the last purebloods of our Sheikah tribe. Our line was slowly diminished due to the needs of our dwindling population. Sheikah are not prejudice against the dilution, but old Sheikah royalty originally fought to stay pureblooded, keeping the traditions in place. The Sheikah were once big enough to have anything one could consider royalty…but the genocides and strife have destroyed that. I am a descendant of the old royalty.”

Link felt his mouth hanging open and quickly snapped it shut. Sheik had painted himself to be just a disposable servant of the Royal Family for years, and here he was possibly just as royal as Zelda. No wonder Impa had changed his name from something so powerful to something even more powerful. Sheik was to be the last pureblood. His renaming made perfect sense now.

“Do you think the Order is pureblooded?” Link asked after a moment to digest this information.

“It’s entirely possible. I wonder if some of them maybe escaped Ganon’s attack. I wonder if the Order found them,” Sheik admitted, his voice now beginning to betray the barest of emotions he normally kept in check. “For Sheikah to be practicing magic that goes against the Vala, though…I still feel like the last Sheikah.”

Link couldn’t help it; he reached out in the blackness and gripped Sheik’s shoulder. “Maybe Saria had it wrong. Maybe it’s a bluff.”

Who knew if it convinced him? But he felt Sheik nod through their contact, Sheik’s body heat warming his freezing hand.

“You hand is ice,” Sheik accused, placing the blanket on Link’s lap. “I have no need for this. Warm up.”

Immediately, Link’s mind conjured up other ways to warm up but savagely pushed them aside before the images could fully render. No. He wrapped himself up in the wool blanket and sighed.

“What about you?” Sheik asked. “I know you were bullied by that Mido kid, but what was the Kokiri forest like? You seemed…at home there.”

Link found himself smiling despite the mention of Mido. “The forest…even if I wasn’t supposed to be there it was my home. There were plenty of good days, days that Mido left me alone and I spent all my time with Saria. She was a pillar for me. We spent most of our time in the Lost Woods. She taught me how to speak with the trees and the spirits there.”

“Your parents were killed in the last war…how did you end up in Kokiri?” Sheik probed, returning the favor of questions.

Link shrugged, beginning to feel marginally uncomfortable. He hated talking about his parents. He didn’t know why, but Link had always felt a disconnected resentment towards them. “My father was a soldier and my mother was fleeing the fights. She was mortally wounded and managed to make it to the forest, knowing I would be safe there if adopted by the Kokiri. The Great Deku Tree of the time sensed what was happening and sent Mido to retrieve me.”

“Do you remember any of it?” Sheik continued.
“No. I think I was just an infant. All I’ve ever known was my home in the forest. I was raised by the Elders until I was old enough to live alone. When I started growing taller than the others…I became an outcast despite the Great Deku Tree’s urging to accept me. Saria was the only one that truly listened and followed his decree. But she and I had always been close – she was the daughter of one of the Elders who raised me.”

“It’s incredible that you recovered the spiritual stones at only ten,” Sheik said. “I’m not sure if I could have accomplished that at ten – and I was trained in combat since seven. I doubt the Kokiri gave you any melee skills.”

“Well, in an indirect way they did. Mido and his little gang started fights with me all the time, so I learned a lot of hand-to-hand combat. Then, when they started going at me with Deku sticks, I had to keep up. My swordsmanship was crude, but effective, I suppose. And when Saria and I were old enough to go into the Lost Woods on our own, I would beat off any monsters that attacked. I suppose all of that prepared me for what was to come.” He paused, remembering the horror of Gohma, the severe burns from Dodongo’s Cavern, the electric beasts of Lord Jabu Jabu’s gut.

“The stones were almost more difficult than the temples,” he admitted. “I had nearly no stamina and everything was much too big for me. It took me almost a year to collect them. Navi was the only thing keeping me going once I left the trees. I grew up, like all Kokiri, believing there was nothing beyond the forests…the truth of Hyrule’s existence altered everything I believed.”

“You’ve met with a cruel fate…” Sheik muttered. Link thought it sounded like he was quoting something, but thought better not to ask. A moment passed and Sheik seemed to come out of deep thought. “I’m sorry that you were forced into battles that you weren’t ready for. I wish I could’ve guided you then as well.”

“I don’t think your eleven-year-old self would’ve been quite as good at memorizing poetry, though.” Link quipped. He still couldn’t relent on Sheik’s pre-written soliloquys Zelda had forced him into before they finally became comrades.

“My eleven-year-old self was a stubborn ass,” Sheik clarified. “I didn’t think very well of you when I was told of the prophecy.”

Link laughed quietly, still cautious of the black night. “I can’t say I’m surprised. Did you think I was going to be an air-headed, privileged soldier?”

“More-or-less,” Sheik admitted. “I was young. I had just lost everything. I was angry at everything. It completely consumed me for years. Impa, thankfully, had much patience. Zelda was the only one who could calm me down in those times. It angered me that you slept, completely spared from the horror of descent Hyrule was lost to.”

“I felt so guilty when I awoke,” Link recalled. “I felt that if the Goddesses had just kept me awake, I could’ve helped stop it. I thought if I could defeat those massive beasts of my youth, I would be able to stop Ganon.”

“There was no one to stop him, then. And the sword chooses the worth of the Hero. In a sense, you were not worthy enough to bear it. Also, nowhere near tall enough. Waking up twice as big was probably just as shocking as leaving the forest, if not more.”

“I probably would’ve completely lost it if you hadn’t shown up. I feel like I never say it enough,
but thank you for that. I know you were following orders…but you still could’ve said no.”

“No, I couldn’t have. I had a dream the night before you awoke…and that was the first time I saw you. Or the future of you, standing before Ganon with the Master Sword. I knew then you were not an air-headed, privileged soldier. I thought you were much like me, dragged into divine responsibility. So the task gave me direction in a hopeless time,” Sheik argued. “You helped me as much as I helped you, Link.”

Suddenly, in the height of the emotional admissions being passed around and the urgency of the location, Link couldn’t help but tell Sheik something he had planned on never telling him. It was embarrassing and sensitive and just too much. But then he also needed Sheik to know. Maybe it was just thanks for what he had been willing to share with Link. Maybe he worried that, if they didn’t make it out of the Nether, he would never be able to share it and it would go unsaid. Maybe…

“Zelda offered to send me back. After the war,” Link blurted out.

“Send you back?” Sheik asked, clearly caught off guard.

“Reset the timeline so the war would never happen. She said it was my choice. I could have my childhood back,” he went on, feeling a blush creep up his neck and thankful to the darkness hiding it.

“And you obviously said no…why?” Sheik asked incredulously.

“Because of…you.” He paused, letting the words hang in the air and almost afraid to say any more. But he had to; he couldn’t let that kind of admission just sit between them. “The friendship I had with you… I didn’t want to let that go. I didn’t want to forget you. Because I would’ve and who knew if I’d ever see you again. Would we remember each other? I just couldn’t let it happen. I didn’t want to forget everything.”

“You stayed here, enduring the memories of the war and helping rebuild, so we could still be friends?” Sheik summarized, sounding stunned.

“Well…yeah,” Link quickly tried to cover up his embarrassment with logic, feeling like a backtracking child caught in a lie. “And besides, what was I going back to? The ignorance of abusive Kokiri’s? I would’ve gotten my childhood back…but with that came an unknown future. I didn’t want to bear that again. At least I knew my future as an adult.”

“What were you hoping for in this future?” Sheik asked. And suddenly, his voice was different. Link had no idea what it was, but it was more open and vulnerable and real and eluding than he had ever heard it. It wasn’t a simple question; it was a very loaded one.

What was he hoping for? Link wasn’t sure yet.

And it didn’t even matter because everything came to a terrifying halt as a howl, blood-curdling and horrific, came to their ears. And it was close. Too close.

They both knew it.

Vog.
Laying out backstories. Creating the foundation for mush. You are very welcome. Now seriously – please strap in because the next chapter is gonna be a rollercoaster.

Thank you guys for reading Congruent and leaving such amazing reviews. Getting back into posting this daunting trash has been such a nice experience with all the amazing feedback I’ve been getting.

Side note, if you ever see any typos, mistakes, etc, please don’t hesitate to point them out – I miss things sometimes when editing.

I'm Sincosma on tumblr so pls come say hi. Next chapter coming soooooon.
Chapter 14

XIV.

In a quick flurry of motion, they strapped gear back in place and slung their packs over their shoulders. Twice did they bump into each other in the dark, quickly righting themselves and preparing to run for it. The Vog had surely smelled them judging by the closing proximity of its continuing howls.

As soon as they were oriented, Sheik lit the lowest flame he could and they quickly scaled the opposite side of the creek bed, away from their pursuer. Link managed a minute glance up and noted that the sky was lightening just barely, trying to find solace in that fact as they shot through the tightly knit trunks. It was horribly difficult given the severe lack of light and several times did they both slam hard against trees, knowing the bruises later would be ugly.

The Vog was still quick on their trail, its senses seemingly just as formidable as the texts in the castle’s library had warned. Link couldn’t confirm if it was gaining on them or not but, to his horror, a similar howl suddenly roared from the direction they were barreling in. It was still a ways off, but they skidded to a stop and swiveled to sprint to their left.

Vog, as Link’s mind recalled, were enormous canines with explosive fire they spit from their mouths not unlike dragons. And Link couldn’t get the concept out of his head as they wove desperately through the trees to outrun their now two assailants.

Then another beast seemed to join the hunting party, its yap sounding diagonally behind them, much closer than the others. Link could hear them panting wildly, grunting furiously with each stride.

The sky was now light enough he could make out shapes; when he glanced back, he could see the movement of the closest Vog, more enormous and hulking than Link could’ve imagined.

“They’re gaining,” Link shouted to Sheik who was one stride ahead so they could thread between trees. Then, with a roar and a flash of light, a fire ball was catapulted towards them, colliding with a trunk to the left and throwing sparks and flames at their faces.

“We can’t…outrun them. We may have to…turn and fight,” Sheik yelled back breathlessly.

“Let’s at least…try to find a clearing…or keep running until…it lightens more…” Link panted back, leaping over a root he saw at only the last moment. “Won’t be…much of a fight…in the trees!”

“Agreed!”

So they pushed their speed even more, risking a fall to stay ahead of the approaching Vog and the whizzing balls of fire that came in quick, uneven intervals. The monsters had all convened into one pack and there was no telling how many there were with the cacophony of explosions and barks and yelps sounding behind them. Link stole a look backwards and saw black shapes following a good distance behind them…though not far back enough as another blast hit an adjacent tree and spit flaming debris on his exposed fingers. Link bat the fire out and growled at the new burns on his sword hand – at least the whipping icy air numbed the pain.

Everything was a rush of wind past his ears, halfway deafening him unless he angled his head just right. The sky was now light enough Sheik could extinguish the flame, pale gray light reaching
through the canopy and casting odd shadows. Link looked back again and saw the Vog suddenly twice as close. He could now make out finer details and wished dearly that he couldn’t.

They look half-decayed, black fur matted and falling off in patches. Their eyes were gaping holes in their heads, somehow still able to see. Or perhaps their sense of smell somehow made up for the lack of eyes.

“There’s a clearing ahead. How…many?” Sheik huffed out. They had been running for long enough to ebb at both of their stamina. Adrenaline was now the only thing keeping their legs pumping.

Link looked back yet again and counted four. Maybe. He relayed this information to his companion.

“We’ll do what we can!” was the reply he received.

Which meant We’ll improvise. For such a control freak, Sheik really did like improvising. Link let out a groan – well, at least their trip to the Nether wasn’t boring. Zelda always liked a good story.

They reached the clearing a moment later and both skidded around, drawing their weapons and slamming behind two trees that lined the open space. They had used this trick before on a pack of Wolfos; hopefully the Vog were just as unintelligent.

Link and Sheik locked eyes, ready to take cue at any moment as the yaps and snorts of the Vog drew ever nearer. The anticipation was agony as a new wave of adrenaline made Link’s body vibrate with apprehension.

Then, in a wild storm of putrid stink and hot, stifling breath, the Vog broke into the clearing. Link and Sheik leapt on separate beasts in tandem, earning sharp yelps from their enemies. The Moon Blade sliced cleanly through the middle of Link’s prey with a surprising lack of resistance. For such ferocious beasts their rotting skin seemed rather vulnerable. Sheik also brought his mark down as three others (he had, unfortunately, miscounted) whirled around at the sounds of their dying comrades.

“I’ve got the two on the left.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Link barked back, charging the two on the right, fighting for claim on the middle one.

The beasts leapt into motion, all yellow teeth and flaming breath. Link’s sword managed to go halfway through the center Vog’s head, earning his victory against Sheik who gave a grunt of disapproval. But it gave the Vog at his far right the opportunity to swipe at him, clipping his right side and re-opening his wound from the previous day.

Yanking his sword out of the middle Vog now howling and twitching in agony, Link spun around to fell the other only to find himself knocked flat on his back, a harsh paw slamming into his chest. As his head snapped dizzyingly against the earth and the Moon Blade bounced from his grasp, he saw Sheik was being roughly pinned against a tree by the other Vog.

There was a long moment of heaving breath as Link prepared for teeth at his throat or the claws to dig deeper into his flesh. But nothing happened – what were these creatures waiting for?

“Living things. Va, living things is here! What as we do?” the Vog pining him to the ground growled. Link blinked at the familiarity of the speech. The Void Walker hadn’t really spoken; the words had been more like thoughts than speech. But these creature were speaking Hylian, albeit an
incredibly broken and confusing version of it.

The one holding Sheik, Va, replied, “Oh yes, Ko, we hasn’t had a living things in never.”

“Do we as take they to King?” Ko asked, ash-black slobber dropping on Link’s shoulder with a slap.

“Ko, listen to me,” Link called out impulsively. The Vog sounded stupid enough to be lied to, so he would try it considering they hadn’t been devoured quite yet and a prisoner arrangement that was now being discussed.

“Thing is as talking at me, Vo. Should I speak it?”

“We should eat they. No one know. Gree, Li, Dom is as death.”

Link growled under his breath. “Ko! I can tell you where to find a whole pack of living things!”

It was a flat out, groundless bluff and Sheik shot him a look. Link was pulling this lie out of thin air, but Sheik’s hand was already working very slowly to a concealed dagger at his thigh. If Link could distract them enough with his lies Sheik might have his chance to kill Vo. The action might pull Ko away from Link long enough to strike.

“Not believed. They prove!” Ko snarled, more weight crunching into Link’s chest.

“I’ll take you there,” Link struggled to say.

“Why they want to have friends eat?” Vo demanded.

“We hate them. We need them gone. You help us, we help you,” Sheik supplied, sneaking easily into the rouse with a convincing voice that always impressed Link.

Ko let out a sharp bark. “We trusts they?”

“Not know,” Vo whined.

“But more living…we as bring to King. If he happy then won’t hurt we for Gree, Li, Dom,” Ko insisted, his mouth watering even more on Link.

“Take they stick,” Vo suggested, using his other paw to rip away the dagger strapped to Sheik’s leg. Link couldn’t imagine how Vo managed to spot the weapon, but nonetheless the knife was flung a few feet away, leaving nasty gashes in Sheik’s flesh.

Ko let out a bark-like laugh and snatched the Moon Blade from the dirt with its rancid mouth, swallowing it whole. Well, that put a dent in his plan. Sheik gave him a dark glare that plainly said, What now, genius?

“Okay, thing. If you as betray, our King will eat. No forget,” Ko warned.

The threat meant nothing – their “King” would hunt them down regardless, what with their fallen pack members and scent covering the clearing. They would deal with it later; there was no time now to be fussing with overgrown mutts. Sheik was clearly following his lead, the only thing left in Link’s arsenal was magic.

And at least he was good at one spell.

Link channeled the necessary energy into his hands, preparing for Din’s fire, one of the first truly
powerful spells he had ever learned. He knew it would deplete his Mana considerably, but he needed something strong enough to get free and burn Ko open to retrieve his sword. And it would create enough of a distraction for Sheik, whose eyes widened in realization of Link’s plan.

As Ko began to remove his paw, Vo howled, “No!” recognizing Link’s deceit by the glow of his palms.

Link angled his palms to his Vog’s stomach and let the power loose just as Ko reared back with a terrified yelp. The fiery blast knocked Ko backwards across the clearing and its body exploded, the magic clearly igniting something in the creature. Link shielded his face as flaming bits of bone, like shrapnel, shot at him in a flurry. He knew he wasn’t spared from further injury, but his mind went numb from the blast and he couldn’t focus over the ringing in his ears.

For a few long seconds, he was completely blind and deaf from the force. His ears, possibly ruptured, throbbed horribly and vertigo kept him from reorienting.

It took an indeterminable amount of time, but eventually the world came back to him and Link forced himself to focus on what was left of Ko – which was basically nothing. It was just a mass of ash, flakes of flesh and fur, and splintered trees and leaves.

Relieved to see the Vog destroyed and surprised their weakness could be fire, he struggled to his feet and furiously tried to find Sheik and Vo through the haze in the air. He tried to step forward and found his leg was barely cooperating. Something was definitely wrong with it. But Link had a dreadful feeling in his gut that something else was even more wrong as he limped forward, batting debris out of the air.

Sheik had only been a short distance away, but with the debris cloud obscuring his view, his stomach sank at the horrible thought that Vo had exploded as well while pinning Sheik against the roots of the tree. But no, that couldn’t happen.

“Sheik!” he shouted, voice unrecognizable even to himself. Link’s throat was clogged with ash and he gagged violently to dislodge it, nearly tripping over an uneven part of earth. His movement was slow, but soon he was able to make out shapes, then details.

The first thing he saw was Vo, lying bloody and still just a few steps from the tree. Link’s eyes snapped back to the tree, blinking furiously against the fallout blurring his vision. Sheik was crouched there holding his knife and clutching his middle, a puddle of red forming around his feet.

“Sheik!” Link cried, voice so hoarse it didn’t even sound like a name anymore. He tried to run despite his useless leg, the pain lost to him now. Link reached his companion as gravity seemed to win and push Sheik back to the ground.

“Sheik,” Link repeated, catching his friend’s shoulder and propping him against the tree trunk. “Sheik, look at me.”

He pushed the Sheikah’s hair out of his face, seeing red eyes wide and panicked as his body entered shock. Link slid his gaze down to the wound, barely taking it in but knowing it was bad. So bad. “Talk to me, Sheik.”

“I…I’m here,” he said vaguely. His shoulders were starting to quake. “Get your sword, Link.”

“Forget the sword. We have to get out of here. The explosion will attract who-knows-what.”

“I’ll hold…the tree. Get…your sword,” Sheik pressed, voice thin but still demanding.
“I said forget the-!”

“Get the Goddess-damned sword, Link!” Sheik shouted, voice sounding unhinged. The blasphemy was shocking but Sheik wouldn’t use such language if he wasn’t desperate. And he was right—leaving the sword would be a fatal mistake.

Link cursed roughly under his breath and pushed Sheik firmly against the tree. “If you die I will kill you,” he snapped, then tried his best to run back despite his disablement. Rummaging through the crumbling remains of the Vog was a struggle, causing him to fall twice. Each time he landed on his bad leg and caused the piercing agony of it to finally push through his muddled mind.

But then, covered in gore and ash, he found the Moon Blade, glinting dully at him in the half light. He sheathed it quickly and raced—limped, really—back to Sheik. His friend had slid down the tree now, breathing frantically and gripping his middle with shaking fingers.

Shock was setting in. Shock would lead to death. Death would…

“Sheik, get up,” Link ordered, reaching down and dragging his companion to his feet with all the strength he had. “We have to move now.”

But Sheik was past words, the wound appearing mortal and leeching away his life. If they didn’t find safety and get potion in him soon…

Then, to his horror, Link heard sounds in the distance. Vog or other, he had no idea, but they had to move or they were dead.

Link pushed the thought away in panic. With a loud grunt, he grabbed the Sheikah around his ruined middle and hoisted the man over his shoulder. And it was difficult because Sheik was not light. He was the same height as Link and nearly just as heavy, all solidly-packed muscle and long limbs.

Sheik let out a terrible sound as his wounded middle pressed into Link’s shoulder. But it was keeping the warrior together and adding pressure to the wound. The shrieks and howls filled the sick air and with a kick of adrenaline, Link struggled onward through the trees, leaving the battle grounds behind him.

It wasn’t until he was a few minutes from the site, did he realize how starved of oxygen he had been as freezing, clean air hit his lungs. The feeling rejuvenated him, allowing him to focus more intently on moving faster and blocking out the pain of his leg. Link only prayed that whatever damage was there, he could make the limb last until they reached safety.

The ruckus behind him began to die as he gained ground, putting hopefully at least half a league between them and the clearing. Once he felt far enough away, Link struggled into his bag with his free hand to pull out a vial of strong spice he and Sheik had commonly used during the war to throw off their scent. It was a Sheikah technique that had saved their lives dozens of times and he emptied it behind him in a trickle for a few strides, tossing it to the right as he continued on.

All the while, he tried to keep Sheik talking. The pressure against the gore had stopped a little of the bleeding, allowing Sheik to find some semblance of consciousness though he muttered his replies to Link in Sheikah. The language gap didn’t matter, however: Sheik was alive and he was speaking. Link could only hang onto that hope as he jogged at an uneven gait through the tight trees.

Eventually, they were going to have to stop, whether they found a shelter or not. Sheik wouldn’t
last too much longer without potion, but they wouldn’t last at all if something was tailing them. His gaze shot behind them every few strides, confirming there was nothing to be seen now in the fully lit forest.

Soon enough, the terrain became steep, rising up sharply and dropping so dramatically Link nearly lost his footing more times than he cared to admit. Where ever they were, the landscape was beginning to elude to mountains much like it had done the previous day when Link had been wandering alone. Perhaps he would find a cave or another embankment to take refuge in.

“L-Link,” Sheik moaned, his voice jolted violently via the unsteady stride of Link’s run.

“Sheik, we’re almost there. Just hold on, okay?” Link begged, voice breathless and weak to his own ears.

“Leave me. I’m…slowing you do-own,” he insisted.

“Sheik, don’t talk…unless you have something…constructive to say,” Link snapped. “Just keep an eye behind us.”

“Don’t be stu-bborn,” Sheik groaned.

“You know, on second thought…keep arguing with me. As long as…you’re talking,” he said irritably, barely making it down another steep grade.

Sheik snarled something in his native tongue as Link hit a rough step, jarring his wound even more. Link knew he needed to find shelter now. His side was soaked in blood and Sheik’s body was going dangerously cold.

And then, Goddesses be blessed, he saw it. Obscured by a large trunk, he nearly missed a very shallow cave to his right. In a split-second decision, Link sprinted for it, nearly slamming into the trunk that shielded the entrance and ducking into safety.

Thin roots like cobwebs hung from the earthen ceiling, the alcove only big enough to squeeze them both in with only a foot of space to spare. The hide only reached ten feet back, but it was good enough. He laid Sheik back against the wall, tugging one more vial of spice out of his pack, ripping out the stopper and chucking it into far outside the cave. Just for good measure.

When he turned back to Sheik, the crouch he sat in making his leg feel on the verge of breaking in half, the wind left him – Sheik looked dead already.

“Sheik,” Link hissed, crawling back to his companion and shaking his shoulders violently. “Stay. With. Me.”

Sheik mumbled something in Sheikah, letting a Hylian word slip out suddenly that Link heard as fate. Link didn’t want to consider what his companion was saying, refused to entertain the possibility it some sort of goodbye. Because Sheik had once recited for him a traditional rite of passage into the afterlife and what was said now sounded suspiciously like just that. And Link wasn’t going to accept it.

Just because Sheik was giving up didn’t mean Link was going to.

“Shut up, Sheik,” Link growled, rummaging viciously through his pack for as many vials of red potion he could find. His hands shook violently, making him drop several in the process. “Tell me about Kalyh. What did she look like?”
Sheik’s eyes stared at him, the red hue hazy and weeping from the trauma. “She was…beautiful. Her hair was white…white is rare. Her beauty has…only ever been rivaled by…”

Link managed to yank the cork out of the first vial despite his blood-slicked hands and yanked down the cowl, guiding the liquid into his mouth. Sheik protested, his body trying to throw the liquid back out; it was clear his stomach had been damaged. But Link plugged his nose and massaged his throat, forcing the liquid down.

“C’mon, Sheik, drink,” Link demanded in a shaking voice. “Drink!”

Red eyes rolled up, the lids falling shut as the Sheikah’s body tremored. Blood continued to drip from the wound Link couldn’t bring himself to take in; the gore might send him over the edge of panic.

But the barest hint of hysteria was already blending into his thought-stream. Sheik couldn’t die. Not here. Not now. Not this. No. No. No.

“Don’t,” Sheik cried, voice so broken it shook Link to his core. “Don’t waste…”

“Shut up!” Link nearly shouted, only barely remembering they were hiding as he forced Sheik’s mouth open for the next dose. “I’m not letting you die. You can’t die. I’m not wasting anything.”

Sheik tried to speak again but his mouth was flooded with more potion, causing him to cough and spasm. Link held him down, praying to any Goddess listening that the mixture would save him. Potion was powerful and had brought Link back from death so many times. But if Sheik was too far gone…

He needed to know.

Link pulled off what was left of Sheik’s armor and tunic off as his friend sputtered and shook, revealing the true extent of the wound.

It took everything in his power to not be sick.

It was clear now that Vo had bit into Sheik’s abdomen, pulling off his flesh and possibly rupturing organs. If Sheik’s muscles had not been left mostly intact, he would’ve been disemboweled. There was almost no way to differentiate between anything in the mess. He ripped thick gauze out of his pack, barely able to hold it with his trembling fingers, and pressed it against the wound which was slowly stitching back together in vain.

The potion would not be able to fix this in time. He had stopped their flight too late.

If only he hadn’t been so incompetent and allowed himself to be pinned down by a Vog, if only he had found some other way out of their capture, if only he had stopped sooner, if only…

“I’m glad…you stayed with me,” Sheik said weakly, drawing Link’s attention away from the blood and back to his unfocused, maroon eyes. It was like Sheik couldn’t see him anymore. Link felt his blood rush through his system, causing a roar in his ears.

No. Sheik was saying goodbye. This wasn’t happening.

Emotion started creeping up in throat as he grabbed Sheik’s shoulders, gripping them tightly and shaking his head. “No. Stop. Sheik. You’re not going anywhere. You’re not allowed to be sentimental with me.”
“I’m serious, Link.” Sheik sobbed out the words, hands gripping weakly at Link’s forearms. “When you told me…when you said you stayed…”

He was fighting the darkness now. He was truly fighting to stay alive so his words could heard, his skin pale and sweaty and chest heaving. Link held Sheik’s shoulders impossibly tighter.


“You stayed for me…” Sheik went on, face crumpling in pain and sadness. “I didn’t realize…you cared enough…to abandon your…”

“Stop, Sheik, stop.” Link demanded, voice coming out like a broken sob. Tears were obscuring everything now, Link completely helpless in the face of Sheik’s struggle for life.

“I would’ve…stayed for you, too,” Sheik insisted, fingers gripping desperately tighter. “I’m glad you’re…here.”

“Sheik don’t you dare leave me. You’re not supposed to die. You can’t leave me here,” Link yelled, no longer able to care about their location or how every other word broke in the air.

Terror flooded every part of him and his shook his friend’s arms, unable to believe this could be the end. Sheik had become everything to him, without even recognizing it. Everyone else dulled in comparison. No one held him together after the war like Sheik. No one held him together anymore like Sheik.

“I don’t…want to…you moron.” And Sheik laughed, forcing blood from his mouth – or maybe potion – in a sick trail Link couldn’t help but wipe away, like a worried mother, like it would help. “I don’t want to…leave you.”

“Then don’t,” Link begged. “Fight it. Fight it, please. Let the potion-”

“The potion…won’t work. We both…know it.”

“Yes it will.”

No, it wouldn’t. He knew that. And it was his fault, his fault for not stopping sooner, for not acting quickly enough.

Sheik shook his head, coughing again with a wet, sick sound. “I wish…I would’ve told you before, Link. I waited…too long.”

Link shook his head vigorously, another half-sob erupting from his lips. He didn’t even know what Sheik was talking about and he was caught viciously between wanting desperately to know and wanting desperately to never know. Because he just knew it would break him. “Sheik-”

“I meant to-”

“No,” Link cut him off, voice quick and pleading and desperate. “Don’t tell me anything right now. You can tell me once you’re healed. You can tell me tomorrow, Sheik. I’ll listen to anything you have to say tomorrow. And I’ll give you hell for drinking all the potion, too”

Sheik laughed again, and in one serene moment, Link realized he was staring at Sheik’s entire face. And he was every bit as beautiful as Link would’ve imagined. Three bright red, perfect scars, shaped like teeth stretched from a full bottom lip to the tip of a strong chin. He was smiling, mid-laugh, staring sightlessly at the entrance of the cave. The gray light of the Nether lit up his dark red
eyes and Link couldn’t help but reach out and hold Sheik’s face, bloody fingers cupping sharp, strong jawlines. Like he could hold Sheik there, keep him there, tether him in the world of the living.

But the Nether wasn’t a place of life and Link could feel his friend slipping through his grasp.

“Tell me tomorrow, Sheik. Promise me you’ll tell me tomorrow,” Link begged in a whisper, unable to find his voice any longer. He could feel his face twisting, giving way to the destruction Sheik’s death would assuredly cause.

“Don’t…don’t forget…remember…don’t give up, Link,” Sheik whispered back, his own hands reaching out desperately to press his bloody fingers to Link’s cheeks. He kept coughing, blood interfering with his lungs as he fought to summon the air for his last words. “Link, stay alive. For Zelda…f-for Hyrule. For me. You have to know…you know you were my-”

But the words died in his throat as his out-stretched hand shook and fell to Link’s lap, gripping his leg. There was one more cough, one more shudder, one more squeeze of long, bandaged fingers around Link’s left arm, one last broken look from wet crimson eyes…

And that was it.

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If you wanna really fuck yourself up, now listen to “Murder Song” by Aurora (acoustic ver) like I did while editing this. PM me for my home address so you can come punch me in the face.
Chapter 15

XV.

They had brought shovels. They were short and fit well in their packs. The handles were worn and stained a ruddy color from years of use in tired hands. The blades wore metallic marks of all sizes and shapes, every encounter with rock or root clearly recorded on faded metal.

Link pulled his shovel from his pack and shoved it into the hard, crisp earth outside their cave. He couldn’t sense a thing below him, but he whispered prayers to the Goddesses – if they could even hear him or even cared – as he ripped up the soil.

Find the Vaspra, bring him back. Find the Vaspra, bring him back.

It was an impossibility but he wouldn’t listen to any of the voices speaking reason in his mind. And when the hole he made was so deep he could no longer dump out new dirt, Link climbed to the surface and found another spot to continue his quest.

He dug hole after hole, making the surrounding terrain look like the aftermath of a war. The cold couldn’t touch him as he sweat out for hours. Link worked the entire day, unable to think of anything else but those last words, the combination of letters that wouldn’t let go of him no matter how deep into the earth he went.

I wish I would’ve told you…

I don’t want to leave you.

I’m glad you stayed with me.

When you told me…when you said you stayed…

You were my…

Link couldn’t bear it. He couldn’t bear the way Sheik had said his name on the cusp of oblivion. He couldn’t bear Sheik’s last broken sentence. He couldn’t bear the way Sheik had grabbed his arms so desperately. He couldn’t bear the body in the cave. He couldn’t bear the healed skin of Sheik’s mortal wound, just minutes too late. He couldn’t bear Sheik’s open red eyes. He couldn’t bear the chill of Sheik’s skin and the loll of his head.

If he could find Vaspra…

If he ripped apart the earth...

If he…

Darkness fell and Link continued to dig. Even when the blackness blinded him completely, he continued to dig. The shovel crunched into soil and rang solemnly when it collided with rock. The wind was cold and as night fell, the chill finally sank into his joints. Link had brought no supplies with him, walking far from the cave after covering the entrance with dirt to protect Sheik’s lifeless
It wasn’t until his legs gave out did Link realize he had never bothered to check his wounds, never ate, and never drank.

Maybe he would die.

Link didn’t want to die…but then maybe death wasn’t so bad. Sheik had done it. Link could just follow Sheik’s lead, like he always had.

No. He had to save Hyrule.

But it was dark and it was cold and Sheik was dead. And he could not bear it.

The hole was only his height deep. He fell back, lying against the dirt and felt down at his leg. A chunk was gone from his thigh and shrapnel stuck out of his flesh and clothing like teeth. And they were teeth – Vog teeth – and shards of wood.

And he couldn’t care.

Link fell asleep in the ground, dreamless but restless. When he woke in the morning, the sky was gray and blank, as it was to be in the Nether. He should’ve been thankful nothing had found him through the course of the night but he felt nothing of the sort.

It took a long time for him to rise and climb from the hole. His leg was beginning to smell like rot and Link knew if he was to continue on, he would have to finally tend to his wounds.

For a few scary minutes, he couldn’t recall the way back to the cave, but he found it eventually. Link should’ve walked with his dagger out, but he couldn’t care. The forest was silent and empty, the wind barely whistling over his head. He wished he could go back to day one in the Nether, walking aimlessly to find Sheik.

Because that would mean Sheik was alive.

Link pretended he had just landed in the Nether, pretended his sword and his pack were over his shoulder, pretended he was cautiously travelling between the tree trunks, trying to sense Sheik. But there was nothing to sense, even after two days in the garbage pit of the universe, there nothing but a void.

He felt angry.

Yesterday, he felt angry at himself. Today, he was angry at the Goddesses.

The infernal Goddesses that took his childhood, took his innocence, took his sanity, took his best friend, and took his future. He had prayed to them so feverishly while Sheik died before him, begging them to save him.

After taking so much away, they couldn’t give him this.

At this thought, Link started kicking at trees, throwing wild punches at gray trunks, screaming out curses as the anger swelled so deeply he feared he might explode like Ko. He screamed at the Goddesses, he cursed Ko and Vo and all the other Vog he had already forgotten the names of. He
cursed Zelda. He cursed Evanna. He cursed Foursky. He cursed the Nether. He cursed the living world. He cursed everything he could think of.

And, halfway back, Link finally attracted something with his bellows; a towering Balta crept from behind a tree, the blood and muck skin only incensing Link further. Its high-pitched wails fell upon deaf ears – Link was numb and beyond shock or surprise. He ripped his dagger from his boot and leapt at it with a ringing cry, yelling nonsensical curses as he hacked through the Balta’s reaching arms.

It had no eyes, no face; only glinting talons attached to fingers that now twitched alone on the ground, as though trying to reconnect with their lost owner. But he didn’t finish there. Even as the Balta began to retreat, letting out an equally high whine, Link advanced, still cleaving away at whatever he could reach. His mind went blank with heated rage and he was only aware of how far he had gone when there was nothing left standing to attack.

And Link stared at the messy remains of the creature, not sure what else to do, too lost to make sense of anything.

What was he doing…?

A pressure built in his chest and he remembered he had been heading back to the cave. Back to Sheik. Back to…nothing. The emptiness rang in him so deeply he nearly collapsed.

No. No, he couldn’t.

You were my…

Link wiped his blade off on his already blood-stained pants – Sheik’s blood – and limped onward, cold numbing his leg. As he walked, his side started to sting, a feeling he had been only vaguely aware of the previous day.

That’s right. Ko had ripped open what had been left of the wound from the Void Walker. It was probably superficial, but it was another chance for infection, just like the path he was sure his leg was well on. He glanced down at his hands, taking in how deeply the blood had stained his flesh, the burn from the Vog chase yesterday still raw and blistering along his left knuckles and fingers.

Link was a mess.

It reminded him of the war.

And that was all it took to bring him down.

Images flashed through his mind of the Fire Temple, being burned alive by Volvagia, the agony blinding him. The memory flushed panic into his mind, like it always used to do. He had spent so much time after the battle with Ganon suffering from his own past and the horrible things he had been subjected to for the Goddesses. Sheik had dealt with the same attacks, too. They both carried wounds in their minds that would never seem to heal. But in the past year and a half, Sheik had shown Link how to control them, ease them.

And now Sheik wasn’t there to help him.

Fresh from the war, the months after were hellish. Never had Link felt so mentally unhinged. His
violent episodes had kept him from making any public appearances. The flashbacks kept him from even looking at a sword for two months. Despite it all, Sheik had stayed near him. Zelda, while she didn’t know the same nightmares, stayed with him as well and always offered calming magic when the panic was so intense Link couldn’t breathe.

They supported him, comforted him, distracted him, loved him…

Link’s back collided with a tree, his equilibrium too disrupted to go on, and dug his nails into the trunk. He remembered how the attacks crushed him and took away his breath. He couldn’t remember what normal felt like, maybe had never even known it in the first place. He couldn’t remember a dream that never referenced the war. He was littered with scars that shone like silver runes and it seemed no magic could remove them all. He would never be whole again, especially now. It was like suffocating.

Without Sheik, he would suffocate.

He was suffocating.

He couldn’t breathe.

His chest was collapsing.

His heart would burst from the strain.

He would die.

He would die alone in the Nether and Hyrule would crumble under the whims of a mad Gerudo.

Again.

Like sleeping for seven years, Hyrule would have no savior and descend into ruin.

But Link would never awaken to save them because he would be dead.

His gasping dried his throat, forcing him to cough for air. His legs wobbled and failed. Link slammed his head backwards, against the tree trunk, as though he were trying to knock himself out. And maybe he should. If he could just not be awake…

Link knew what a panic attack was. He knew it was happening, somewhere in the tempest of his mind. And he wanted out. Maybe he wanted death. Or maybe he just wanted nothing. Quiet, darkness, nothing. Anything to flee what was happening in his skull.

Put those fears to bed. We don’t have time for them.

Sheik’s voice drifted through his mind, hypnotizing him and demanding his eyes open and search for his friend. But he was alone in the woods of the Nether and he was panicking against a tree like a lost child, like he was back in Kokiri Forest. He was not suffocating and Sheik was dead.

Sheik was dead.

But his words were still alive somehow in all of that panic.
Put those fears to bed. We don’t have time for them.

Link closed his eyes and reached back to the night they searched for the Eastern Kingdoms in dusty tomes. It had been their last night of true comfort before everything was set into motion. It felt like years ago.

All of the small thoughts that had wandered into his mind over the past two years seemed to coalesce before him – every heavy gaze, their constant company from breakfast to dinner, their squabbles and admissions, every purposeful touch. How had Link ever denied those things attention? How had he convinced himself to ignore the things he felt, as confusing as they were, when death was always such a possible future for them?

“Sheik,” he whispered. “I let you die and I can’t…do this without you.”

And then he just broke.

Link hadn’t truly cried since the end of the war, tears of relief filling him as he and Zelda stared at the falling debris of the collapsed castle. She had hugged him and he had apologized for destroying her castle. And she had laughed and cried and chastised Link, insisting it wasn’t her castle at all but she would rebuild it as theirs.

Rebuild the castle. Rebuild the relics and the books and the beds and the tapestries. Rebuild the kingdom. Rebuild everything.

But Zelda could not rebuild Sheik.

So he wept.

Even if he found Vaspra, Link wouldn’t be able to bring Sheik back from death and he had known it since he started digging. Even if he knew the spell, it would never work. Once the spirit left, there was nothing to be done.

Sheik was gone.

Permanently.

Forever.

Even Foursky would be unable to do it, even with all the Vaspra in the Nether. Even Ganon. There were some rules in magic and life that were absolute and unbreakable. Link didn't know of anything short of a Goddess could reverse Sheik’s death.

If only Link had stopped running sooner…

He knew not how long he sobbed but he did until his eyes ran dry and he was left with nothing but a deep, vacant feeling in his chest. The skin of his face felt dry and tight and chapped in the cold wind spreading through the somber forest.

Put those fears to bed. We don’t have time for them.

“Link, breathe,” Sheik insisted calmly, warm hands on his shoulders. Shaking shoulders. Link felt like a failure. Like a child. “It’s not real. It’s just a memory.”
They were in Kakariko, taking refuge in Impa’s old home. They all were in Kakariko; it was a place of refugees. The castle – and the kingdom – was being rebuilt and Zelda was away. She had so many things to do, needed so much help, but Link could hardly leave the house without running back to hide before anyone saw him come apart.

This time a child had fallen in the well and, too young to swim, splashed and cried frantically in the water. Link had pulled her out but then gave all his sanity to the black waters.

He was bombarded by memories of the past, of the descent into the well as a boy, of the monsters that chased him, of the terror he endured.

Sheik had dragged him back to Impa’s house and forced him to sit in a chair by the window.

“You’re going to pass out if you don’t breathe, Link,” Sheik said a little louder this time, gripping Link’s shoulders hard enough to ache. But it was the pain that brought him back from the hallucinations and the panic.

“I can’t… I can’t keep doing this,” Link whispered, covering his face with his hands and taking a shuddering, deep breath. Reality slowly re-centered itself in his mind and he sat heavily into the chair. “I can’t keep falling apart. I’m a coward-”

“You are a survivor,” Sheik corrected, cutting him off, letting go of his shoulders and dragging another chair to sit directly in front of Link. “You are a veteran of war. You’ve seen horrors even I haven’t seen.”

“It excuses noth-”

“Everything. It excuses everything,” Sheik pressed, interrupting him once more. “Being a survivor of horror and death does not make you a coward or a failure or a burden or whatever else you’ve convinced yourself of. You’ve been tossed here as a child and forced to carry the weight of a kingdom. You must allow yourself to fall apart because it’s the only way to heal and rebuild.”

Link balanced his elbows on his knees, still unable to pull his palms from his face; he couldn’t allow Sheik witness to The Hero of Time reduced to a child. Though he didn’t feel ten anymore, he certainly didn’t feel seventeen. And he didn’t feel like the Hero of Time, either. The end of the war marked the end of his resolve and that wasn’t something he was prepared to show anyone.

But Sheik knew. “Look at me.”

Link didn’t, eyes firmly closed against his sweaty palms.

“Look at me,” Sheik demanded, raising his voice like he rarely did.

So Link looked at him, surrendering himself to velvet-red eyes, shocked by the intensity and the emotion in them. Sheik reached down and gripped Link’s hand, tight enough to hurt. But Link’s hands were so calloused and had endured far worse so the sensation grounded him more than words ever could.

“Fall apart. Break. Cry. Scream. I don’t care, Link,” Sheik told him, voice so low and passionate, Link felt he could never look away from that gaze, even if ordered to at sword-point. “But don’t you ever give up. I will always be here. And even if I’m ever not… don’t you dare disgrace my
(memory by giving up. Fight the memories. Fight the pain. Fight everything.”

And Link nodded because the words were like magic. The words were sanctuary. They were the antidote to memory’s poison and the anchor to shaken but hopeful reality. Sheik knew what to say to hold him together. And part of Link thought maybe it held Sheik together, too. Because after that day neither of them ever had an attack again.

And that was the day, Link was sure, that began everything.

They watched each other’s backs, fending off the demons, real or just remembered. Sheik helped him feel eighteen, then nineteen, then twenty, even despite the missing seven years.

*I will always be here. And even if I’m ever not…don’t you dare disgrace my memory by giving up.*

Sheik was gone.

And now Link understood what Sheik had *truly* meant to him, what he had conveniently refused to accept and admit. It wasn’t confused, adolescent, and fleeting. The feeling had been stacked piece by piece, built over years and rooted in the soil of his mind. Like it had always been there – perhaps that’s why he hadn’t noticed it.

Sheik had saved him. Sheik had been there. But…

*I’m ever not…don’t you dare disgrace my memory by giving up.*

So Link got up.

--

He dug open the entrance to the cave and crawled in. Link built the dirt back up, only leaving a small space for air, and paused so his limbs could thaw out in the small bit of warmth left in the space. Laying a blanket quickly over Sheik’s face, he started the smallest of fires and convinced himself he was alone in the makeshift cave. It was cramped, but Link managed to shed his armor and clothes, taking an assessment of his wounds and grimacing.

His side – four large slices about an inch deep each – was adopting a green pus amidst the glittering raw wounds. The half-scar-half-scab from the Void Walker’s impalement adjacent to the cuts was a warped circle now and half torn from its healing process. The burn on his hand had blistered now, the bright-red flesh bubbling thickly off his knuckles. The potion would drain the wounds for him, but the smell would be sickening. Then, finally, he studied his leg.

He wanted to be sick.

From knee to hip, his skin was destroyed. His pant leg had been shredded and his boot scorched well beyond repair so the wounds didn’t surprise him. In the process of his activities, much of the surface shrapnel had fallen out leaving behind open holes now filled with green and black rot. The lower part of his leg was undoubtedly infected. Not completely – some of the wounds higher on his thigh were leaking fresh, crimson blood – but he needed potion soon before the rot headed north and infected his blood.

And Link was truly surprised it hadn’t already.
Two vials of potion later (more than he wanted to use, but he worried for his leg), the wounds were stitching closed, the shrapnel pushing itself out of his skin in a rainbow of colored liquids, and he felt as numb as he had ever wished to feel. As the magic sank in, he cleaned his weapons thoroughly, doing everything he could to disregard the blanketed shape next to him.

When a frightening dizziness reached him, even despite the sleepy quality of the potion, Link realized he hadn’t eaten or drank in two days nor did he feel the desire to.

*Don’t you dare disgrace my memory by giving up.*

Link fished out the salted meat and held it over the flames with his newly polished sword. He drank his entire canteen despite the paranoid voice that warned him of conserving water; he knew dehydration had contributed to his earlier madness. There were now two extra canteens to his water supply – four in total – and he couldn’t accept that this development was fortuitous for many reasons.

Those two extra canteens were Sheik’s. And even with the new addition to his supplies there was no telling that it would make any difference if Link couldn’t locate a vein of Vaspra.

He dared not cook the meat for too long lest he attract something, so the fire was stamped out and the smoke lingered in a lazy cloud about the little cave. He forced himself through two bites and then, despite his grief, his body demanded more. Link ripped it apart like an animal, warmth returning to his freezing limbs and filling up his empty body.

When it was gone, Link glanced down his leg and saw the last of the infected pus being emptied out in sick streams down his calf. As soon as he finished eating, his hand began to drain was well. His entire body was leaking fluids and he almost didn’t keep his food down at the sight of it.

But at least Link was healing and – for once – he couldn’t feel the pain.

He lay back against the damp wall of the cave and closed his eyes. Somewhere within himself he found a tentative calm; his body was regenerating, his stomach full of food and water, limbs warmed by the fire, and paranoia somewhat quelled by his hiding place. Beetles crawled here and there around him, clawing quietly through caked dirt. Link’s mind was buzzing pleasantly from the potion and he tried to pretend Sheik was just sitting quietly next to him.

Nothing in the cave smelled of rot aside from his leg, which was improving. Sheik’s body, from what he saw briefly, didn’t appear to be decomposing. But Link wasn’t ready to check for sure. He wasn’t ready to see it happen. He wasn’t willing to accept it could already be happening.

Link needed to find Vaspra. Link needed to fill the blue bag and go home.

With Sheik’s body.

The thought made him feel instantly and painfully hollow again, the ache in his chest still piercing but somewhat duller now. He should bury Sheik under the mountain he had once called home, Vrika. He should lay with his fallen people, with his parents, with Kalyh.

Whatever awaited him in Hyrule, Link would do anything to keep Sheik’s body safe, liberate their kingdom, and keep himself alive long enough to take Sheik home when it was all over. And then…

It didn’t matter.
That future didn’t matter. Sheik had been his future…and Sheik was still his future. He would live through everything that came next to make sure Sheik went home. He would not give up on their cause.

After he defeated Foursky? After Sheik was finally at rest?

It didn’t matter.

From the hole in the entrance, darkness had set in, the last bit of light a dark metallic gray. Link had spent the day doing nothing but falling apart. He could’ve been searching for Vaspra. He could’ve found it already if he had just gathered himself together and focused.


Don’t you dare disgrace my memory by giving up.

In the morning, Link would dig for Vaspra. He had fallen apart, he had broken, he had cried, and he had screamed. And now he wouldn’t give up, like Sheik had told him to two years ago.

After restless sleep and blurry, monstrous dreams, the light rose and Link tied the Calling Bell around Sheik’s wrist with some stained fabric ripped off the blanket. Although Sheik had never found the opportunity to explain how the device worked, Link determined he could at least follow the ring if anything tried to disturb Sheik’s body.

Link then finally found the guts to look at Sheik’s face and saw no signs of decay – despite the dried blood, the man almost looked peaceful. It panicked Link for a moment, forcing him to check for a pulse and see if – by some miracle – Sheik was held in some sort of stasis. Rigor mortis had set in and his body was ice – but perhaps the cold nature of the Nether was slowing the rate of decomposition. There was no heartbeat to be found and Link swallowed his false hope, convincing himself to calm down when his heart hammered worriedly away in his chest.

Sheik was dead.

After checking his wounds and finding them all closed and nearly healed, Link changed clothes and geared up, strapping on his leather chest guard, pauldrons, gauntlets, and gloves in a mind-numbing, meticulous way. They had both decided to forgo chainmail, however light of it they could find – Sheik wanted to be quick as possible in a foreign, unpredictable place.

And now he was dead.

Link spared a small bit of water to scrub the dried blood mostly off his hands and face. Shoving the words out and sick of his mind’s constant reminders, Link checked everything for the fifth time and left, burying the cave again behind him. He skirted the holes he had violently made the previous day and surveyed the area as he never did before.

The trees here were thinner than the ones he had first appeared in days ago and he could see much further. The cave sat at the edge of a valley, hills rolling up to his right and left, the horizon forever hidden to him. Link walked straight ahead for a while and tried to find a good tree to climb. Every four or five trees he carved an X into the bark on the far side of the trunk so he had a path to follow back.
As he travelled, scanning for enemies, marking trees, and looking for low branches, Link worked hard to keep his mind blank. Every once in a while he’d hear a distant bark or a haunting shriek, but they were all leagues and leagues away so he studiously ignored them.

It was his fourth day in the Nether and it was bizarre to say he was…getting used to it. The skies never changed from the same pallid gray and nothing ever eluded to a point of light in the sky. For all he knew, there was no sun that rode from horizon to horizon; maybe there was just a celestial light source that turned on and off behind the never-breaking layer of clouds.

After what felt like an hour or so, Link spotted a tree worthy of climbing and made quick work of it. When finally at the top, he discovered what he was mostly sure of to begin with: a repeating landscape of dense woods that stretched into the horizon, only interrupted by intermittent collections of hills. There were strips or pockets of space that lacked canopies that Link could only assume were small clearings, rivers, or lakes.

Really, Link learned nothing from his climb but how to scale down a tree at lightning speed when he saw a Blood Back closing in from a distance.

His heart rammed in his chest as he dropped to the ground and took off sprinting. Link wasn’t sure if the Blood Back saw him – its shrill cry wasn’t reaching his ears – but he certainly wasn’t about to risk it. Trunks whizzed past him and, renewed from his night of healing rest, food, and drink, he found it easy to leap and weave between the trees; he almost wanted to laugh at how effortless it was to move now.

Eventually, he did hear the Blood Back but it was clear the bird wasn’t in pursuit of him judging by the distance of its shriek and how little urgency was in its tone. Link slowed to a walk, feeling frustrated at how little focus he had since running from the bird.

He had to find Vaspra. He had to go home. He had to…

Link spread his senses, pushing hard to find that tell-tale, uncomfortable feeling Vaspra possessed. It was aggravating to feel nothing, as he had since his arrival. Part of him feared anger and hopelessness would consume him again if he walked blind once more.

But now, by some miracle…he felt something.

Link pushed harder.

The afternoon passed and Link followed the little taste he had, nearly abandoning his caution in his excitement. The landscape blended together as Link stared sightless at the ground in blind concentration. He couldn’t know what about the Nether dulled their senses before, but some damper was either lifting or he was doing something differently now.

Or maybe he was different.

But it didn’t matter. Now Link had a direction and everything else fell away.

By nightfall, he was closer to the Vaspra than he had ever been and sensing more than he ever had. He was probably only half a day from a vein. Maybe. The optimism that filled him was unexpected but welcomed as Link found a shelter in a tight circle of trees on the side of a steep hill.

And when blackness fell, he found sleep despite his nervousness at being so much more in the
“Link!”

He stood on a battlefield. He knew it was a battlefield for the bodies strewn around him. Blood. Gore. He stood unscathed, as if he had just been plopped there in the aftermath. It was Hyrule field, somewhere south of the ranch and north of the lake. The sky was a shade of dark well into the night. Hanging above the horizon before him was a heavy, full moon, blinding silver and somehow sinister.

The whole sky seemed to shudder and, suddenly, lined before him was an army. Two enormous, gray creatures with long limbs coming from their faces, massive tusks, and huge, trembling ears swayed towards him at the company's head.

Elephants.

Evanna astride one; a tall, dark-skinned man on another.

Foursky.

There were the unmistakable yellow eyes and red hair, so much like Ganondorf Link felt his blood run cold. But Foursky did not possess the same inherently evil glare Ganondorf had always held; this man wore a disarming smile and wide, intelligent eyes. He looked trusting, calm, strong, confident…it was no wonder he had convinced the people of Termina he was a God. Foursky sat on his stead amidst the blood-soaked grass with a welcoming smile on his face, as if he hadn’t noticed the dead.

“Link!”

He turned around and Zelda stood only feet from him. Panic filled him – she couldn’t be here, so close to the battlefield. And where were her soldiers? Where was the Royal Army? Link opened his mouth but his voice was gone.

“Link, we must flee!” Zelda cried, her battle gear stained red and gore-covered sword held to the ground as though it were too heavy. Link had never seen her so weak.

There was a familiar sound – the royal battle horn. But it was coming from behind him. Link spun back around and saw, to his horror, the Royal Army stepping from behind Amrita's forces. Their eyes glowed an eerie blue and their faces were blank as though under a spell as they held their weapons aloft.

“No!” he cried, his voice returning so it could echo across the field. How could this have happened? What power could turn the Royal Army in such a way? Whatever battle this was, it was surely lost now.

“You.”

A new voice was behind Link, so close and so familiar. He turned yet again, fearing for Zelda's safety.

But the Queen was gone and in her place stood Sheik.
His eyes glowed blue, just as the Royal Army. But there was a terrible intelligence in Sheik's eyes, not the mindless vacancy of his other comrades. Crystalline Vaspra seemed to crawl down Sheik's powerful arms as they regarded each other for a tense and terrifying moment. Something was very wrong and Link felt a horrible sickness in his gut, too afraid to try and understand what he was seeing.

“Sheik,” Link said cautiously. Part of him thrilled at seeing Sheik alive once more while the other part grieved that this was very likely worse than seeing Sheik dead.

Because this was not Sheik.

“You,” the Sheikah repeated, suddenly advancing at an aggressive gait that shocked Link into paralysis. Within seconds, a palm was thrust to Link's chest and hot, nauseating magic filled and slammed him to the ground. The force of impact left him breathless as he stared into the sky in shock. Sheik crouched over him and pressed a dagger hard into Link's exposed neck.

“You let me die.”

“I tried to save you!” Link cried, struggling to push the Sheikah away but finding his wrists bound by some invisible force. He could feel the magic coursing thickly through his body, emanating from the man about to slice his throat. It was overwhelming and sickening – Link knew the feeling of Vaspra so well now. “I tried to save you, Sheik! I’m so sorry!”

“Look what I’ve become!” Sheik snarled, pushing the dagger hard enough to break skin. “Look what you’ve turned me into!”

Link didn’t even know what he had turned into. What Sheik was this? Was this even the same person? Beyond the venomous expression and unearthly aura, the familiar smell of Sheik's hair and the spice of the desert could be scented on his skin, the mixture of it a haze of sensory confusion as he stared into the cold eyes of a killer. A monster.

This wasn’t Sheik.

But it was.

“Consider this,” Sheik growled, “my retribution.”

And he drove the dagger home.

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For those of you that wanna say hi, my url is Sincosma on Tumblr. I just posted some reference pictures on my Congruent tag that I used back when I started writing this story in the beginning of 2014. There will be more to come as we move along.

Thank you all for sticking with this story. Although I know last chapter was not an easy read (it wasn't an easy edit, either), the feedback I received was the most encouraging I've ever gotten. The fact that I wrote a thing and people were kind of freaking out about it was a very new experience to me and I just can't thank all of you enough. Keep lighting fires under my ass, please.

Anyway. Enough of that shit. Onward we go.
A loud screech jerked him awake to a dim gray sky.

Link leapt to a crouch and drew the long dagger from his boot as he surveyed the trees above him. Within eyesight, but far enough to feel relief, was a Blood Back making a fuss on bending branches whose leaves scattered to the cold morning wind. He wondered if it had been roosting there all night and found himself thankful for the first time in days – he wouldn’t have noticed its presence in such a deep slumber.

The dream…

Dread lingered in his thoughts as he re-sheathed the dagger and gathered up his pack. His appetite was nowhere to be found but he forced himself into a few bites of hard biscuit.

Perhaps in another time – perhaps another life – his attention would be stolen by the many discomforts of his body. The wounds of his side, leg, and hand, although healed, still ached horribly. Link's mouth was dry, lips painfully scabbed over, and sores swelling on the inside of his cheeks from the hard bite of impacts over the past few days. But none of it would faze him. Much like the tunnel-vision Link had adopted in Spirit Temple, he was determined to barrel his way through the last of his trials.

He could lick his wounds later.

Link moved on as soon as the full day's light filled the woods, trying desperately to focus on his objective and the whisper of Vaspra. But he could not.

He instead thought about, what felt like an age ago, Zelda revealing the dreams that had begun to plague her. The elephants, the battlefield…premonitions were not commonplace in Link's life. The only ones he'd ever had were as a child on the eve of war. There was no mistaking it now, however: Zelda's visions were not simply dreams.

Link had now witnessed the same future...but perhaps Sheik was Link’s own addition. Was it his guilt over Sheik? He could not deny that he would never shake the blame for not stopping soon enough to administer the potion. He would probably blame himself until his last breath.

Sheik couldn’t turn into something like that. While the Goddesses had granted Link the premonition as well, surely Sheik's appearance was merely a fictional addendum, exacerbated by the stress of the Nether and the trauma of losing Sheik.

But it still lingered in the background of his mind as he continued on and focused his energy on the Vaspra drawing ever nearer.

It seemed the harder he pressed his mind the clearer his awareness seemed to grow. He’d push and tug until he found a mental block…then it would slowly pass. As the morning slipped by Link was still lost to why his abilities were strengthening other than the simplest of reasons:
The longer he stayed in the Nether, the more he understood it.

Most of the day passed without event. He heard little of the beasts of the Nether and the air stayed crisp and windy. The only thing that kept him from wandering without caution was his continued habit of marking trees. His marks grew further apart now, but still present enough to provide a guide back.

By what felt like midday – whatever that actually was in the Nether – he found himself in another valley where the trees were further apart and felt nearly nauseous from the power of Vaspra.

Link had found the vein.

He hurriedly yanked out his shovel and began digging between the trees, more calculated than before but just as desperate. As he found purchase in the cold, damp earth, he kept his awareness blown out around him – if there was any time Link really didn’t need to get thrown around, it was now. He had to get the Vaspra, he had to complete his task, he had to bring Sheik home…

So Link dug for hours. Even when he reached two of his heights, he still felt it below. By three of his heights, he could no longer gain the excess to the mouth of the hole without digging himself an exit. Forced to dig outwards, he created a trench for more excess dirt and felt the familiar frustration in his lack of magical prowess – a spell for moving earth would be invaluable about now.

Sheik had known one, Link was sure. If only he had found the time to ask for it.

Link stopped every few hours, drinking greedily from his canteen although he tried not to. He was drenched in sweat, however, and dehydration had done him no favors in the past three days.

Light was fading when he reached the ore.

The bedrock of the Nether was just as dense as that of Hyrule. Vaspra, despite its delicate crystalline form, was somehow deceptively hard; he may as well been mining diamonds. Link thought he would’ve been happy, finally finding the infernal thing they’d come for, but he held nothing but hatred and disgust for it as it glittered unnaturally blue through the dirt and stone.

The blue reminded him of Sheik’s twisted eyes. This horrible rock had caused the ruin his life had now become.

Part of him wished for a bomb – blowing the ore out of the earth would be the easiest option – but considering the setting, even the sounds of a chisel and hammer were likely to attract something when Link started in the more.

Light was leaving the Nether and Link determined the real mining would begin tomorrow. He covered the Vaspra back up in a layer of dirt to hide its glimmer and shifted to dig a small shelter in the side of the hole. Although the depth of his mining would attract curiosity of anything insistent enough to climb down, the protection of having moist earth around him again was worth the risk. Link wouldn’t light a fire, but the shelter kept the chilling wind out and he could live with that.

He wasn’t granted much sleep as blackness fell over him, however.

Every time Link closed his eyes the image of Sheik’s face entered his mind. It fluctuated between the living one, the dead one, and the nightmarish one from his dreams. Just as he would begin to
doze off, the shock of it would jar him awake with a quiet gasp.

If Sheik had been there, he would’ve laughed at the way Link would fade away and then spasm back into consciousness. Because Sheik knew the teasing distracted from the nightmares.

_Do I need to put you outside? I’m trying to sleep as well._

Sheik had said it before and Link thought of it now, finding a grin on his lips despite himself.

“I’m not a dog, Sheik,” Link said quietly.

_Dogs whimper in their sleep._

“I’ll remind you of that next time you have nightmares.”

He had to be losing his mind, talking to a dead person that wasn’t even there. But the pretend conversation slowed his heartbeat and stole away that heavy emptiness he’d been feeling for days.

“We’re almost done, Sheik,” Link whispered, resting his head back against the cold mud of his little cave again. “We’ll be back to Hyrule soon.”

_The first bit you mine should be the piece you keep…you don’t know when the blue bag will seal._

“I remember,” he insisted to no one. Or maybe Sheik was somehow speaking to him. If only…

_You should hide it in Zelda’s study. She has that safe under her desk. It has sealing properties that might mask the Vaspra._

“I know,” Link sighed. “I know what I’m doing, Sheik.”

_Of course you do, Hero._

Link snorted. Sheik practically used it as an insult sometimes. “I’m not the Hero.”

_The Goddesses say differently._

“Damn the Goddesses.” His voice was surprisingly harsh and snapped into the freezing air.

_Link…_  

Sheik would’ve disliked Link’s blasphemy. But he wouldn’t have chastised him any further – Link’s beliefs were his own and Sheik had always respected that. Link had once grown to love the Goddesses Farore, as all Kokiri had…but throughout his disjointed life, he had always been doubtful of their intentions. Even in the Sacred Realm, even after his stasis, even after the prophecy came to be.

Link didn’t doubt they were there; he doubted they gave a shit.

He was a pawn to them, a soul passed over and over to save a land ravaged for eternities. Why couldn’t the Goddesses just prevent it in the first place? Why let the wars happen and force a boy into divine obligation? Link had mostly contempt for the beings that ripped his life apart.
And Sheik – only Sheik – had truly understood how Link felt and why he felt it.

Sheik respected it.

“I miss you, Sheik,” Link said, voice so quiet it almost didn’t exist. Emotion pressed heavily in his throat and forced his eyes tightly shut. He had been numb since his meltdown by the cave but now Link was wavering again in the lonely darkness. But it wasn’t a sharp and panicked agony like it was before; now it was a deep, slow sadness that crept into his bones and sat solidly in his mind.

It reminded him faintly of when he and Navi parted ways.

She had been his constant companion, especially in the moments Sheik couldn’t be there as he went back and forth through time, child to adult and back again. When they parted ways the sadness had lasted days like a depression.

But Navi wasn’t dead.

Link wondered where she was. He hadn’t thought to search for her when they visited the forest, too focused on their task for nostalgia. It was likely she was with the other fairies, safe and happy and working tirelessly for The Great Deku Sapling.

If only they had thought to bring a healing fairy with them. Since the war’s end, they had all but retreated back into their hidden domain, so they wouldn’t have had time to locate one before they left.

Now, more than ever, Link worried for his own death and its effect on the future of Hyrule; he was, as always, his kingdom’s only hope. Healing fairies had saved him countless times during the war, revitalizing him just moments from death. What if he died in the Nether and was unable to administer potion for himself?

*It’s prophesized. You will be fine, Link.*

“Oh…without you,” Link breathed, rubbing at the brief moisture that had built in his eyes. He was suddenly ten again, lying in his house in Kokiri, alone and nursing a broken nose. He was a child, lost and overwhelmed and displaced.

Like in the hard times after the war, Link couldn’t accept that a Hero was supposed to feel like this. Where was the confidence and courage he had managed to find in the war?

*Put those fears to bed. We don’t have time for them.*

“I need help.” Link’s voice was so thin, so frail to his own ears. He wanted to punch himself for it. Whining in a dirt hole, in the armpit of the universe wasn’t going to help *anything.*

*You will always have help, Link. You’re the Hero.*

Sheik had said it before, outside the Shadow Temple. The horrors within had driven Link out after a day. He was pale and shaking and nauseous, unable find his composure as he pressed his back against the fence overlooking the graveyard.

*Sheik crouched in front of him, trying to convince him to get out of the rain and eat. Link had called for Sheik, though he hadn’t truly expected the man to actually show.*
“I can’t. I c-can’t,” Link insisted, shivering in the biting cold.

“Link, let’s get out of the rain,” Sheik said calmly for likely the third time.

“How am I g-going to do this?” he demanded, glaring up at those red eyes. “How does anyone do this?”

“If you don’t get out of the rain, Link, I’m going to carry you. Like a child,” Sheik threatened.

Link managed to find his legs and followed Sheik to the shelter of Dampe’s old hut. How sad that the place was a comfort to him as he thawed out in a rickety chair. The shelter wasn’t too much warmer, but anything was better than the screams and the blood and…

“No one expects you to do this without fear,” the Sheikah said quietly, leaning back against the clay wall and surveying Link with a surprisingly gentle look. It was one of the few times thus far that Sheik let down the stoic personality he insisted on holding in place. “You worked flawlessly through the others…but I know of the horrors in that Temple.”

“You don’t know those things-”

“They are the horrors of my people, Link.” Sheik’s eyes were flashing in the feeble torchlight above them; the sight was nearly as haunting as that of the Shadow Temple. Link had just stared, waiting to understand but also wishing not to.

“The Sheikah…we’re the Shadow Folk the ghosts speak of. That was once our Temple, a place of refuge and worship to the Goddess Din. However, it has been tainted by years of betrayal from the Royal Family and the evil of Ganondorf. I know of the horrors. I expected this,” he explained.

“You didn’t warn me,” Link accused. “You should’ve told me-”

“Told you what? That it’s dark and smells of rot? That it has monsters one could never imagine? That it will turn you inside out? None of my words could have truly described what resides in that hell. You had to see it for yourself.”

The rain was a reliable rhythm on the metal roof, the sound somewhat calming as he and Sheik regarded each other quietly. No, if Sheik had tried to truly describe the Shadow Temple Link probably wouldn’t have believed him.

Redeads, Floormasters and Wallmasters, Like Likes, Gibdo…after the fight with the Dead Hand, he had fled the dungeon in mindless fear. Link would never recover from that fight. He knew, somewhere deep down, he would suffer that horror for the rest of his life.

“You’re almost done, Link,” Sheik said after a while of quiet company. “You’ve almost cleansed this temple. The Spirit Temple is the only one that remains. Then all of this can finally end.”

“I can’t see it that way right now. I can’t see how all of this doesn’t end in my death,” Link argued, pushing his face into his hands and shivering again. “I feel like I’m alone. I don’t know why the Goddesses picked me. I can’t do this. I’m just a kid. I need help.”

“You will always have help, Link. You’re the Hero,” Sheik reminded him. “You have that annoying fairy under your hat,” Navi tiffed at that, “and you have me. It is my duty to guide you.
The Goddesses are with you, too. You are their champion.”

Link scoffed at the mention of them but Sheik left it alone.

“You will always have help, Link. You’re the Hero,” Sheik reminded him one more time.

It lasted only a moment, but Sheik reached out and gripped his gauntleted arm tightly. And then he left.

Hanging onto Sheik’s words like a boon, Link cleansed the Temple the next day.

But what help was there now? He was completely alone, in an entire other plane of existence. There was no one to help him. Now it truly was just him. And he didn’t feel any more of an adult now than he felt back then.

No Navi, no Zelda, no Sheik.

And he just had to be okay with that.

You’re going to make it.

“I know,” Link whispered into the darkness.

Of course he was.

Link was the Hero of Time.

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The first amount of Vaspra he managed to glean from the earth was the size approximately of his fist.

Zelda, at one point or another, had said that was all they should need, according to the Sages. And according to some set of equations Link couldn’t hope to understand; he only hoped they were right. It was hard to imagine something so small could seal an immortal tyrant in the Nether, but then he had seen what so little Vaspra was capable of in the hands of Evanna. Perhaps a fist-full really was enough.

Link hated how loud he was being with the chisel and hammer, but there was nothing for it – the Vaspra was hard and resilient and he spent hours coaxing it from the rock. He kept his senses wide open as he broke away chunk after chunk and just prayed no beast became too curious.

Bit by bit, he filled the blue bag, which had been previously stored in his own pack. When dealing with magically expanded bags inside magically expanded bags…well, he tried not to think about it too much. If Link could carry all his gear and the Vaspra without being rendered immobile in a hostile dimension, he wasn’t about to complain about the complicated physics of it.

It was midday when the bag sealed.

Link’s fingers had still been at the draw-string opening when a flash of light zapped his skin, pushing his fingertips out of the way. The opening of the blue bag was sealed shut and after a few experimental tugs, he found Evanna’s word to be true.
It was finally done.

Link sat there for a moment, feeling a little empty. He hadn’t expected a fanfare when he completed the task…but he had expected at least relief. And Link felt nothing of the sort. He just felt blank and tired. It would take him two days to get back to the cave and then he would have to activate Zelda’s spell and…

He didn’t want to think that far ahead.

Link shoved the now full blue bag into his own pack and made his way tiredly out of the hole. But finishing his task had distracted him because, as he finally climbed the surface, his heart leapt in his throat at what was waiting.

A pack of ten Vog surrounded him.

“Well,” growled one. It was the biggest one, tufts of gray among the black, matted fur. The smell of rot filled the air as hot, rancid breath created a whirlwind around him. “It is living.”

“It smell so eat,” another one chimed in, turning its head to look from the biggest one to Link and back again. There was no telling how it could possibly see with no eyes, but clearly the gaping, black holes offered them some sort of information. “We eat it, King?”

So, here was the King that Ko and Va had spoken of. Link nearly laughed – of course, at the near end of his journey, he would meet his demise to the most idiotic creatures in the realm.

“It is as small. I will eat,” the King demanded, tone territorial and absolute.

“It kill Ko, Va, Dom, Gree, Li,” another one warned. “What if it as poison?”

Link felt great irritation at their childish, broken Hylian. He couldn’t even feel fear now that a strange mixture of humor and recklessness had taken him. Before he could stop himself, Link opened his mouth and starting bluffing without care. “I’ve been told I’m rather poisonous. One drop of my blood will have you pups blowing up in minutes.”

“Lies,” the King said simply.

Link shrugged. “Suit yourself. It’s your funeral.”

There was an uncomfortable grumble among the Vog and the King stared blankly at him for a moment. “You kill mine Vog?”

“I don’t know what Vog are,” Link lied casually, crossing his arms.

“We is Vog. You kill Vog,” the creature insisted.

“I’ve seen a lot of things here, but nothing like you lot.”

More grumbling followed.

“It scent in clearing where Vog die,” the King accused, stomping its huge, rotting paws in anger and baring its needle-like teeth.
“I’ve passed through many clearings,” Link hedged.

Several Vog let out frustrated barks or whines as their King snorted in anger. “*Why it lie?*”

Link took one intimidating step forward, pleased when the King nearly took a step back. “*I’m not lying.*”

“*Kill it!*”

“*Eat it, King!*”

“*Lying thing!*”

Well, it was worth a try. Intimidation wasn’t going to do it, even when mixed with his lies. Perhaps Link truly was as bad at lying as Sheik said he was. Anger swept through his body as the Vog started edging in, still growling encouragement to each other. Panic joined the fury and clouded his judgment for a moment. Link had to get home. He had to get to Hyrule. He couldn’t die here. He couldn’t-

*Ringing.*

Link could’ve cried in relief.

The Calling Bell sounded in his head, the sensation sending a cold flush of shock through his chest.

Maybe Sheik was right. Maybe the Goddesses *were* with him. Or maybe it was dumb luck. Whatever it was he was grateful for it.

Link quickly sensed the source of the Bell and cast a grin around the circle snarling Vog.

“Maybe next time, assholes,” he laughed.

With an abrupt jerk, Link warped away.

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The sob story continues. I will ask you once again to please hold thy panties for this next chapter. I made a music playlist on YouTube while I was writing Congruent. If you guys have any interest in hearing what inspired this story, let me know and I’ll link it next chapter. I’m active on Tumblr at the URL (sincosma . tumblr) – come say hi please!

And as always, thank you, thank you, thank you for the reviews and continued support.
Chapter 17

XVII.

Link nearly heaved when his feet slammed jarringly on the uneven ground and his equilibrium lost. The warp had been abrupt and painful on his mostly empty stomach. The world was an unfocused mess as Link struggled to look around for – what? What was he going to find? He forced his eyes to cooperate and looked around frantically, drawing the Moon Blade with a sharp ring.

Link was back in the small, thinly wooded area surrounding the cave. His eyes shot to the entrance and his stomach dropped.

The entrance had been dug open.

And Sheik’s body was gone.

I always keep my word.

Link let out a horrified gasp, his breath exiting his lungs as though he’d been kicked in the guts.

No. No. No. No. This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t happening.

He spun around and found what he dearly wished he wouldn’t find.

The Void Walker stood a few feet from him, elongated limbs twitching in what could’ve been anticipation. Link was barely holding down his stomach as the smell of rot – a smell he had grown tired of experiencing – filled his nose. He stared at the beast, speechless and unable to breathe.

No.

The selfishness you displayed on the day of our meeting has reaped consequences. I’ve been watching you, Link. I was curious to see if you’d actually succeed in pulling the blue ore from the ground. How fortuitous that you left that bell on your fallen friend so that I may take what you’ve found. Once I’ve finished recycling him, I will devour you and your ore.

“No! You didn’t touch him!” Link snarled, leaping forward as though to run the creature through with his sword but a black limb stretched out and knocked him backwards and off his feet.

“Bring him back!” Link screamed, writhing in the creature’s hold. His mind was going all blank but for the madness of hatred. He twisted his body in every way he could, surely pulling and tearing a myriad of muscles as he went. “Spit him out you bastard!”

I will rebuild him. He will be even better than before. So will you.

The selfish naivety in him nearly exploded at the idea of it. But then Link also remembered what the Void Walker had told him when the first time they met. Recycled but twisted. This being had turned the Vog and Blood Backs and Balta into what they were.

So what did that mean for Sheik?

Yes, Link. He will never be the same. He will not be what you knew him as. And the same for you. But I feel it is not so bad. The birds or the dogs don’t complain.

“No!” Link cried once more, trying to find composure, to think it out logically. He needed to get Sheik back. Somehow. He needed to take him home. But as Sheik. Just Sheik. His companion death was horrible enough; his companion turned Nether monster would be unbearable. “Bring him back dead! Don’t rebuild him!”

It is too late. The process has already begun.

“There has to be a way!” Link demanded, still struggling hopelessly against the grip the Void Walker was keeping him in. “Reverse it! Kill him! Don’t make him live as a monster!”

You may kill him once he is rebuilt. I care not. When he returns, you are next.

Horror twisted at his stomach but before his thoughts could coalesce, Link worked a mental shield into the center of his mind just as Zelda had taught him years again. Link knew he could never kill Sheik. Never. Not again. He could not be responsible for that once more.

But in the moment he felt powerless, Link suddenly recognized the opportunity the Void Walker had just created.

“Let me see to him before you devour me,” Link asked after a moment, putting up every mental block he had ever learned. He kept his thoughts focused on saying goodbye to Sheik, keeping an endless white noise of sadness in his mind as his intentions were scrutinized uncomfortably. “Let me kill him. Let me say goodbye. Then you may do whatever you want. I clearly have no choice.”

There was a deeper pressure and something sharp probed at Link’s thoughts – now that he was defending his mind Link could clearly feel what the Void Walker had been doing all along. He held his ground, however, as the creature pushed and prodded at his thoughts. And all the while he concentrated on thoughts of Sheik with the face of a demon, of the Moon Blade’s hilt in his grip as he…

Very well. I’ll allow you this. It will be just a moment longer. We shall wait.

Link felt cold shock when that horrible arm let him go, abruptly returning to the empty shape of the Void Walker. He almost collapsed without the creature holding him up, his legs trembling from the fear and anticipation and dread. Link hadn't truly thought his lie would work – his bluffs certainly didn't have even a decent track record – but this one seemed to miraculously work. Either the Void Walker was stupid enough to buy it or it was going along with him. And if it were the latter, Link couldn't even begin to imagine the reason.

The forest around them was unnaturally quiet as the Void Walker’s body continued to vibrate. Even the distant sounds of other beasts seemed to be sucked out of the air, as if the area around the
Void Walker was just as much a void itself. Link wasn't sure when something would happen but he spent that uncountable amount of time a terrible mixture of excitement and disgust, his thoughts confused and fragmented.

As they waited, Link very slowly picked up his sword and made a show of sheathing it. The very last dumb thing he needed to do was leave his sword in the Nether. After all, they would be leaving soon so he stealthily confirmed he had everything accounted for.

“How different will he be?” Link demanded after a few minutes of tense silence.

_The first recycle changes the mind considerably. Sometimes it breaks the mind, sometimes it enhances it. Magic-users always find an agreeable increase in mana. The changes to his body are less predictable; some are unrecognizable after the first recycle, some look the same but are gifted with certain physical enhancements. It’s always a surprise, which is part of what makes all of this so fascinating. I have not had a clean specimen in an age. Once you kill him I will recycle him again. Perhaps some of his abilities will exaggerate and turn him into a beast like the Vog-

“Enough,” Link snapped, unable to handle any more of that revolting voice in his head. “I don’t want to hear this.”

You will think differently when you have been recycled. You will be so much more powerful. Some creatures beg me for it.

Link shuddered, fighting nausea as he thought of what the creatures of the Nether had once been and were now. He didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to see it. He didn’t want to live it. He would rather die.

_Balta were once men. An entire army of them fell into the Nether. They wished for power and I granted it. They lacked the foundations, however, to make them anything more than weak scavengers. After so many recycles they became their own nightmares._

Link grimaced. No, he didn’t not want to know this.

_Blood Backs were once Loftwings, ancient birds from an ancient time of the living realm. The Nether tore and they flew right in. They were mine to rebuild. Mine to build better._

“Stop speaking,” Link ordered, feeling so sick his vision blurred. He knew of Loftwings, of course. He had read about it in the library during his search into the Hero’s previous lives. He knew of that time and the thought of such graceful, holy creatures becoming…

_All things start so simple. You see, we are gods here. I, and the few others of my kin that remain, rule over the Nether. We give life and power to all here. I will make you so powerful, you may rival me._

Link opened his mouth to demand the Void Walker cease speaking once more, but then something started to stir within its gaping body. It started as a flicker in its chest, hardly noticeable if Link hadn’t been staring. Then the creature went still – so still it struck fear through Link’s chest once more. Somehow he knew it was happening. He was about to see Sheik again. Horror and happiness and disgust filled him simultaneously.

The flicker of light ignited exponentially, the Void Walker’s body beginning to pulse a vicious crimson. Link tried to watch, but soon the color became too bright for him to handle forcing him to
shield his face with a gauntleted arm.

A mighty roar filled the cold air and then a sick noise like a gag followed it. Link couldn’t contain his nausea anymore; he turned his back and painfully retched nothing until the sound died and the light seemed to fade.

Struggling for composure, Link slowly turned, breathing through his nose and trying to keep his head level enough to block out the Void Walker. He needed to focus. He had to focus. No matter what he saw, he needed to focus.

Lying on the cold, mossy ground was Sheik.

The Sheikah looked identical in every way – his armor, his weapons, his body, and his face were all the same. And he lay unconscious and unmoving. Perhaps he was still dead.

*He lives. If left to wake, he would open his eyes in a day. But that is not his fate – we have struck a deal, Link, and now you must say your goodbyes.*

Link’s heart hammered so hard in his chest he thought he might pass out from the pressure. With a stiff nod, he yanked his dagger out of his boot. Sheik lay between Link and the Void Walker, body in a loose curl and barely moving with breath upon closer inspection. Relief and fear bombarded his mind as he crouched before his friend and saw the slow pulse at his throat.

Sheik was alive.

*Sheik was alive.*

Link could never kill him. And he never intended to.

*Deceit!*

The Void Walker read the truth and let out a horrific whine as Link pulled Sheik’s limp body against his own. He hummed the Royal lullaby faster than he ever had in his life, the melody almost unrecognizable – but the spell seemed to know his intention and activate warmly in his chest.

The creature reached him just as heat yawned from his chest and surrounded them in bright golden light. Link sensed the sharpness of the Void Walker’s sword-arm pierce his shoulder, but before any further damage could come they were yanked away and out of the Nether.

Link would’ve gladly welcomed any pain in the world to leave the Nether.

The disorientation of the warp was almost a comfort to him now; they were going home.

*They were going home.*

Though it was surely just seconds that passed, the travel felt much longer as he gripped Sheik tightly, their bodies being stretched and squashed through a roar of sound. Link saw nothing but stifling darkness. He flinched when the bones of his body became unraveled, then re-wrapped. Then, suddenly, there was contact as they slammed into a hard wood floor. Link heard a loud crunch as they fell, like he had bit into a mouthful of sand.
He laid sprawled out on the floor of Zelda’s study, staring blearily up at the pure white, vaulted ceiling above like it wasn’t real. And how could it be? How could he really be back? How could he have survived it?

For a moment, he was utterly lost. What was he doing? Where had he been? Oh, Goddesses, he made it. Wait, from what?

But then the momentary amnesia was shoved aside by the smell of blood and decay. He suddenly remembered where he had been. He suddenly remembered what he had nearly died for.

Link was up in seconds, unsteady on his feet but determined. His boots scuffed nosily over high-polished wood as he wrenched open his bag, panic blaring through his mind like a siren.

Get the Vaspra in the safe.

Get the Vaspra in the safe.

It was Sheik’s voice in his head too – Goddesses, Sheik was alive – urging him to rush before Evanna found them. That woman would sense them in the castle. Any moment now they would no longer be alone. His fist closed around the cursed ore and ripped it free, the sharply pointed surface pressing hard into his palm.

The desk was three steps away but he only took one. The safe was on the underside of the desk, the door facing inward to disguise its presence. He fumbled blindly with the clasp he couldn’t see, shoving the rock in so quickly it clanked loudly against the iron box. Link whispered the locking spell Zelda had taught him, the magic robbing him of his strength to stand.

And then he dropped to his knees and let out a cry of pain and sorrow and relief. Link looked back to his companion, at long last looking for hope.

Sheik lay there, almost motionless and perfect. His hair was loose, fanning around his head like a halo; and it may well have been considering all they had been through. His face was serene, cowl still pushed away and revealing the same three triangles Link had spied on the day of Sheik’s death. They were sharp and red, the ink hardly faded – Link wondered just how old they could be consider how vivid the pigment remained. Link's eyes wandered away, following the slope of his nose, the fullness of his lips, the high edge of his cheekbones, the light stubble at his jaw.

Link crawled back to Sheik, feeling his eyes begin to water in...happiness? Sadness?

Sheik was back.

But what was he now?

The two emotions warred in Link violently as he lifted Sheik’s cowl, securing it back over the bridge of his nose. Now Sheik could be as he was before, once again covering his face like generations of Sheikah warriors before him. The skin Link carefully touched was warm. The armor of his chest rose with long, measured breaths of deep slumber. Hot exhales ghosted against Link’s fingertips through cloth as they lingered above his face.

“Sheik,” he whispered, feeling emotion clutch at his throat. Link could feel the energy coming off his companion and a wave of fear pressed against his mind. It felt like the Nether.
It felt wrong.

Sound suddenly filled the room as people stormed in.

“Where is it?” a sharp, demanding voice called, the authoritative timbre filling the room.

Link turned to see Evanna at the doorway, cloaked in black and looking desperate and dangerous. Zelda rushed from behind her, nearly collapsing on top of Link with a relieved cry. She was a swath of white and pink and blonde in his lap as she gripped him tightly, disturbing the wound on his shoulder. But he couldn’t care as he held her back, wanting to sob into her neck but unable to with the tension in the room.

“Link, you’re back, you’re back, you’re alive, you made it, Link…” she babbled in his ear, her tears wetting his collarbone. He had never seen Zelda quite so broken.

But Link had never been quite so broken either.

“Where is the Vaspra?” Evanna shouted, pulling them out of their reunion and back to terrifying reality – they had to hand over the most powerful weapon in the world to the most dangerous King and Queen.

Zelda helped pull Link to his feet, casting a look down at Sheik in fear, but Link waved her off. Later. He couldn’t even begin to explain it to her. The air was warm and thawed his frozen limbs as he slowly reached into his pack. Evanna watched him impatiently as the blue bag was drawn into the room, all eyes falling upon it for one solid and silent moment.

“You’ve done well, Guardsman,” Evanna said quietly, holding out a hand, an ever-so-slight tremor running across her fingers. “I will take it and leave this world as promised.”

Zelda’s hand shot out, almost on instinct, and squeezed Link’s free arm tightly. And he held out the bag, allowing it to be taken by the enemy.

What had they done?

“You did not use the Calling Bell,” Evanna commented, tucking the bag into seemingly nowhere and giving him a suspicious look. “How did you return?”

“The Calling Bell was lost to a creature of the Nether,” Link answered blankly, feeling his body numb as he thought of the Void Walker and its smell of death. “Zelda placed a back-up spell on me before we left, just in case it was lost.”

“How fortunate.” Evanna cast an unreadable look to Zelda, eyes glowing.

Link froze and for one long, long moment, it was unclear what was going to happen next. But then…the volatile moment passed, Evanna’s shoulders rounding a bit as her feline gaze fell to the unconscious Sheikah was on the floor. “And what of him?”

“He has…been through much,” Link explained thickly, emotion just grazing his tone.

Evanna’s eyes seemed to widen after a moment of study, as though she had just realized something paramount. It made Link’s blood run cold as her mouth slid into a wide smile, the whites of her teeth and the red of her gums hard contrasts in the soft light of the room.
“I’m sure he has,” she agreed slowly. “I’m glad he has survived. He has…gained much from his
time there with you.”

Dread gripped Link’s gut for the umpteenth time as his mind reeled at the implications. He
couldn’t bear what answers might be waiting for him when Sheik awoke or what Evanna saw in
him that could cause such happiness. He couldn’t bear what the future held for them now that
Foursky and Evanna had their Vaspra. And they had more of it than Link could even begin to
comprehend.

“We are done here. Leave,” Link barked out, body tensing in preparation for a fight.

Brown eyes narrowed in amusement and she smiled once more. In one graceful movement, she
bowed before them and Link wanted to kick her in the face.

“Of course. Thank you, Queen Zelda and High Royal Guardsman Link. I am forever indebted to
you for the survival of my people. I will repay you. I promise.”

“Keep your charity,” Link warned her.

Evanna laughed. It was a light, deceptive sound that made Link seethe. “Very well, then. I will
keep my charity.” Their eyes met and Link saw the challenge.

No.

This was not over.

It was definitely not over. And that reality was crushing. Unsurprising, but crushing.

“Farewell.” Then she turned and left the room, her shoes clipping the floor in sharp snaps. When
the sound was finally gone, the energy fled from Link’s body all over again and he slumped to the
floor.

“Link!” Zelda cried, crouching down with him, running her hand over his sweaty forehead.

It must have been the middle of the night; she wore her plain, white night dress and her hair lay in a
thick braid, like the night Link had met with her in the kitchen. The study looked as it always had,
all its walls lined with books, the desk towering with parchment and littered with quills, the
windows revealing nothing but moonlight and stars. Oh, how Link had missed the sky. He wanted
to get up and go look at it, but he had not the strength.

“What happened to Sheik? What happened to you? What happened in that place?” Zelda said in a
panicked tone, her voice wavering. She studied him in a rush, shaking her head and running her
hands over his cheeks and jaw. “You look…Link, I’ve never seen you look like this.”

“It was…hell.” It was all he could say. He didn’t know how to explain the Nether to Zelda. He
didn’t know how to explain Sheik’s death and resurrection. But then…he didn’t have to. She
scooted closer to Sheik and, before Link could stop her, touched the bare skin of his fingers.

The reaction was instantaneous.

Zelda was on her feet and backing up into the desk as though she’d been electrocuted. Her eyes
were impossibly wide and a cry of horror left her mouth.

“What happened to him? Link! What happened?”

The sight of it made Link want to break down. He covered his face with his hands so he wouldn’t have to see Zelda’s expression anymore.

Zelda could feel it. Like Evanna, she knew something was very wrong. Link knew it too, although he had been far too distracted by Sheik even being alive to really let it set in. Hands ripped his own from his face and Zelda stared into his eyes in anger and fear.

“Tell me what happened. Now.”

Link didn’t know where to start. Exhaustion ate away at him and he lay back on the floor and stared at the ceiling, unable to think of anything else to do. He could feel the warmth of Sheik next to him and the strange aura that now belonged to him.

It felt so alien, so sinister.

“Link, I’m terrified. Please talk to me. Please,” Zelda begged, crouching down next to him and planting her hands on his chest. She spotted the wound on his shoulder and hurriedly murmured a quiet spell to begin healing it.

“Sheik was…killed,” was all Link could get out before his jaw clenched shut in the strain of emotion.

Zelda’s fingers were suddenly digging into his chest guard and her head shook quickly in denial. And Link knew she was putting two and two together. Even in the living realm there were plenty of stories of people using black magics to bring back the dead. They all failed horribly or, in Ganondorf’s case, worked perfectly. Horrific monsters were created by resurrecting the dead.

Sheik had been resurrected.

Ergo, Sheik was a monster.

Link’s body shook like he had sobbed and he threw an arm over his face, trying to hold himself in one piece somehow. Zelda said nothing but her hands were now impossibly tight on his chest guard. The silence was awful and Link knew she was waiting for him to confirm what was obvious.

“A creature…it was called a Void Walker…it lives in the Nether and recycles the dead. It is the reason why the beasts of that realm are so…” Link shook his head, unable to find the words.

“It recycled Sheik,” Zelda said, her voice like skin stretched over a drum.

“I…I couldn’t save him.”

The emotions wrapped themselves up in Link's throat and he was rendered silent yet again. Link battled with himself to say more, to make her understand the true depth of his betrayal. He wanted her to know.

Maybe he wanted her to hate him.
“He was dying and I was running to save us from the Vog who attacked us. I could’ve…I could’ve stopped and saved him, given him potion. But I…I didn’t and I killed him. He died because of me. And then I left him to find the Vaspra. I allowed the Void Walker to-”

A sharp pain bloomed in his chest as he realized Zelda had punched him hard through his chest plate. The impact knocked the air from his lungs and silenced him just as Zelda had clearly intended.

“Shut up!” she ordered. “Stop blaming your-”

But she couldn’t manage the words because sadness now choked them and she struggled to calm herself. Link knew she wouldn't find it, however, for now there was nothing to do but grieve; grieve over Sheik and grieve over the immense power Evanna now had. Link wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly as though it could hold them both steady.

And for once, he didn’t feel like a child. The Queen of Hyrule, his friend, his sister, could not hold it together any better than he could.

Link’s body ached and his head throbbed. He felt empty and barren as he stared unseeingly at the ceiling. Zelda pulled away, her legs tucked beneath her and hands wrung together as she watched Sheik.

Link just couldn’t.

“When will he wake?” she finally asked after much time.

“In a day,” Link replied, voice hoarse and nearly gone.

“We need to put him…in the…”

But Zelda couldn’t get the words out. They needed to put Sheik in a reinforced cell. In the dungeons. Because there was no telling what would be in that body when those red eyes finally opened. They couldn’t risk it. And that was unbearable.

Eventually, Link found the small bit of energy to stand, helping the Queen up as well. Before he could stoop down and pick up his friend, Zelda gripped his wrist tightly and gave him a stern look.

“You are not responsible for any of this.”

Zelda had to know he didn’t believe her, but she said it anyway.

Link wasn't sure how he found the will to lift Sheik, but he did. Perhaps it was the old Sheikah saying of "you keep what you kill". He carried his comrade in his arms, Sheik's body heavy and radiating strange energy. Link tried to find some small bit of happiness in the knowledge that Sheik was alive and breathing…

But he didn’t know if it was Sheik and he couldn’t allow himself that sort of hope.

Not yet.

The halls were empty at such a late hour and after depositing his sleeping friend onto the cot in the
darkened cell, he watched Zelda cast spells to seal it. Energy crunched in the air as she released the
magic and they stood there for a moment, staring sadly at the door. His stomach twisted tightly as
he thought of what the next day would bring.

Zelda only bid him goodnight after Link insisted for the sixth time that he could manage the rest of
the night alone. He wanted to peel off his armor and clothes, shower, and drop into oblivion. She
gave him a drought for dreamless sleep and Link thanked her in a quiet, flat voice.

Blood and grime washed from his skin in a myriad of dark colors and Link surveyed the new scars
he had now inherited with disdain. The warm water should’ve comforted him but it didn’t. He
dressed for bed and padded along the empty halls to his empty room.

When he lay down to sleep, Link instead stared at the ceiling, unable to stomach the dreamless
drought after all. He deserved the nightmares. He deserved the horrors.

_Shut up. Stop being a martyr._

“I’m not a martyr. I am a murderer,” Link whispered indignantly to the darkness.

_Murderers carry intent. There’s a dictionary in the library if you’ve forgotten that word's
definition. You tried to save my life, Link. You don’t know anything about this situation yet. Why
would you make assumptions so soon?_

“Because I’ve seen the monsters black magic creates. I've seen the monsters of the Nether. I’ve lost
you to that,” Link insisted to his imaginary Sheik.

_Was the Void Walker using black magic? I thought it said Void Walkers were made by the
Goddesses…_

Link paused. Well…yes. The Void Walker _had_ said that. But what did that mean? Was this the
exception to the rule? Would the Goddesses allow this blatant violation or would it be no different
than Ganondort's sacrilegious activities? Perhaps this was more complicated than that. If the Void
Walker had originally been the Goddessess' creation, perhaps Sheik wasn't destined for the same
fate as a Redead. But the Void Walker had insisted Sheik would be different. More like that of the
Nether.

“I’m so sorry, Sheik.”

_Sleep._

Link was arguing with his own mind and he no longer had the excuse of the Nether. Maybe he was
losing his mind. _Really_ losing his mind. Heroes of the past had done it before. Maybe he was one
of them.

War was coming and he lay there talking to himself.

_Sleep._

_Put those fears to bed. We don’t have time for them._

_You were my…_
Here’s the URL for my Congruent playlist. This is the crap I was listening to when writing this monster and even now as I’m editing it. If anything, here’s the bizarre mixture of genres I listen to. Bit.ly/1RvHy9U (Remove spaces)
As per usual, thank you endlessly for reading.
When Link woke in the morning he was thoroughly confused for a few minutes as he took in the blank ceiling above him and the soft white blankets tangled around his body. He was warm and comfortable and, strangely, well-rested.

_The Nether._

_He returned._

_Sheik._

His memories poured back into his mind and he grimaced in the pale light coming from his window. At least he hadn’t dreamed – perhaps his mind had finally reached an exhaustion so deep it had no strength for visions. So Link forced himself to sit up and run his hands through his tangled hair. He hadn’t thought it even possible, but he felt better. Better in a way he had believed was impossible after what he had endured. Fear still lingered in his mind but he could bear it more now than he could last night.

Link dressed and went to Zelda’s private dining hall like it were any other day. Zelda sat in her normal spot over her half-eaten breakfast, golden quill scratching quickly into parchment as she barely noticed his arrival through her concentration.

Sheik’s spot, of course, was empty.

Link didn’t realize he was starving until he saw his food – Zelda looked up as he sat down heavily and dug in. She gave him a tired smile, the dark circles under her eyes a delicate lavender. Only Zelda could manage to make exhaustion look elegant.

“Good morning,” she said quietly, a hoarseness to her voice that spoke volumes to her lack of rest.

“Did you sleep?” he asked.

“A few hours.”

“No change?” Link asked, unable to conjure up anymore words than that.

She set down the quill and folded her hands under her chin. “He hasn’t woken…but that weird energy is starting to fade.”

Link stopped eating and stared at her. “Fading?”

Zelda nodded wearily. “I don’t know what it means…but we should try and stay optimistic.” She paused to give him a cautious look, her eyes taking note of every little detail with a scrutiny he always hated. “You look so much better today.”

“The Nether didn’t lend itself well to rest,” he commented, unable to meet her gaze and returning
to his food.

“Last night you looked worse than after the war. It scared me. I was afraid I had lost you, as well.”

The fear crept into her voice and Link glanced back up, forcing a reassuring smile. “I’ll make it, Zelda.”

She reached out and touched his wrist, but said nothing more.

Once fed, Link knew what little else to do than to clean and sharpen their weapons. He stayed in the armory, emptying out their packs and cleaning off the blood. The Moon Blade had it the worst so he spent the longest on it, rubbing endlessly against the crevices to remove the dirt and gore. The hilt was stained and beyond saving – he spent as much time as possible re-wrapping it. All the while, he stared at the moonstone, trying to find solace in the memory again.

There was a small amount of potions remaining, their vials streaked in drying brown-red that he wiped off quickly. The whole task was starting to unnerve him as he went through three rags, turning them all brown.

It was all a distraction anyway.

Link had just finished cleaning the last of Sheik’s knives when Zelda came for him. At first, he thought it was for Sheik. But she looked calm and simply beckoned for him to follow. He put away the weapons quickly, sheathed his newly polished blade, and followed her down the hall. They passed the Duchess Morsa but Link waved her off when she opened her mouth to speak. He would deal with the offended look he received later. He tailed Zelda into her study whereupon she locked the doors and instructed he sit on a chair adjacent to her desk.

“Can you open it?” she asked.

Of course. The locking spell could only be opened by the one who performed it. Link narrowed his eyes in concentration and mumbled the spell under his breath. It took a moment, but the safe clicked open and she reached under the desk to pull out the ore with a gloved hand. Zelda placed it on a cloth before them and, for a moment, they simply regarded it.

This was the infernal material that would start a war. This was what he nearly died for. This was what Sheik had died for.

He wanted to throw it across the room.

“While you were gone, I attempted to force Evanna to use her life force without causing outright battle…and I was only marginally successful. But I did learn something incredibly important, however,” Zelda explained, her voice impossibly quiet and forcing Link to lean close.

“I spoke with the Sages once more while you were gone. I know why the Order of Hexa destroyed the Great Library.”

Link felt his eyebrows raise, his back tense as he sat up at attention.

“I know you’re aware of the Order of Hexa and the Sheikah word it derives from…it’s a word that only the Sheikah – and very few of them – know how to use. There’s a very specific way to learn its use and we now know those instructions were kept exclusively in the library.”
“So Saria’s guess was right. The Order did destroy the library to keep that truth safe.”

“Yes,” Zelda agreed but then slowly shook her head. “But it goes a lot further than all of that, Link. There is another word whose instructions were in the same text. It’s a variant of an ancient Sheikah-Gerudo word, back when the tribes were one. It’s called Hexam. But it does something different than Hexa – it exerts complete control over another human being. And the amount of people one can control is determined by the power source.”

“Words of possession and death…the prophecy was talking about Hexa and Hexam,” Link whispered, a terrible feeling coiling in his gut. “But Foursky and Evanna can’t get them, right? That information is gone now. The Great Deku Sapling won’t be resurrecting the Library for a while.”

“Prophecies don’t lie, Link. If the Order really is using Hexa, for all we know, the Order might know Hexam, too,” she countered, brow furrowing. “Link, we need to find the Order. We need to keep those words safe. If Foursky finds them…well, we just have to find them first. Perhaps we could avoid a war.”

“You really think Foursky won’t attack, even without the words?” Link asked incredulously. “They now have more Vaspra than you can imagine. They now have their fuel source for anything. They don’t even need of those words to be a threat to us.”

“If we have the Order on our side,” Zelda reasoned, “we might be a threat to them, Link. What chance could their armies stand against a spell that kills and a spell that controls, even if they have all the Vaspra in the world?”

Link shook his head, knowing well where this was going. “I don’t like this, Zelda. In fact, I hate it.”

She rubbed at her forehead and nodded. “I know. I do, too. But we don’t have much of a choice. We need to stand a chance against them. Maybe if we have Hexa and Hexam we can defeat them and use the Vaspra to send them to the Nether and seal it for good. Like the prophecy states.”

“Zelda,” Link said suddenly, feeling a nausea sweep over him at the thought of what she was proposing. “Promise me you won’t use Vaspra for anything other than sealing them in the Nether. Promise me it won’t be used for anything else. Let the words just be a threat. Don’t use them. Don’t let the Order use them. It’s wrong. Those words, that ore…how could it not warp a person?”

Zelda seemed to almost falter for a moment, her blonde eyebrows knitted together and expression divided. Was she truly considering this? The Zelda he knew so well wouldn’t be tempted by this…but then, Link realized grimly, he could see the temptation. For anyone. Not just for her but for him as well.

The future was a scary, blank space in a scroll waiting to be filled. The prophecy was their outline and whatever move they made next would determine the letters future generations would gaze upon.

If there were to be any.

But the moment seemed to pass and Zelda shook her head slowly, a remorseful and horrified expression on her features. It was clear she had now realized the true implications of what they were considering.
Using their enemies evil plans for their own.

Kill them before they kill us.

Dispose of all morals for an empty victory.

It was something her father would’ve done.

Zelda picked up the blue stone and held it out to him. “These words will not be used. By anyone. I swear it by the Goddesses, Link. Cast the spell and lock it. It will be in your charge. You…you can see this situation far better than I can now. You’ve seen things I have not. The prophecy calls upon you to end this…so the ore is yours.”

Link almost laughed at her; he could see the situation far better than her? How unlikely considering the imaginary conversation he’d had in his head the past few days.

But she was correct about one thing: Link had seen things she had not. And not just in the Nether, but in war. Link had seen the true darkness of Ganondorf and knew where the earliest of questionable intentions could go if left unchecked.

Zelda was making a decision her father never could’ve made.

Link nodded and took the ore, staring at it accusingly. So much death and pain and fear over something so…mundane. It could’ve just been some weird Zora trinket or maybe some pretty thing Duchess Morse had cut down and set into gaudy jewelry. But instead, it was the ultimate source of magic and capable of destruction that rivaled the Triforce itself.

With a scowl, he leaned over and chucked it back into the safe, sacrificing a bit of Mana as he cast the locking spell once more.

“To find the Order…” Zelda started, breaking the heavy silence in the room.

Link frowned, already knowing what she was going to say. And he didn’t even know what to think of it. Sheikah were elusive – they were called Shadow Folk for a reason.

The only way they were going to find the Order was with Sheik.

“Let’s just…take it one step at a time,” Link suggested, surprised to find some bit of composure and patience returning to him now. “Let’s see how he is when he wakes.”

“Okay.”

They both walked down to the dungeons together to check on Sheik. Through the bars of the small window on the solid iron door they saw nothing had changed. Sheik looked peaceful, though, and Link tried to take solace in that as he watched the man’s chest rise and fall.

In a lost sort of way, they walked around the grounds together. Link wanted to feel the warmth of sunshine and Zelda didn’t seem to want to be alone. It was one of the rare days that Zelda wore trousers, attracting weird but mostly concealed stares from guards and maids alike. Her tunic was loose and her hair was hanging free along her back.
Link always preferred her this way – Zelda looked like the warrior she really was.

The Council and tradition kept her in pink and purple dresses the majority of the time, so seeing her more comfortable in turn comforted him. Dressed this way Zelda moved like a Sheikah as they walked laps around the grassy slopes. It reminded Link that most of her combat training had been under Lady Impa and Sheik’s instruction.

Their walk was calming. And it was grounding. The horrible chaos of the Nether was beginning to recede from him now that he was back in the place he loved. The sun nursed him back to health in ways food and potion could never do. Much like the war, his trip would scar him for the rest of his life. But now that he was back in the world of the living there was maybe a small chance that Sheik could be okay.

Maybe he could live with that.

_You can live with it._

Link was really going to have to put a moratorium on the whole talking-to-no-one thing, however. Voices in his head, whether he was talking to himself or legitimately hearing them, didn’t bode well on the cusp of a war.

“What happened while we were away? Did Evanna try anything?” Link asked, trying to distract himself from the idea of madness.

Zelda made a face. “She spent the majority of the time with the Ladies of the court. I spent much of my time trying to draw out her magic. Despite her lack of Vaspra, she continued her frivolous use of spells in a way that would drain one’s life force but…”

“What?”

“The more time I spent around her the more I felt like what she was drawing on wasn’t…there.” Zelda looked even more troubled now, her fine face twisting at something Link couldn’t fathom.

“I don’t understand,” Link pressed.

“I don’t know how to make you understand it,” she said, sounding a hint frustrated, but not at Link – at everything. “I think I might just be muddled because of how _otherworldly_ her energy is. She is very much a woman of Termina. I recognize the feeling. But her aura is even more confusing…and it feels familiar…”

Link pulled them to a stop. “Familiar?”

Zelda placed a hand over where he held her elbow. “I’m not sure. I think from here…I can’t rely on my senses anymore. At least for the time being.” Her eyes shifted away, across the hill and down into Castle Town below, the sky above a mellow blue. “And we need to start seriously budgeting for the war. Because we both know it’s coming. It’s just a question of when and how. Will Evanna lead it? Or will Foursky?”

“How much time do you think we have?” Link wondered, his stomach coiling at the reality of yet another war.

“I’d imagine before the end of summer. It will take them some time to gather their armies,” Zelda
replied, lowering her brow in thought once more. “Who knows what horrors they’re creating with that Vaspra.”

“I wish we could’ve stopped it.”

“She had us cornered. The vagueness of her threats made her all the more dangerous. We could all sense it. I don’t think we could’ve done anything differently. Especially if it’s prophecy,” she said with a long sigh. Zelda still looked tired, even in the warm sunlight. Link wanted to reach out and comfort her but she didn’t look like she really wanted it. Her face was closed to him now, no longer the open and vulnerable expression it had been before.

Zelda had always been gifted at shutting down into Queen mode, as Sheik always liked to call it. It made him glad, though; after the emotional upheaval of the night before Link needed Zelda in Queen mode. They needed to seriously consider the future and it was possible that the Kingdom of Amrita wasn’t their only threat.

“We…we need to talk about what we’re going to do if Sheik is…not him,” Link suggested carefully, his chest feeling too tight.

“I don’t know what we would do,” Zelda admitted quietly, staring ahead of them. Despite the blinding sunlight, her eyes looked so dark. Or maybe he was just imagining it. “Order his execution?”

Link couldn’t help but flinch. “We both know that wouldn’t happen. Could you make that call?”

“If he’s too dangerous…if he’s gone…”

It made Link shiver, anger swelling at the thought. He had just gotten Sheik back. He couldn’t handle losing him again. If the loss had broken him before, it would completely destroy him now. Every part of Link wanted to shout at Zelda, demand she keep him alive, even if Sheik wasn’t Sheik anymore.

But he stopped himself and the logic he hadn’t had in so long, finally returned – Link knew she was right.

If Sheik was gone and only a monster remained they would have to do what was best for the kingdom, especially if he were more powerful like the Void Walker had warned. But then how would they find the Order? Impa was a Sage. What other Sheikah were there? Would they risk a trip to Termina to find the Sheikah that lived there? Would they mount a blind search of Hyrule for the Order? There were too many unknown variables.

“Execution…would need to be the very last resort, Zelda.”

“Of course.”

“Do you think he’s still in there?” Link asked, suddenly desperate for reassurance. He didn’t even know if he thought it but he needed to hear Zelda say it. She glanced at him, her eyes wary and unsure.

“I think…he’s still there. I think he’s still Sheik. I don’t think he’s a mindless monster,” Zelda answered carefully. “But I fear we’re going to find that things have changed for him and, out of all
of us, Sheik will be the one to suffer the most.”

“Then we do everything we can to help him,” Link said decisively. “Like you and Sheik did for me.”

Zelda gave him a sad smile and closed the gap between them, looping a thin arm around his bicep and holding on tight. She was warm and real and comforting, the starkest of differences between the past week of his life. Link could hang onto this. Link could make it if he still had these people.

After their walk, Zelda was at the mercy of several meetings, leaving Link to stay in the dungeons to watch Sheik sleep. He didn’t know what else to do and he wanted to make sure the first person Sheik saw when he awoke was someone close to him, not a guard. Link sat with his back against the cold iron door, letting his mind wander as he regarded Sheik’s mixed energy on the other side.

Zelda had been right, of course – his energy was starting to settle. It was still off but there was something much more familiar about his presence now. Maybe once he awoke that strangeness would leave completely. Maybe.

Link sent the guard away when the man offered to take Link’s post, insisting he get some dinner. The guard was kind but Link’s appetite was nonexistent now that he sat vigil over the Sheikah. He just needed to know. He needed his best friend. He needed to know what Sheik was going to say.

He needed Sheik.

Link thought back to just a few days ago, in that damp little cave, holding his best friend as blood rolled down his chin. He thought about the way those dark red eyes had glazed over, seeing something Link couldn’t. He remembered the way Sheik reached out and touched his cheek, an action so intimate it made his chest ache.

He knew how he felt about Sheik. He wasn’t ready to even say it, but he knew. And maybe Sheik had been on the same page as him the whole time.

But would he ever know?

You were my…

Link rubbed his eyes and yawned, tired from a day of nothing. But perhaps that was to be expected – he was still in recovery from the Nether. His wounds were finally fading but his mind was still coiled so tightly he wondered if he’d ever find true calm again. Maybe once Sheik woke up. Maybe when that giant question hovering over their heads went away.

He could handle the impending war more than he could handle this wait.

Link hadn’t meant to doze off but the darkness of the hallway had lured him away from the waking world and his dreams were a blur of trees and blood and screeches. He saw the rotting fur of the Vog and the revolting muck of Balta skin. He heard his name, said over and over, in all different voices – first the Void Walker, then the Vog, then Sheik…

Link jerked awake and he knew.

“Link?”
He got to his feet so quickly, dizziness made him grapple for the bars of the door. And he nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw nothing but wide red eyes, very awake and very aware. Shock flushed through him and his vision sharpened as he took in every little detail. Even with the cowl back in place, he could see the thick, dark blonde lashes, the glaze in his eyes from sleep, the mess of his hair from lying down for so long…

“Sheik,” Link replied, his fingers white-knuckling the bars. “Sheik.”

“What…happened?” he asked, voice hoarse and unsure. His eyes were now darting around the small cell. “Why am I in here? Where are we?”

Link wanted to sob. The bizarre aura was gone.

It was Sheik. He was staring at Sheik.

Alive. Sheik was alive.

He was standing right there, completely fine.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Link demanded, his voice breaking.

Sheik’s eyes were getting wider as the emotion bled into the question. “I…we were in the…we’re back?”

“Yes. We’re back.”

“The Vog. We were trapped by the Vog…I was…” and then his eyes went wide, somehow even wider than they already were. “I was dying. I remember leaving.”

Link’s hands shook on the bars as emotion threatened to bury him again. But he tensed his jaws and held it together. “It’s very complicated, Sheik. I just…need you to talk. Tell me everything. How do you feel?”

Sheik looked one hundred percent spooked. And Link couldn’t blame him if the last thing he remembered was dying. “I feel…I don’t know. What’s going on, Link?”

Damn Zelda and her infernal locking spells – he would need her to unlock the door. Sheik wasn’t a threat. The thought of him staying in that ridiculous cell incensed him. “I can’t let you out without Zelda. She’ll sense you’re awake and be here soon. Just tell me everything you remember.”

“We were running from the Vog, they caught up with us, you came up with some moronic plan to get us out of it…then the Vog attacked me before I could kill it. I just…remember pain. Unfathomable pain,” Sheik recalled, his eyes staring blankly at the floor as he seemed to relive the memories, face twisting in pain. “You carried me. You were running. Then we were somewhere dark and small. You were pouring potion down my throat…but something was calling my name.”

“What was it?” Link asked.

“I…don’t know. I remember speaking. I remember speaking to you. Then something said my name and told me to follow it. Then everything went black,” Sheik described, eyes meeting Link’s once more, looking lost and almost frightened. There were no lies there. Link could feel the anxiety rolling off his friend, so powerful it was almost a tangible wave crashing against Link’s mind. It
made Link feel so guilty for pushing Sheik to relive his dying moments. “Link, what happened?”

“You were dead. You were gone.”

Link’s voice came out hoarse and half-broken. He couldn’t feel his fingers for his numbing grip on the bars. Keeping everything in check took all of his strength but at least now he wasn’t drowning in sadness anymore. Now, it was relief. Endless, deep, ground-shaking relief.

“Link…” Sheik’s gaze was loaded, emotions pushing forward over and over in his eyes – regret, sorrow, and fear in a hurried cycle. “I’m so sorry.”

Of all things, Link laughed. The sound was bordering on hysterical as he ducked his head and pressed his face into his arm; the smile felt like it was cracking his face in half. “Why are you apologizing?”

Link felt warm hands cover his own and he looked back up. Sheik was even closer to the bars now, his bare hands laid over Link’s own straining grip. His hands were ice under the warmth of the desert and Link just stared, mind going blank.

“You got the Vaspra?”

Link nodded.

“Evanna has it?”

He nodded once more. “She left the kingdom. But she’ll return, we’re sure. War is coming.”

Sheik nodded in agreement, his fingers tensing on Link’s.

“It…it was…the Void Walker, wasn’t it?”

Link’s stomach dropped through the floor. He wasn’t going to say it. It was too soon. It was too much. He wanted to hold onto the relief and the happiness. He wanted to hold onto this. But Sheik knew. Of course he knew. Sheik would remember the brief conversation they had had about the creature. He was too brilliant to not piece it together.

“I had to leave your body. To find the Vaspra. I left you. I was going to bring you back afterwards, bury you under your mountain,” Link explained, almost babbling as the horror of it filled him back up. “But it found you. It told me it would find you when I met it in the woods. I didn’t think—”

“Stop,” Sheik ordered.

Link shook his head. “No, Sheik. This is my fault. I’m responsible for your death and for your resurrection. And…the aftereffects…we don’t know how you’ll…”

But Sheik was shaking his head, too, gripping Link’s hands so hard it was painful. Those red eyes bored into Link’s as he canted his head, trying to grab Link’s attention again. “You are responsible for nothing. You did everything you could. You have to let it go.”

“I can’t let anything go, Sheik. You don’t know what that place did to me. You don’t know what—”

“I know. I see it in your eyes,” Sheik interrupted once more. “You don’t have to tell me, Link.”
They both fell silent. Link leaned forward and pressed his head against the bars, shutting his eyes tightly and struggling for his composure for the thousandth time. Why couldn’t he just keep it together? Why couldn’t he just be okay?

But who could possibly be okay after everything that had happened?

Sheik let go of one of his hands and threaded his fingers into Link’s hair, brushing over his scalp with a gentleness Link could never imagine a Sheikah warrior capable of. He almost jumped in surprise, eyes snapping open to stare at the stone floor but the sensation was quelling the pain and sadness in him in its own way so he closed his eyes once more to the comforting feeling. Link focused on the soft caress and tried to forget. Forget the fear. Forget the horror. Forget Sheik’s death.

“Why do the Goddesses torture you?” Sheik murmured, more to himself than to Link.

Link raised his head and Sheik’s hand slid out of his hair, staying extended below his chin and hanging loosely between the bars of the window. He was met with dark red eyes and an expression he had never seen before. No. He had seen it before. Link had seen it before Sheik’s death, as he uttered, You were my…

“You were my…” Link quoted. “What were you going to say? What was I?”

Something darkened even more in Sheik’s eyes and the hand by his face trembled ever so slightly. They were silent for a moment, just regarding each other in a confused mix of unreadable expression and tense breaths. They were so close but so distant with the thick door locked between them. Sheik opened his mouth to speak, but…

There were sharp steps down the hall to his left and, within moments Zelda was in sight, back in a regal dress and looking frantic. As she entered the doorway, the question covered her face like a veil.

Link nodded and assured her. “He’s fine.”

Queen mode was abandoned as she let out a laugh that sounded more like a sob and cried the unlocking spells out at the door. Sheik barely had a moment to prepare for her embrace as she invaded his space in a tight hug that he rarely tolerated. But they were childhood friends. Sheik would, ultimately, tolerate anything of her. As would Link.

“Welcome back,” she said in a shaky voice. “I’m sorry you woke up in here.”

Sheik just shook his head and hugged her back tolerantly, something that also rarely occurred. “I know. It’s fine.”

It was surreal seeing the two before him. Just a day ago, he had been fighting for his life and Sheik was a corpse in a hole. Link just stood, rooted to the spot by paralyzing shock and happiness…and wariness.

Would the Goddesses really be so kind? Was Sheik really okay? Link didn’t know if he could allow himself to relax and be completely relieved, too afraid it would all be taken from him again. He watched Zelda finally release Sheik, tears of relief filling her eyes but never falling. Sheik assured her he was okay when she asked, his eyes shooting over to Link and back again.
Sheik looked somewhat irritated which was actually a good sign.

Irritation was completely normal when he became the object of Zelda’s affection. Because Zelda loved her boys and she had no qualms with making that apparent. Maybe he was okay. Maybe he would really be okay.

“Are you hungry?” Zelda asked and Link finally broke out of his thoughts.

“No, I’m fine,” Sheik insisted. “I would really just like to go outside. I want to see a real sky.”

Link could relate.

So they left the dungeons behind. Sheik fell into step next to Link, like nothing had happened; and to Sheik maybe nothing had happened. He died and then woke up back in the living realm. Sheik was completely unaware of how Link had grieved, how Link had nearly lost it to the Nether. Sheik didn’t know just how bad it had really gotten. Sheik didn’t know Link had even started talking to himself and made bargains to only live long enough to end the war and bury him.

But now Link felt that familiar, warm presence beside him and those horrors were starting to melt away. Sheik always had this effect on him and nothing, clearly, had changed despite his resurrection.

Sheik couldn’t erase the memories, much like that of the war. But maybe he could help Link live with them again.

They went to the highest balcony, the three of them, and sat on the edge of the stone railing. The sun had long set and the sky was a cascade of glittering lights. The moon was only a crescent now, the light barely illuminating Castle Town below them. The air was warm and fresh and one look at Sheik told Link all he needed to know:

The living world was an antidote.

“Do you feel any different?” Zelda asked after long minutes of silence. She sat between them, her dress swaying around her legs.

“No.” Yes.

Link sensed the lie as soon as it happened. And for a moment, he thought Zelda had as well. But the look on her face told him she was oblivious to it. Link stared over at Sheik in shocked, recognizing what had occurred.

Sheik had pushed that thought into Link’s head. Somehow. That was why he had sensed the lie. Link didn’t know if his companion was aware of it but it was clear it had happened nonetheless.

“You’ll tell us if that changes?” she pressed.

“Of course.” I’ll tell Link.

And Link frowned at this. He looked over once more and this time Sheik gave him a pointed look. Nothing had changed there: as always, they were keeping Zelda purposely out of the loop. But since when could Sheik do that? The answer, of course, was unfortunately obvious.
But what did that even mean? Should he be worried? Was Sheik worried? Did Sheik even know he was doing it? Link would have to wait until they could speak alone, though, since Sheik seemed to have no intention of revealing anything around Zelda. And perhaps it was rightfully so – she now had a war to prepare for. Sheik’s new-found telepathy was just a distraction at this point.

As they stared across the landscape, the fields rolling far in the distance and stretching to the horizon, Zelda updated Sheik on the current situation and their plan to find the Order. Almost instantly, Link could sense Sheik’s discomfort and he remembered how unhappy the Sheikah was that his own people were violating strict laws.

“If they really are Sheikah, as the Sages say, we assumed you’d have a good idea of where they’ve gone to,” Zelda finished. Her head was turned away from Link, but he could imagine the grim expression she now wore. Link doubted she enjoyed shoving the newly resurrected Sheik back into the metaphorical frying pan, but what choice did they have?

“They aren’t of Hyrule,” Sheik countered. “They are of Termina. I’m not sure where they would go.”

“Kakariko?” she wondered. “The Sheikah of Termina are descendants of those who knew that village to be of the tribe, correct?”

Sheik was beginning to look even more uncomfortable and Link was tempted to ask Zelda to stop. He had only just woken up. From death. He didn’t need this bombardment of his own people’s folly.

“From what I understand, yes. But there’s no reason for them to stay in Hyrule if the threat has gone back to the deserts of Termina.”

“The Sages don’t think they’ve left,” she said. “They believe the Order is staying here for the war.”

Sheik didn’t say any more, looking away to the sky with a hard expression. Link knew, maybe better than anyone, that Sheik rarely got frustrated enough to back down. And one couldn’t really blame him all things considered. Link reached out and prodded her lightly in the side, hoping she would give it a rest for a few minutes.

Zelda shot him a glare but said no more.

“They would go…to the desert,” Sheik said after a while of quiet. His voice was guarded, but sure. “They would go to the mountain, where our people began.”

Zelda looked a bit confused, not being that knowledgeable on a people that were naturally secretive enough to not even share their language with Hylians. Link was privileged to know what he did. But she looked a little reassured – now they had a direction.

“If that’s what you think, then we’ll follow you.”

Sheik just nodded distractedly, looking away completely so his eyes were hidden. And Link could sense the overwhelming feeling his friend was fighting with. He could relate. Zelda, however, seemed to be unaware. Was Sheik purposely blocking her from his energies? Was that even possible? Zelda was one of the most skilled people in Hyrule at the arts of aura reading and extrasensory. Her premonitions always came to pass and she could sense a bad mood in Kakariko.
Now a Sheikah was completely blocking her. Should Link be concerned?

The moon was nearly at its zenith when Zelda decided to retire for the night. She gave Sheik a light touch on his arm and threw Link a soft, but pointed look before spinning around and getting tiredly to her feet to go back inside. Once the door closed shut with a soft boom, they were left alone, the small space Zelda had taken now empty but still warm between them.

Link needed the room, though. He needed the space between them so he could keep a handle on his still-wayward emotions.

“I don’t want to go back there,” Sheik admitted quietly, surprising Link for a moment.

“But would they be there?” Link countered.

Sheik readjusted his cowl – a habit Link had always associated with moments Sheik felt vulnerable but refused to admit it – and gave the skyline a frustrated look he rarely wore. “I don’t know. I’m still too muddled from coming back. But…yes. If they’re in Hyrule, I believe that’s where they would go.”

Link nodded. “I know it bothers you.”

Sheik gave an uneasy shrug. “My people’s history is written in blood. It bothers us all.” He gave a long sigh and brushed his still-messy hair out of his face. On any other night, Link would’ve found it endearing because Sheik barely bothered with his hair; it seemed to just get in his way half the time but he endured it because of what was probably Sheikah tradition. But tonight it just made Link solemn because dying and coming back to life had caused the messiness, not just sleeping the wrong way. “I haven’t been to Vrika since the attack. I don’t…want to return. I don’t want to imagine what I’ll find.”

“You won’t go alone,” Link assured him. “Remember that you don’t have to bear any of this alone.”

“But you did.”

Sheik fixed him with a soft look that Link couldn’t hang on to – now it was his turn to feel vulnerable. And that was a feeling Link was quite done with being subjected to. “I’m still here, though. I made it. That doesn’t mean I can’t be there for you.”

“I should go alone,” Sheik insisted quietly.

Link couldn’t help but reach out and half-heartedly punch the Sheikah’s arm in irritation. Of course, Sheik was mostly unfazed because the hit wasn’t meant to maim. But, really? Sheik was going to play this game?

“Over my dead body,” Link snapped.

“You have to help Zelda prepare for a war. It’s best if I-”

“Don’t make me punch you again,” Link warned over the reasoning Sheik was trying to spew out.

“If the Order is really out there they’ll probably be a bit more receptive to one of their own than a
“Hylian covered in the Royal Crest,” Sheik interjected, gesturing to the blues and dark golds that had become Link’s normal wear as Guardsman.

He gave Sheik an impassive look. “And you think I can’t change my wardrobe?”

“You’re the Hero. It’s not about your wardrobe. You’re missing my point, Link.”

“And you’re missing mine!” Link exclaimed, on his feet before he could stop himself. He glared down at Sheik, suddenly reenacting their argument in the field when Sheik had admitted his sickness. But the anger Link felt now went deeper than that. Much deeper. “You were dying, but you didn’t tell me. You accuse me of being a Martyr and insist on going to the Nether. And then you die. And now you’re back and you want to cross the desert by yourself and you think that’s okay.”

“Link, it’s about priorities. I’m not a priority. I’m not the prophecy; you are.”

“No, shut up, Sheik,” Link warned, the anger flooding his brain like it had been on the brink of snapping all along. It was making him far too honest but he couldn’t care in the light of what had happened in just the span of a week. “You’re a priority to me! Or does that not matter?”

Now Sheik was on his feet too, the movement not as lithe as it normally was. Like he was tired. Like this was all too much for him, like it was for Link. “It matters—”

“I nearly lost my mind down there, Sheik!” Link went on, now completely incapable of stopping the onslaught. He didn’t know which was more frightening – the inconsolable sadness or the uncontrollable anger? “It took me a day to even get a hold of myself again! I nearly didn’t make it! I nearly gave up!”

“You would’ve made it, Link, you’re the Hero—”

“Say that one more time and I’ll—!” But he cut himself off, not even sure of what threat he would’ve made. Sheik took a cautious step forward, clearly shocked the argument was escalating so quickly, but Link ignored it. “Why can’t you just stop deciding what I need to know or what I need to do? Why do you make all the decisions about this?” Link waved his hand, gesturing between them to reference…what? What was he referencing? Did he want to know?

Sheik froze now, nailed to the spot by whatever door Link had just opened. And for a moment Link worried that whatever door he had just opened was one that couldn’t be shut. Would he regret this outburst later? Would there be repercussions because of this?

But Link was angry and hurt and sad and broken and, Goddesses, if he was going to have a meltdown he might as well not half-ass it.

“I don’t want you to cross the desert, Link,” Sheik said slowly and carefully. “Because the desert is terribly dangerous and you’re not used to that climate. It could kill you.”

“Have you forgotten that I’ve been to the desert before?” Link snapped back. “I cleared an entire temple in that climate.”

“You’ve never crossed it.”

“I don’t care. You’re not crossing it alone.”
“Goddesses, Link!” Sheik suddenly yelled, his body in motion as he advanced like he’d been coiled up the entire time, his body snapping like a spring. He was suddenly in Link’s face with raging red eyes. “Don’t you get it? If you die-”

“You died!” Link bellowed, shoving Sheik away from him as his rage came to a boiling point and he was shouting louder than he ever had before. “You died, Sheik! Don’t lecture me about dying because we both know the Goddesses would never allow it! You’re the one who died! I didn’t die because that would’ve been a relief!”

Sheik’s eyes were wild now with shock and disbelief. All the ugliness Link had inherited in the Nether was now laid out between them and Link shook with the aftermath, staring at the ground between them because he couldn’t look anywhere else.

Sheik wasn’t Sheik anymore.

And Link wasn’t Link.

“Link, what happened? What happened to you in the Nether?” Because you’re different now. It was unspoken, but Link still heard it anyway because Sheik was now pushing it into Link’s head.

Link locked up at this, the conversation taking a sharp turn into a territory he wasn’t ready to visit. Because he could be angry. He could yell at the top of his lungs about how stupid Sheik was being and how terrible he was for not being considerate with Link’s stupid feelings. But to talk about how unhinged he had become down there?

No.

He couldn’t. Because he had to admit that ultimate weakness when he’d already let loose enough. And then he had to face what he felt for Sheik, whatever that was, because the two went hand-in-hand. Neither of them could handle themselves so how exactly were they going to handle three years of convoluted affection that all equaled out to…what?

Link knew the Nether had changed him. He didn’t need convincing. But he wasn’t ready to talk about it and really accept how it had changed every part of him.

So he just stood there and looked back out at the horizon, wishing he could find anything to look at, anything to use to deflect the question, anything to say. But there was nothing so he just waited for Sheik to either say something else or walk away.

Minutes passed and Sheik finally seemed to come to some sort of decision with a soft sigh. “Okay. We leave at dawn.”

Link just nodded, feeling once more like a child but unwilling to let his anger go. He turned to leave, heading for the door so he could calm down in private.

“Link,” Sheik said from behind him, voice so quiet now compared to their yelling. Link paused to listen but not look. “You want me to stop making decisions about this…I’ll try. But then you need to tell me what this is.”

And there it was. Or maybe it wasn’t. It was vague and it was confusing, but it was something. Which was maybe better than nothing. Or maybe it was worse. But Sheik had acknowledged that
there was a whole lot of unanswered questions between them and Link could only nod once more and leave the roof.

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Here. I threw a bone. A very angsty bone, which I’m inclined to apologize for just a tad. Thanks to all of you that have been reviewing, whether for the first time or those of you nerds that review every damn chapter and literally make my day. As always I can be found reblogging/posting trash at sincosma on Tumblr.
Chapter 19

Zelda walked them to the stables before the sun rose, attempting to find something to carry for them though it was obvious Link and Sheik were hardly burdened. And it was almost amusing. But there was still tension between him and Sheik. Zelda could sense this, the stiffness chasing away any silly frowns she might have worn at not getting her way. She walked beside them in trousers again and she at least huffed at Sheik’s raised eyebrows.

“Don’t look at me like that, Sheik,” Zelda told him. “I think I can wear whatever I’d like before a war.”

Sheik just shook his head, clearly exasperated but knowing better than to challenge it. Zelda was just trying to cheer them both up – she knew something had happened and, although she wasn’t happy that they were departing so soon, she was more than willing to try and give them a light-hearted send off.

Like they weren’t heading to Sheik’s ruined village to find a group of rogue Sheikah with killing spells.

Kronos didn’t seem to recognize Sheik at first. He snorted and stomped his midnight black hooves when Sheik approached and Link couldn’t help but throw a worried glance at Zelda. Sheik was still different. They all knew that, Sheik included. But animals held an intuition that even Zelda herself couldn’t grasp.

Link just hoped it wasn’t something bad.

Sheik quickly talked his horse down, speaking gently in Sheikah like he always did to Kronos. The horse still appeared confused but recognized the sound of his owner’s voice, slowly going calm once more. Although Link and Zelda could no longer sense the Nether aura, Kronos clearly could. But Link pushed the worry out of his head and started saddling up Epona – he had to stay focused.

Through the course of the night Link had managed to swallow down all of his wild emotions. He knew he had to keep a level head now that they were leaving the castle. Hyrule was on the brink of war and the last thing he needed to do was rush back out into the wilderness a complete mess. Sheik, too, seemed much calmer when they all ate breakfast in the morning – well, Link and Zelda ate. Sheik just sat there going through a stack of parchment Zelda needed proofreading.

Much to Link’s annoyance, Duchess Morsa had insisted on joining them, chattering on about her dresses and aristocratic drama. It deterred them from discussing any more of their trip but it appeared Duchess Morsa wasn’t quite so air-headed that she failed to sense the stress between them all.

“Are you and the Sheikah leaving again?” she asked, earning an annoyed glance from Sheik who was now scribbling some corrections with a red quill on Zelda’s papers. Sheik, on principle, did not like being referred to as The Sheikah. Link didn’t have to ask why when for the past three years he had been called The Hero.
Link nodded, glancing at Zelda and hoping she would start another vapid conversation to divert the girl’s attention. But the Queen was too engrossed in the budget her and the Council had come up with the previous day so there would be no saving him.

“Where are you going?” she pressed, tossing back her blonde hair and leaning forward with a mischievous smile.

“Just a routine scout,” he dead panned.

“Liar.”

Morsa’s unexpected perceptive moments always seemed to coincide with the most inconvenient times. “It’s confidential.”

“Are we going to war?” Morsa hedged, apparently trying for a different angle. “My father has mentioned sending me back to my mother as of late.”

Zelda glanced up, her eyes narrowing a bit. The Queen, for the most part, avoided Morsa. The girl pestered her far too much as it was with Morsa’s father being on the Council. In fact, the only reason she was to join them for breakfast was to keep her father, Lord Bilios, from complaining. He was still offended by Link’s behavior during the negotiations with Evanna so he demanded that Morsa have her way.

And he was also arguing with Zelda for an engagement between his daughter and the High Royal Guardsman, much to Link’s exasperation. No matter how Bilios detested Link it was clear Morsa controlled him just as much as Zelda did, which was really saying something.

Link had managed to convince her there would be no war and evade anymore questions for the rest of the breakfast. But as he left the dining hall she followed him out, tugging on his sleeve and throwing out a shy look.

“Well, you know how the Ladies of the Court blabber – I know where you’re going anyway. So, be careful in the desert, Guardsman,” she told him with a soft smile. Her eyes fluttered flirtatiously, long lashes like a butterfly’s wings.

And then she floated gracefully down the hall, giving him one last blushing glance before she turned the corner. What a world to live in, he thought to himself. Morsa had nothing better to do with her time than gossip and flirt; if they survived this war, there was absolutely no way he could ever suck it up and marry her.

“I don’t think I need to tell you to conserve your water, do I?” Zelda said with a very unqueenly smirk, tapping at his canteen and drawing his attention away from Morsa and her silliness.

Link allowed himself a small smile. “Be careful while we’re gone. I posted guards near Kokiri yesterday – as your General in war, I suggest we keep them there. We’ll send word if anything happens or if we find the Order. If you hear nothing…”

“Then we’re probably dead,” Sheik supplied dryly. The return of sarcasm made Link grin for the first time in a while.

Zelda gave them both a grumpy look. “I feel so comforted. Leave before I have you both drawn and quartered.”
Link allowed her to hug him tightly as she whispered in his ear, *Watch him*. He nodded just barely and she released him to attack Sheik with a similar grip.

*Watch him. When was Link ever not watching Sheik?*

They left as the sun drifted into the sky, just peering over the mountains. There was a coolness to the air that alluded to autumn…Link wondered if the war would fall before summer’s end. He recalled the dream he had in the Nether – it had been warm still. But he wasn’t Zelda and he’d never had another real premonition since the seven-year war, so how could it be real?

*Wait.*

His stomach dropped, his head made dizzy.

Hexam had been in his dream. The soldiers had been under Foursky’s control. Sheik had been under Foursky’s control.

How could he have known about Hexam before Zelda told him?

The realization gave him a start as they crossed the bridge into the fields, his body going rigid with shock and worry. Sheik sensed it, having been leading the way, and held Kronos up to match Epona’s stride.

“What?”

But it fell upon deaf ears as the dream ran over and over Link’s mind. The field, the elephants as in Zelda’s dream, the blue eyes and mindless stares of his *own* soldiers – *friends, comrades* – Zelda bloody and grim and begging for retreat, and Sheik…

No.

“What?” Sheik said more forcefully this time, his warm hand gripping Link’s arm just under his pauldron. “Talk to me.”

Worry buzzed through him as Link shook his head, more to rid himself of the memories than to say *no*. He couldn’t tell Sheik about the end of the dream. He couldn’t divulge how Sheik was under the influence of Hexam, somehow, and *killed* him.

Retribution.

*Consider this my retribution.*

“I had a dream in the Nether,” Link explained numbly. “The dream was of a battlefield, of the war with Foursky. The soldiers of Hyrule were…under Hexam.”

It took Sheik a moment to realize what Link was saying and then his red eyes widened, shoulders just as tense as Link’s. “We didn’t learn about Hexam until…”

“Until we returned,” Link supplied, feeling Sheik push his own shock into Link’s mind, doubling the sensation in his head and making him feel nauseous. “How would I know about Hexam unless…?”
“Have you had premonitions before, Link?” Sheik pressed.

“Yes, but only once. When I was younger I dreamt of Ganondorf taking the castle before I knew the war was coming or I knew who I was.”

The horses were now walking at a pace barely above that of a walk, clearly sensing their rider’s distress and snorting in the still morning air. Sheik looked away distractedly, staring sightlessly on the horizon as he seemed to process what the premonition meant.

“Perhaps we should…”

“Not tell Zelda,” Link finished for him, fixing him with a forceful look.

“I don’t think she should be quite out of this particular loop, Link,” Sheik argued.

“Well, you seem convinced on keeping her out of the loop when it comes to your new abilities. Explain to me the difference,” he couldn’t help but snap back, the anger of the previous night nearly showing its ugly head once more.

Sheik gave him a wide-eyed look. “New abilities…?”

Maybe Sheik wasn’t aware of it. But he had been giving Link a look. Like Sheik knew he was pushing his thoughts into Link’s head. Or perhaps he had just been looking and nothing more. Maybe he really had no idea.

“I could hear your thoughts last night, Sheik,” he explained, cooling down a bit. “It only happened a few times, but I thought you were doing it on purpose. When Zelda asked you if you felt any different…you said no out loud but you thought yes. I heard it loud and clear in my head.”

Sheik just stared at him, like he was waiting for Link to say something more that clarified everything. Like Link was speaking a different language and he was simply waiting for the translation. Sheik seemed to be just as lost as he was.

“What feels different, Sheik?” Link asked quietly, giving Epona a soft kick to get them moving again. At least he had now completely derailed the idea of worrying Zelda – she probably already had her own premonition about it, anyway.

It was clear Sheik didn’t want to talk about it, but their relationship – especially after the argument last night – was going to need some concessions until they could really talk about the baggage between them. He gave Sheik the time he needed to collect his thoughts, watching the sun stretch up into the blooming sky; they would soon lose the brightness to an overcast blanket of clouds that had begun to form above their heads.

“I feel…out of control. Overpowered,” he finally admitted. “Like I’m about to snap any moment.”

“Snap how?” Anxiety crept into Link’s voice before he could stop it.

“I feel like I have twice as much magic coursing through me. I’m honestly afraid to access it at all,” Sheik admitted quietly.

“So that’s why you were pushing thoughts in my head? Because of the increased magic?”
“I didn’t mean to – I wasn’t aware I was doing it or that I even could in the first place,” Sheik amended. “I’m sorry. I’m still…equalizing, I guess.”

Link nodded. He was still equalizing too, but for different reasons. At least Sheik could talk about what was happening to him; having difficult but earnest conversations was better than guessing what horrors might be stewing in the Sheikah’s mind. They went quiet after that, finally returning to a normal trot across the fields.

When they neared Lon Lon Ranch Sheik offered his consent to a visit. But Link couldn’t. He told Sheik he didn’t want to spare the time, but he really just couldn’t. He couldn’t look at Malon and pretend to be okay. She would see right through him and expose him with comforting words, like she did after the Shadow Temple, and it would make everything all the more difficult. So by midday they skirted around it like it were a mine field.

Despite their earlier tensions, they fell back into their easy rhythm of travel, taking turns leading so the other could focus on scanning the horizon. They paused for more water by mid-afternoon and sat under a copse of trees. It reminded him of the small group of trees they rested under on their way back to the castle where Evanna awaited them. He felt just as stressed and just as exhausted. The memory of it made Link bristle. They had been so foolish to leave the castle like that. They should’ve known better.

“After I…” Sheik started, breaking the quiet, “died, what did you do?”

Link started a bit, not expecting Sheik to open a conversation, let alone ask such a sensitive question. But Link had made himself a promise to keep his head on straight once outside the castle so he answered the question the best he could without igniting everything again.

“I needed a day to heal from the Vog attack,” Link explained, running a broken blade of grass between his fingers distractedly. “The next day I covered the cave your body was in and went to find the closest vein of Vaspra.”

“How did you find it, though?” Sheik asked. “I thought you weren’t able to sense anything in there.”

“How did you find it, though?” Sheik asked. “I thought you weren’t able to sense anything in there.”

“After you died, I was able to. I don’t know why.”

Sheik looked perplexed, but let it go. “So you found the vein, mined the Vaspra,” he supplied.

Link nodded. “I had to dig down a little ways, but I found it. I mined a good portion from the earth and when I climbed back out the Vog pack had found me. Luckily, I had the foresight to tie the Calling Bell to you so…when the Void Walker…”

Sheik gave him one of those impressed looks that Link – though he would now admit it himself but no one else – worked tirelessly for. “That was very clever. And it was also fantastic timing.”

Link just shrugged, hoping this was the end of the questionnaire. Because Sheik knew how to press every button he possessed and Link wasn’t feeling up to another argument.

And, thank the Goddesses, it was.
By nightfall they were halfway through the field, making camp around with the smallest fire they could manage; the Nether still had them both easily spooked. Neither of them said it but they occasionally crossed glances and Link saw Sheik was just as antsy as he was.

It was amazing what that place had managed to instill in both of them so quickly.

“I spoke to Lady Impa last night,” Sheik commented, interrupting the unsure silence that had settled deeply between them for the better part of the day.

“What is so bad about returning to Vrika?”

Sheik fished a stick from the grass and tore at the stray branches distractedly. His eyes shifted back and forth, not really seeing the fire before them, and appeared to deliberate his answer with more hesitation than ever. So Link waited, as he was now accustomed to doing when it came to Sheik and complicated and emotionally charged answers.

He watched the reflection of the flames bloom sharply in Sheik’s irises, the color like glass stained crimson in the Temple of Time. His hair was tame now, hanging around his dark face and glowing golden in the half light. He looked like he always did: stoic, exotic, strong, and…

He was beautiful. Link could at least admit that now without confusion.

And he was alive.

“There was no one left after the slaughter. I left with Lady Impa and she never went back. There was no time. There weren’t any swords left to help. No one…cleared it,” Sheik explained carefully, his voice a taut wire. He tossed the stick rigidly into the flames, scattering ambers around them in the black.

Link’s stomach tightened at this. What awaited them at Vrika was…a tribe of skeletons and destroyed homes, the ruins of war. It wouldn’t even be a battleground; it would be a graveyard. Not blessed or visited but barely even remembered except by its two lone survivors. It suddenly made Link want to call the whole trip off. Why would the Order go to such a place? Maybe Impa was right – they shouldn’t go.

“Sheik,” Link started, “we don’t have to-"

“No.” Sheik moved a stiff hand over the fire to cut him off. “No. We must go. We must find the Order. I must put these fears to bed.”

Link could only nod; he wouldn’t argue this one with Sheik. Not when they were on the brink of war. Not when they so desperately needed to keep the users of Hexa and Hexam out of Foursky’s
“Someone needs to put those souls to rest…and it should be a Sheikah. They are my people,” he finished, pulling his legs from their crossed position and up to his chest. As before, it reminded Link of the night in the library after the ceremony. Back when Sheik was Sheik and Link was Link. Back when the fire in Link’s mind was just a small flame, far easier to ignore and avoid.

And now…what a wildfire Link held for the Sheikah. If only he could find the right words now that Sheik was back. This was his second chance to…

To what?

He couldn’t do it. Link couldn’t lend the energy to work through it for himself, let alone unleash it between them. At least not in that moment. Not in the shadow of chaos. Not in the lonely dark of the field. Not with tensions high and no time in the world to risk allowing his feelings to flourish. He was going to have to bite it back.

Sheik took first watch. As Link lay down for a few hours he realized that Sheik hadn’t eaten since they left the castle. He reminded his companion of this quietly but he only received a vague grunt for his concern. Who knew what Sheik’s eating habits were anymore? Who knew what was really different about him now? Who knew what he had become?

Link fought the fear that brought him and stole a few hours of rest.

When he woke the moon had set and leeched almost all light from the landscape. For one horrible moment Link panicked, mind a rush of adrenaline. It was so dark. It was Nether-dark as his eyes struggled to find some source of light. His breath caught in his throat as he struggled to his feet and tried to find equilibrium.

Black, cold, empty, dangerous…

A hand gripped his arm and Link was brought back to reality. There was a splatter of stars over his head. He could make out the landscape, all sweeping plains and peppered with trees. The air was warm and soft and the whispering wind smoothed back his hair. The night was beautiful – their world was beautiful.

This was not the Nether.

This was _not_ the Nether.

He was safe. He was fine.

“Are you okay?” Sheik asked quietly.

He gave a jerky nod, feeling dreadfully like a child and wishing Sheik would let go of him. “I’m fine. I’ll take watch. Get some sleep.”

It didn’t take moonlight to know his friend wasn’t convinced, but Sheik let him go nonetheless. They both settled back on the ground and Link propped his elbows on his knees, gaze darting worriedly along the horizon despite the reassurance of the living world.

It was like his post-war madness all over again.
At least Link could still handle wielding a sword. But if he couldn’t find some oasis of calm soon he would become a liability. He would have to withdraw his title. He would have to leave everyone else to fight his war.

How could he fulfill a prophecy if even the darkness of night overtook him?

A few hours had passed when Sheik rose and Link had the feeling the man hadn’t closed his eyes once. He mirrored Link’s stance and watched the other side of the field. His eyes just barely glinted in the soft starlight and Link wished he had something funny to say to bring them back to the place they used to be. Their friendship was all dry humor and wit. And deep camaraderie and unending trust. What was it now? Was it too soon to tell?

“I can’t eat,” Sheik whispered. “And I can’t sleep.”

“You should eat anyway,” Link warned.

“I’m not fatigued,” he said with a shake of his head. “Trying to eat makes me feel ill. I don’t know what that means.”

“I’m not sure. Did Lady Impa have any insight on what may have... changed?”

Another shake of his head and “No,” was all he got. It scared him that even a sage didn’t know. The space between them was charged with anxiety and Link hated it for adding to his never-ending well of worry.

“I’m sorry I yelled last night,” Link admitted quietly into the night, hoping if he cleared some of the air between them it would quell his anxiety.

The words were so quiet Link feared his companion hadn’t heard. But there was a soft sigh and Link knew the gesture had been received.

“There’s no need to apologize. I was insensitive to what happened to you,” Sheik replied carefully. “But my intentions were just to keep you safe. To spare you from any further pain. I hope you know that.”

“Of course I know that. Just like when I told you not to come with me to the Nether.”

“And look where that put us.” Sheik’s voice was just a hint of bitter.

“We don’t know where that put us, though. We don’t know what that process did to you.”

Sheik shrugged his shoulders a little uncomfortably. Link could imagine the idea of not knowing yourself anymore would be unsettling. Maybe skin-crawling and unbearable. Maybe Link couldn’t imagine it. “That’s the other reason I didn’t want you coming.”

“I think that’s all the more reason for me to come,” Link countered.

Sheik sighed. “At least we’re still having domestics like normal.”

Link couldn’t help the snort that comment brought on and, inevitably, it drew laughter from Sheik as well. A small bit of weight lifted from his shoulders at the sound. Maybe they could find some
semblance of normality again. He could hang on to that hope.

The moment passed and they sat once more in quiet, watching the night and waiting for sunrise. It was clear Sheik had no desire to sleep and Link couldn’t find his own weariness again after waking up to such anxiety. Crickets chanted around them, the sound becoming a sort of mindless cacophony to get lost in. It reminded him of the war, camping out in the field and listening to the night like everything was fine and evil wasn’t bleeding into the very earth he sat on.

Sheik made a habit of suggesting Link sleep almost every hour but he remained adamantly awake. It became a running joke.

“You should sleep.”

“After you, Royal Bodyguard.”

The landscape started to lighten when they decided to head onward. The pre-dawn sky yielded more gray clouds and Link began to wonder if the cause of it was strictly natural. The pallor was far too close to Nether skies and he shivered despite the warm humidity.

They moved quickly across the plains, nothing to mar the horizon or interrupt their journey save the occasional bird or game. They would reach the Gerudo Fortress by nightfall and then…Sheik wasn’t entirely sure how many days they would need to cross the desert. It depended largely on the weather. Sandstorms were the worst at the end of summer and Sheik seemed to grow more stressed by the hour as they worked their way west.

“You should borrow the clothes of the Gerudo,” Sheik recommended just past noon when they stopped to refill their canteens. They brought ten in total, barely fitting them into their expanded packs. Magic wasn’t unlimited and Link felt a knot in his stomach as he stored away the only thing that would keep them alive for the next unnumbered days. “The clothes Zelda gave you are too heavy for the desert.”

Link raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never seen lighter cloth than what she gave me.”

Sheik shook his head. “The Gerudo know desert wear far better than any Hylian.”

Link wasn’t about to argue; he was placing his life completely in Sheik’s hands and he did so unreservedly, even despite the changes in his companion. Link’s only job for the duration of the trip was to remain alive. Sheik would be leading this trek and what lay beyond it so Link could only nod and prepare himself to be much like a hired sword.

Rugged cliff walls rose around them by dusk and Link took comfort in them – being in the open always put him on edge, even before their journey to the Nether. The air had long since turned hot and dry, the transition so abrupt it robbed Link’s mouth of saliva. But it felt nice against his skin and he looked forward to spending the night in a soft bed before they set off into the inferno.

Before they could travel any further into the heat, they decided to send their steeds back. They wouldn’t take them to the desert and while Link figured they could trust the Gerudo enough to take care of them, it wasn’t worth the trouble; the road from the Fortress to the plains was only a two hour travel by foot.

Darkness fell and the moon had not yet rose, forcing a torch to be lit. The merchants that normally camped by the bridge were nowhere to be found and the silence was eerie despite the rushing of
the river far below. Link wondered where they could possibly be – even in the war, they lingered. War and suffering tended to be pretty lucrative for a travelling merchant. He almost raised the question to his lips but decided to keep the quiet between them. There would be plenty of time for words once they reached the Fortress.

Two long and quiet hours passed and they reached the gates.

The empty gates.

The moment the flickering yellow light of the torch revealed the absence of guards, he and Sheik brandished their swords in a duet of rings. The Gerudo Fortress was never left unguarded. Ever. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Dropping into a crouch, Link snatched the torch from Sheik’s grip and scouted ahead. Sheik skirted quietly along the curtain of darkness as they entered the main courtyard. Sand glittered off the cliff walls and no candlelight wept through the windows of the Fortress as he remembered it. It was completely black. His eyes snapped back and forth, waiting for an assailant or any sign of where the Gerudo had gone when-

Blood. It was spilled carelessly here and there, near doorways and guard towers. Weapons and scraps of cloth lay strewn as well, all the puzzle pieces to what must have been an ambush. Or, by the amount of blood, a slaughter. His stomach tightened into an angry coil as Link edged his way into one of the doors, checking down the hallway for any sign of survivors. Sheik was behind him now, tensed like an animal.

Nothing. The halls were black and empty. But a smell lingered in the air, pungent and oh-so-familiar to Link’s nose.

Rot.

He shot a grim look at Sheik who shook his head. They’re dead.

The words came clear as day, only this time it was apparent Sheik was doing it intentionally. Link just nodded and led the way silently through the long halls, the only sound that of the crackling torch. Golden light bled over tables and weapons and treasures, the things of the Gerudo left orphaned in what was now to be a tomb. The Gerudo were a great people despite their reputation among some bigoted Hylians – their loss was painful.

They followed the stench until they nearly gagged in the large dining chamber they had been in not two weeks prior when they spoke with Nameth. There were hundreds of bodies, all in different and terrible states of decay and undress. The shock almost forced Link to sickness as he took in hundreds of dead, golden eyes. Flies swarmed in a black mass and maggots were already eating well into flesh.

But Link stayed only to look for two people.

Nameth and Blithos. The Seeress and the future Gerudo King.

Sheik seemed to have the same idea and, adjusting his cowl more tightly, he stepped forward to search through the dead. Link pulled the rag from his belt and wrapped it tightly over his face to help.
It was Sheik again and Link gave him a searching look, trying to feel out around him as well. Yes…there was something. So weak, he would’ve missed it had Sheik not brought it up. And it was clear, by how his friend moved, that he had pinpointed its location. Link followed closely behind as they crept over bodies, torn cushions, and shattered wood tables. Sheik led the way to a door at the opposite end where the kitchens lie.

Light filled the long room and they found, past the stacks of firewood, sacks of grain, and great pots, a figure propped against the wall and struggling for breath. They bolted across the room and dropped down before a bloody, dying Gerudo.

Nameth.

Her white eyes were swollen shut and a large wound on her chest that smelled of death told them infection had long since taken hold. Her body was littered with bruises and cuts and her legs were clearly broken by the odd angles in which they lay.

“Thank…Din,” she wheezed the moment they crouched before her. “I feared…I would not last…to see your return.”

“Nameth, what happened? Who did this?” Link demanded as he dug into his bag for red potion. It was hopeless, but sorrow gripped him at the sight of such gore. Against a wall, in the dark and dying…it was too much like Sheik in the Nether.

“Put your potion…away, child. Listen to all…I say so I…may leave this place…in peace,” she groaned, trying to reach out for him but unable to lift her hand far enough from her lap. Link ceased his search begrudgingly and waited, shooting Sheik a look and meeting pained red eyes.

“We were attacked…six days ago…not long after the full moon. They came…in the night…hundreds more than us. They bore a…crescent moon upon their chests…the armies of Amrita,” she said laboriously. “They took Blithos. They…took him away…back to Amrita. I know not…what they plan for him.”

“What would they want with a child?” Link said in confusion.

“Blithos…is his. Two Kings down the line…Blithos is Foursky’s grandchild. He plans…horrible things for this kingdom…I fear…if he took his kin from here…” she gasped, her lungs struggling in the prelude of death.

“Did none survive?” Sheik questioned in a voice so quiet it was almost lost to Nameth’s desperate breaths.

“A company of Gerudo…were in the deserts during the attacks. They…came back…tried to save me…I sent them to Vrika,” Nameth struggled to say.

“To Vrika?”

“To the Order…to help…you head there now, no?”

Of course Nameth knew. “Yes, we are going to Vrika. The Order is truly hiding there?”
She gave a jerky nod, apparently unable to speak. Link let the torch drop and took the old Gerudo’s hand, squeezing the cold flesh tightly. She would leave soon and he couldn’t bear to allow her passage alone. Sheik mirrored him and they held her hands as her breathing turned frantic and wet from the blood in her lungs. How she had survived as long as she did Link would never know but he could only thank her as her body trembled and twitched.

“Link!” Nameth sobbed, mouth open and gaping as she struggled now for only breath to speak. “Link! Fear the…marked ones! Fear the marked-”

And then she fell still.

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Thank you all for reading and reviewing – reading your feedback is my favorite thing in the world. Remember to come to my tumblr and give me attention and validation, url is Sincosma.

Next chapter of trash coming shortly.
Chapter 20

XX.

The dead were too many to bury so they burned the room. Great flames licked the stone walls as they left the Fortress to smoke. Neither could speak as they made their way for the final gates before the desert. There was a small chamber a ways from the fence; they would find refuge there through the night. The Fortress, even if not filled with black smoke of the dead, would not be a place they would find rest.

If there was even any to be found.

The last well before the desert sat full of still, dark water in the small shelter and Sheik insisted Link drink two whole canteens before refilling them again. Link would’ve drank a third, but his stomach was too twisted to take anymore. They sat in the dark, backs against the wall and a silence between them so heavy it was like an anvil upon their chests. They were both shaken. The twisted anger in Sheik’s face after Nameth’s death had startled him for a moment. Link had never seen such fire in those eyes and he worried what rage his friend held back.

“They must have attacked after we left the castle. They knew we were heading for the desert,” Sheik said quietly, his voice loaded and heavy in the blackness. Link wondered what his expression was…or maybe he didn’t want to know.

“I don’t understand how Foursky got his armies this far west without anyone noticing.” Link rubbed hard at his face, wishing there had been something they could’ve done, some way they could’ve known.

“Since the very beginning, we’ve been one step behind our enemy. He’s been playing us long before Evanna even arrived. I sensed something in the castle before, but it was always veiled…now. Something dwells in this kingdom, still, and we can’t seem to catch up with it.” Sheik’s voice was rough and unsteady with fury and Link could sense it rolling off the Sheikah in waves.

“We find the Order,” Link said in the calmest voice he could muster. “We find the Order and keep the words away from Foursky. That’s all we can do now. We can’t let Nameth’s suffering be in vain. We know they’re out there now.”

“And what if their allegiance is not what we think it is?” Sheik demanded, suddenly springing to his feet and pacing around in the darkness. Link watched him go back and forth, worried the situation was soon to escalate – could he hold down Sheik if he needed to? “What if we’re walking into yet another trap? We’ve left the castle once more. We’re chasing after a fool’s hope. We know nothing.”

“What else are we to do?” Link barked back, rising to his feet as well and struggling to make out detail. Now he was angry too. It was so unlike Sheik to be pessimistic and unreasonable. “Sit at the castle when those words lay in the minds of your people-”

“Those are not my people!” Sheik snapped, pointing vaguely in the direction of the desert, of Vrika. “They have violated the Vala using those words and their knowledge of them is the reason we have to even risk this journey!”
“Sheik, there’s nothing else we can do,” Link stressed, hardly believing Sheik was becoming so lost in his anger. This was not the calm and measured Sheikah he knew. This was something else and, for one breathless moment, Link feared his words had further incensed his companion.

“That’s what I can’t stand!” Sheik yelled, but now in frustration. The heated anger was dissipating and Link could see Sheik’s hands on top of his head into the shadows. He stopped pacing and stood rooted down by his sadness. “It’s our ignorance that forced us into the Nether and altered us both permanently. As if the war didn’t change us enough…”

In the face of such unexpected anguish, Link could only try and do what Sheik had done for him so many times. He reached out and gripped the Sheikah’s shoulders, holding tightly like a guide back to reality, to calm. And then warm hands came down over his own in a startlingly intimate gesture that only further fueled Link’s resolve.

“But we’re still here, Sheik. I’m still here and you came back. I don’t know what any of it means, but we have a task once more and if prophecy deems we always be one step behind…who are we to dispute the Goddesses?”

Link felt Sheik shake his head. “Goddesses. Never have I thought so lowly of them. Their torture is not only for you.”

He would’ve gasped if he hadn’t been watching himself – it was closest Sheik had ever strayed to blasphemy. In fact, it practically was.

“I can’t get away from this new power, this new anger. It scares me. What if I can’t control this? What if I lose control and you can’t stop me from—”

“Put those fears to bed,” Link uttered quietly, quoting Sheik’s words from what felt like so, so long ago. “We don’t have time for them.”

The tension in those lean shoulders relaxed and Link moved to let go. But Sheik held his hands there for a moment and said quietly, “Thank you, Link.”

“And then Sheik released him and the space between them bloomed back into cautious distance as a strange buzzing filled Link’s chest. How many of these moments would they have? How many more times would they linger between loaded intimacy and intense companionship? Should Link just say it? Should he just face the music and bring it all to the light? It wasn’t the time and it wasn’t the place but Sheik acted like he…

“We need rest,” Sheik determined in a tired voice, making the decision for Link.

A mixture of dismay and relief filled Link as he was let off the metaphorical hook. The warmth of Sheik’s fingers lingered on his hands as he nodded and set about making a place to lie on the cracked, hard sand. Sheik checked over their packs and latched tight the door. The shelter could afford them both sleep that night but of course Sheik would not sleep. Link knew that now. It had been nearly three days since Sheik had slept or ate and what that meant Link was too afraid to discover.

Regardless of Sheik’s condition Link knew he had to rest and rest well so he wouldn’t be useless
the next day. But thoughts of the Gerudo’s dead faces and the thick smell of smoke still drifted through his mind, pushing and pulling him away from sleep. Nameth’s breath rattling in her chest, the anger in Sheik’s eyes when she died, the stench that lingered on their clothes…

Sleep.

The thought was soft and, if he tried, Link could almost pretend it was his own. But it was Sheik’s and he clung to the shapes of each letter as he listened to the way their breaths matched up. What he thought of Sheik’s new ability… he didn’t know. It would come in handy, though, he was sure. Link told himself that over and over as his body finally allowed him rest.

Sheik woke him gently some time later, when the sky was a deep blue and still veiled in uniform clouds. Would it last the day? Perhaps the first day’s trek would be softened by overcast skies. Would they really be so lucky?

Link knew Sheik hadn’t slept but still no circles lined his eyes and nothing seemed to suggest exhaustion. Link could only take comfort in that as they slowly gathered their gear and prepared for the hard day ahead. Link swallowed down a hard biscuit and, to his surprise, Sheik ate one as well.

“Thankfully,” Sheik replied to Link’s questioning look, “I do need food eventually.”

“Then perhaps you’ll sleep eventually,” Link suggested hopefully.

Before leaving the Fortress, Sheik had found clothes for Link. As he had promised the fabric was lighter than Zelda’s and Link was grateful for it now that he stood in the heat he would be enduring for many days ahead. While the Gerudo women wore very bright colors, they clearly had need for neutrals as Link took in the umber tones of what Sheik had acquired for him. The loose tunic was long-sleeved to protect from sunburn and a tawny length of cloth seemed designed as a head wrap. It was all light, practical, and impossibly thin yet strong.

Sheik had gathered much of a similar-looking apparel for himself and they changed quickly, grimacing at the burnt smell that clung to the fabric. As they strapped on belts and weapons, Link struggled a bit with the head wrap. He was positive there was an art to its application but he was also sure he’d never master it.

Before Link could attempt winding it for the fourth time, Sheik came to his rescue with an amused glint in his eyes. Link almost made a smart comment but bit his tongue instead and stood still while his companion wrapped cloth carefully over his hair and around his neck to create a thick cowl. Whatever method Sheik used to knot the cloth, Link doubted he’d ever learn it, let alone untie it with any sort of grace.

There was something distinctly comforting about the cowl. Link felt protected, anonymous even. He could walk into Hyrule castle and not be recognized – his identity could be defined by his actions rather than his expression.

Link suddenly understood at least part of why Sheik lived in his cowl so religiously.

When Sheik was finished, he stepped back to survey his work. And then his expression shifted, brows furrowing and eyes growing wistful.

“What?” Link quickly felt self conscious, as though he shouldn’t be dressed as a desert dweller.
Sheik shook his head slowly. “If not for your eyes you would look…”

He didn’t finish the thought and Link didn’t want him to: he would look Sheikah. He wanted to ask how – perhaps the blonde of his hair and the thickness of his brows was similar. But Link lacked the red eyes and the dark skin, not to mention he possessed a completely different body type than Sheik or Impa.

But then Link had never seen the average Sheikah – only the warriors. He wondered if the resemblance would bother Sheik. Before he could ask his friend turned away, eyes full of some guarded emotion Link couldn’t read, and pulled open the door.

They left the safety of the hut and made for the gate. Smoke hung in a heavy curtain about the morning, the bodies likely smoldering in the Fortress by now. The stink twisted his stomach and his eyes stung in the burning air. Link found himself wondering what the surviving Gerudo would think of their methods. He knew little of Gerudo culture, let alone their burial rights. He desperately wished they could do more to lay all of those tortured souls to better rest.

But if they were to save more from such a fate they would have to move on.

Link just couldn’t imagine the grief the surviving Gerudo felt losing their entire tribe, travelling to a tribe that had suffered the same fate. How could anyone understand such a horrible thing?

But Sheik could.

And maybe that was the source of Sheik’s angst the night before. He understood the pain of a race being mostly wiped off the earth on an all-too-familiar level. Link realized, as they walked through the unguarded gates, that they would be walking into a dead village now home to the lone survivors of two tribes that were essentially one, both in blood and in grief. And Sheik would have to be the one to bring all of them together.

Link didn’t know what Sheik was really planning to do or say, but he knew they were doing the right thing – the only thing.

The air was stifling and dry and it took a mile or so for the terrain to go from hard, cracked mud to loose slopes of sand. Everything in the distance was dune after dune, quick wind fraying the golden peaks. It was just as terrible to walk in as Link remembered, his skin breaking into sweat almost instantly as he took his first step into shapeless terrain.

“We’ll be heading southwest, just missing the Spirit Temple. You’ll be happy to know we’ll also be avoiding the Haunted Wasteland,” Sheik told him sometime after dawn.

Link nodded, too focused on walking to say anything of meaning. He knew he’d become more accustomed to the environment the more ground they covered, but presently it was just slowing them down.

Sheik moved over the sand like he was born there – which he was – and Link couldn’t help but stare when he could spare a glance. It was like watching a wolf navigate through its home woods or a bird ride over air currents. Sheik knew every little bend of the slopes and every minute give of the grains. He balanced his weight so perfectly, Link could now understand where the Sheikah had gotten his weird sort of grace from. Walking on solid ground would be terribly easy after half a lifetime of walking through sand.
Just as Link knew the forest, Sheik knew the desert.

He led them around steep dunes and away from the occasional illusion – the figure of a woman lost in the desert or a great lake were not uncommon sights. By midday the sky was still overcast and the heat at least manageable. Their water rations were still untouched and Link was finally starting to find his pace in the sands.

“What lies beyond Vrika?” Link asked after a while, finally able to talk and walk simultaneously.

“Rainforest,” Sheik answered from ahead. “For leagues and leagues. People lived in there, once, ungoverned and free.”

“What happened to them?” he inquired, regretting it as soon as he asked. Did he really even want to know? Probably not.

“They were killed.”

Of course they were. Link wondered if any of them were left. Ganon was thorough but even in his attention to detail many people had still survived the war. The Kokiri managed to slip through the conflict nearly unscathed, as did most of the Gorons. Link hoped those people had managed to survive as well.

The clouds cleared by mid afternoon and the heat and brightness pressed in around him at all sides, drying his mouth and blurring his vision. Sheik’s pace was relentless but far too often was a canteen pushed into Link’s hands to make up for it. Link refused every time, earning a piercing glare from Sheik until he obliged. He felt he was drinking far too much; Sheik hadn’t touched his own canteen since they left.

Perhaps Sheik didn’t need water as often, either. Was that good? Logistically, yes. But it was yet another highlight of the altered person leading him through the sands.

And said sand had efficiently worked its way everywhere in every crevice and even into his mouth. It crunched between his gritted teeth and filled the corners of his eyes no matter how high he pulled his cowl.

In the desert, it seemed, there was no possible relief from the heat, terrain, and brightness, so he pushed away all sense of discomfort and fixed his eyes to the ground. When a dune swept too high, Sheik would have to help him up it. After the fifth occurrence of this, Link couldn’t help but apologize for slowing down the journey.

“You’re actually fairing far better than I expected,” Sheik reassured him with a shake of his head. “I’ll admit I’m impressed you’ve been able to travel this quickly. We’re making good time.”

Link found that hard to believe – he felt like a foal on new legs – but he dropped it. Sheik didn’t look like was hiding any annoyance, however. In fact, he looked more comfortable than Link had seen him in weeks.

The desert really was Sheik’s home.

When the sun finally kissed the horizon and stained the sky in the most startling array of corals, apricots, and violets, Sheik started to talk about stopping for the night.
“Shouldn’t we take advantage of the mild night and continue on?” Link asked curiously.

“No,” he warned, “you don’t walk this part of the desert at night. The illusions are the worst here and the beasts are most vicious. We’re safer travelling at day for now.”

“For now?”

“The Sea of Din…we’ll be crossing tomorrow at this rate. It will be the most dangerous part of this journey,” he explained. “Once we cross it, we will be away from the loose sands and most of the danger.”

The Sea of Din? Link had never heard of it. Was it still part of Hyrule? How far did Hyrule even extend into the desert? He had so many questions but not the strength to ask them. His limbs ached in a vaguely familiar way – the trek to the Spirit Temple had taken a day and the journey had fatigued him in a way he couldn’t forget – and he just wanted to lie down and get off his feet. The give in every step placed a sharp pain in the arches of his feet and his knees now clicked uncomfortably with every step.

He was not made for the desert. That much was very clear.

At dusk they stopped. Tucked in between dunes that would probably only hold their shape for the night, they lit the smallest of fires and Link poured sand out of his boots. His hair was plastered to his face when he pulled off his head scarf and he shook it out with a sigh.

“I’m remembering why I hated the desert,” Link complained idly, leaning back against the wall of sand and hardly able to care when a parade of grains slid down the neck of his tunic.

“I don’t think anyone actually finds it pleasant,” Sheik agreed, shaking sand out of his own hair. “Vrika is not in the sands. I always hated having to cross the desert. I became very used to it but I never enjoyed it.”

“Why would you cross the desert?” Link asked curiously.

“For things we couldn’t get from the forest,” he replied, leaning back next to Link, balancing his arms on his knees. “Iron, leather, certain foods…we relied on exports from the Gerudo. It was what began the treaty between our peoples.”

“No wonder you look so at home here,” Link commented, tugging off his gear with a sort of tired laziness Sheik would normally chuckle at. But the Sheikah had a wistful look in his eyes, clearly miles away in his thoughts.

“Kalyh and I would always go when our elders allowed us. We hated crossing the Sea. It’s a horribly unsettling place. But…we wanted to explore. We always talked about leaving Vrika and serving the Royal Family as the tribe in Kakariko did. We were young and wanted to fight for the rest of our lives.” Sheik leaned forward and rested a covered chin on his fist. “I suppose got what I wanted.”

“Someone has to do the fighting,” Link reminded him. He had long ago accepted that he would always be the Hero, reincarnated over and over and over. Like an ancient weapon whose hilt was re-wrapped and blade was re-sealed again and again. Perhaps it had been Sheik’s fate as well. If it were true, neither of them could’ve avoided their parts in history.
It didn’t make for a pleasant reality, but surely they would have to try and make the best of it.

Link’s gaze rested on Sheik, whose eyes were lost as always to the fire and relieving his past. His shoulders moved with quiet breath and his fingers worried at pale cloth on his wrist. Link didn’t know when he would stop getting a thrill at seeing his friend alive, but he almost wanted to hang onto it. Because it was becoming all he was really hanging onto in the first place.

“Rest,” Sheik ordered, breaking from his trance and meeting Link’s eyes. He would’ve blushed over being caught staring, but the gentle look in those bright eyes was too distracting. “I’m still far from sleep so I will keep watch.”

“You’ll wake me if you need rest, right?” Link almost pleaded.

“Of course.”

Link didn’t sense any lie in the words but he knew his companion would not wake him until morning. Sheik would not need rest for what was likely a few days. Link didn’t want to think about how advantageous it really was because it wasn’t right.

He shouldn’t be okay with it.

The day had made him weary and, when Link lay down expecting to chase after sleep for the next few hours, he found himself sucked straight into it like a vacuum.

And his dreams yielded nothing but screams and howls and the flash of pale leaves and gray trunks. He was running, rushing through the forest with Sheik once more. Vog raced behind, spitting fire and calling into the crisp air. And his legs were failing him, growing weak and tired as he nearly toppled down several times. Then his feet started to sink into the mossy earth, every stride a harder and harder task. Sheik was shouting for him, slowing his own pace – which seemed unhindered – and trying to pull Link out of the ground he was sinking into.

Link woke with a gasp as a Vog leapt on Sheik, tearing him to pieces.

Sheik, the living and real one, was crouched next to him with a warm hand on his shoulder.

“You’re just dreaming,” he whispered.

Link felt a mixture of relief and embarrassment wash through his thoughts, the confusion and panic of the dream beginning to drift from him and into the night. Sheik’s hand stayed there for a moment as Link stared into the smoldering ambers of their long-dead fire, waiting for his breathing to slow.

Sheik let go after a few minutes and sat back, creating distance between them but not too much. The deep night brought a chill he hadn’t expected and Sheik’s proximity shared body heat Link was grateful for.

“I find myself glad for at least one change – because I need little sleep, I am spared the nightmares I would surely have if I slept,” he admitted in a quiet voice.

And Link didn’t know what to say to that so he kept quiet. Navigating the terrain between nightmares and monsters and sleepless nights wasn’t going to add to his calm. The far-off, high-
pitched cry that filled the night air didn’t help either.

They both tensed at the sound, barely moving to ensure the sound didn’t move closer. Link wondered if it was one of the beasts Sheik had warned against. The curiosity in him wanted to ask what the creature was, what it looked like, but the fear that hovered just under the surface said differently.

Over the following hours they sat awake together, the night was filled with intermittent sounds, all just as unsettling as the next. It reminded Link of the Nether a little too much and eventually he started up a quiet conversation just to distract himself from the menacing memories.

“Have you ever thought of leaving Hyrule?” Link prompted.

The shadow of Sheik’s head turned towards him but his expression was lost to the night. There was a pause and then, “Yes. Many times.”

A short silence passed and Link wondered if he’d get anymore than three words from his companion.

“After Vrika, I tried to leave the care of Impa and Zelda. They were asking me to stay, act as a guide to you, do the Goddesses’s biding. I was young and grieving and did not care what anyone wanted. I left the cave and walked east for a week. It was during that time that I learned for myself that the only way to try and repair what had happened to me and my people was to do what the Goddesses asked of me, so I returned.”

“I wonder where we would be now if you hadn’t come back,” Link wondered.

“Zelda would’ve guided you herself. And all would’ve turned out the same, I have no doubts. She was more than qualified for the position; it was Impa’s caution that insisted I take the job instead.”

Link nodded, realizing he was right. Zelda would’ve been a flawless guide…but he was unspeakably grateful Sheik had been the one to help him instead.

“The next time I thought of leaving was after the war. You were still recovering from your wounds, the kingdom was fragmented, and Impa was no longer at my side. She was the last of my people, the last vestige of familiarity I had in my life. Zelda, though she had become like a sister to me, moved like the Sheikah, fought like the Sheikah, was not Sheikah. I felt stranded once again, unable to return home and unable to find a home where I was.”

“But you didn’t leave. Why?” Link probed.

“Zelda begged me to stay. Pulling back together a broken nation was a monumental task and Impa’s departure to the Sacred Realm had affected her as well,” Sheik said. “And then when you and I truly became friends, I realized I was not the only person who felt completely displaced. Leaving became harder as it slowly became clear that, as much as I needed someone who understood my loss, you needed someone who understood your loss.”

A strange warmth entered Link’s mind at this, his thoughts running back over the words even as quiet settled between them once more. Link had always felt that – at least in the beginning – Sheik helped him because it was yet another part of what the Goddesses wanted. Over time, he began to realize it was much less of a one-way street…but now Sheik had fully admitted that they had balanced each other out, even from the beginning.
Link let the happiness that realization brought him linger there in the dark. Even as the distant
growls and cries sang through the night, Sheik’s words warded off the residual fear from his
nightmare.

So little light was coming from the sliver of moon above; in just four days the new moon would
rise and they would have nothing to comfort them in the black but stars...

And that thought jarred him for a moment as sudden memories from past visions flooded back into
his tired mind. His dream, the full moon hanging brightly in the sky, the warm night air…

“In my dream of the war, it was a full moon. It was still warm, too,” Link blurted out, repeating his
thoughts as a terrible realization dawned on him. “I think…it’s the next full moon, Sheik.”

Sheik’s eyes had caught the dim light from the moon, the pinprick reflections allowing Link to
catch the shock written there. “That gives us only…”

Link counted in his head and grimaced. “Almost three weeks.”

They both fell silent, neither knowing what to say. They had already accepted that war was
imminent but the timeline was shrinking on them by the day. So little time to prepare. So little time
to do much of anything. They could only pray they would manage to convince the Order to align
with them and that the Royal armies be ready to act under Zelda’s command.

“We must send word to Queen Zelda once we reach Vrika. It is likely she already knows of this,
but we must warn her nonetheless,” Sheik said after a while of tense thought. “Try and sleep more,
Link. Tomorrow we cross the Sea. It will test us both.”

Link still hadn’t asked him what the Sea of Din really was, but he wasn’t sure he could handle
anymore information, good or bad. Lying back on the warm sands, Link tried to take comfort in the
knowledge they were making good time, as Sheik had claimed. Anything to distract him from
everything else.

The war. Sheik’s resurrection. The Order. Vrika. The words.

The prophecy.

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I’m very excited to say we’ve officially hit the halfway mark. I never thought I’d get this far
posting this crap.

I’m sincosma on Tumblr – give me praise and affection. Thanks for sticking with me, guys. It only
gets better (or worse) from here.
XXI.

Sheik woke him before dawn, as the world started heating up again. The unmarked, bare sky warned that the day would be boiling. They buried the remains of their fire in the sand, salvaging what wood they could and shoving it back in their packs. Sheik forced Link to finish off the third canteen but he refused to drink into the fourth.

“You’re dehydrated,” Sheik warned him. “You need to drink.”

“I’m not dehydrated enough to impair me,” Link insisted.

“Not yet. The Sea might change that.” As they re-equipped and checked their packs, Link finally asked him what it was.

“I could explain it,” Sheik offered, “but I don’t believe words will do it justice. You’ll understand when you see it.”

So they moved on, trotting back into the rolling dunes and scorching morning sunlight. Link found the rhythm of movement much quicker after a day of practice. He discovered more ways to distribute his weight between ball and heel, keeping more surface tension on the fine sand so he didn’t sink quite so far with every step. But even though his issue with desert travel had been somewhat alleviated, the heat intensified even more and his throat became so dry and irritated Link was in constant coughing fits.

Sheik nearly force fed him water when he almost collapsed from the force of his coughs. He drank at the liquid greedily, hating the amount he took in but knowing he was straying too far into dehydration to refuse it.

And still, Sheik needed no water.

Link made him take a few drinks, but Sheik was showing no signs of dehydration after days of not a drop before those sips. It was good news for the water supply. It was bad news for Sheik’s humanity.

It was midday when things started to go south for Link. The brutal scorch of the day was heating his body up faster than the water could cool him down and it caused his eyes to blur and his head to ache miserably. His pace faltered here and there as – almost like a trance he fell in and out of – he spiraled into heat stroke.

Sheik made him stop for rest after the fourth time he fell to a knee. There would be no shade with the sun at its zenith, but Link needed to stop moving.

“It’s time to rest,” Sheik assured him when Link muttered a tired apology from his dizzy sprawl on the sand. “We shouldn’t be travelling midday. We’ll reach the Sea soon and we need all of our strength.”

Link just nodded and licked his dry, cracked lips. The hot air pressed in around him as he pulled his head scarf completely over his face to try and hide from the unforgiving sun. Sheik mentioned
something about him drinking more but Link couldn’t have moved without help so he just ignored
the suggestion. His head throbbed and his throat burned. Only two days in the desert and Link was
already in misery.

And then he must’ve fallen asleep; he blinked and opened his eyes to white fabric and a lessened
headache. With much effort, Link pushed himself up off the sand and nudged the headscarf back
down, squinting in the blinding afternoon light.

He was alone.

Panic gripped him instantaneously. Despite his fatigue, Link leapt to his feet and whirled around
looking for any sign of Sheik. His eyes fell on their packs, sitting close by and half covered in sand.

He’d been asleep for too long. Sheik had been gone for too long.

Where would he go? Why would he leave? Was he coming back? Was he okay? What if some
beast took him? Stress dug deeply into his gut and he wanted to be sick. With heavy legs, he
climbed up the nearest dune and stared out at the horizon.

And saw nothing. Waves of heat feigned bodies of water, obscuring any sign of the Sheikah.

Even with Sheik’s more resilient body, the desert was a deadly place to be alone in. He left his
pack. He left Link. It reminded him of the Nether, having to travel on without his companion and
being left to nothing but his deteriorating mind.

You’re being ridiculous.

Speak of the devil.

Link pushed the voice away and tried to calm himself. Sheik must be scouting ahead. He was prone
to doing that, especially during the war. Normally he would always clear it with Link first. Sheik
obviously thought he would return before Link woke…but the amount of sand on the packs
indicated a longer travel than was intended. The desert was in constant flux, the landscape forever
moving, but only after an hour would it cover the packs like that. Or at least that’s what Sheik had
told him at some point during their journey when he was half-listening through his struggle.

Telling time in the desert was essential, Sheik had said.

So where had he gone that had taken this long? Was he attacked while scouting? Was he lying
somewhere, bleeding out like he did in the Nether?

You won’t do any good panicking like this.

“Shut up,” he grunted, voice hoarse and cracked. He pulled his pack out of the sand and yanked out
a canteen, chugging half of its contents. Link needed to clear his mind of the dehydration. He
needed to focus.

Link climbed back up the dune, peering back to the western horizon again and trying to find any
figure in the bright gold and blue. The colors met at in a blurry line no matter how he squinted.
Frustration filled him. What was he supposed to do?

Wait. Stop panicking.
Although the voice spoke reason, Link pushed it away angrily. This had to stop. He couldn’t be talking to himself in one of the most dangerous places in Hyrule – if they were even in Hyrule anymore – when he was still worryingly dehydrated. Link had to get a hold of himself. He had resigned himself to keeping his head on straight out in the wilderness and he-

“You’re up,” came a voice from behind him.

Link spun around in a flurry of sand to find Sheik looking, for once, tired as he slid down a dune next to their packs. And never had Link wanted to punch someone as much as he did in that moment. He was an idiot for panicking. And Sheik was an idiot for just leaving without word. Link fixed Sheik with a glare and shook his hands furiously in the air.

“Don’t do that!” he cried. But despite the anger, relief flooded him and he almost wanted to laugh.

Sheik gave an apologetic frown. “I’m sorry, Link. I didn’t intend to be gone so long. You needed rest, so I didn’t wake you.”

“Next time, at least leave a note,” Link snapped, sliding back down his own dune and pulling his gear back on to hide how panicked he had really been. Sheik didn’t need to know how unraveled he had become in a matter of minutes.

Goddesses, he really needed to get his issues in order.

“I only intended to be a few minutes. The Sea is only a league away but I sensed something to the east so I went to investigate. And…I found beasts I don’t think either of us will be too happy to see,” Sheik told him gravely. Link glanced up and saw a dark look he didn’t like. Sheik almost looked shaken.

“What were they?” Link asked, feeling dread fill him up. He already knew, but he had to hear Sheik say it.

“Vog.”

Link couldn’t help but close his eyes and grip the strap of his sword so tightly his knuckles cracked. Not Vog. Not those. Anything else. What were beasts of the Nether doing loose?

“It appears the Nether has been torn again. Presumably by us,” Sheik decided, sounding just as angry and shocked as Link felt. “I saw around seven of them leagues to the east behind us. It seems my eyesight is also improved – and for the better. I’m confident we can reach the Sea before they catch us.”

“Why are they following us?”

“Perhaps they’re still looking for retribution?” Sheik suggested with a shrug. “Or perhaps they just wandered out this way from the tear and happened to catch our scent. Either way, there’s a chance the Sea of Din will provide an escape for us.”

Link’s stomach twisted into even a tighter knot. He couldn’t face the Vog again. And not with Sheik. He almost lost his composure over Sheik’s scouting adventure; how would he react being exposed to his nightmares once more?
“The situation is different. Remember that, Link,” Sheik said quietly, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. The touch brought him back to reality like he had been lost in white noise. Those red eyes, while tired and just as worried, were soft. They were the same eyes that talked him down countless times after the war. And here it was happening again. It was always happening.

By all rights, he was practically a 13-year-old but he still couldn’t accept that he always needed this.

“Let’s move,” was all Link could say, stepping out of Sheik’s touch and shouldering his pack. He pretended to not see the troubled look this caused and started up the next dune. Link didn’t want to be so dismissive but it was the only way he could keep it together for what lay ahead.

So they trekked on. The heat was sweltering, but the half a canteen Link drank was doing good work – at least he was sweating again. His stride didn’t falter and they kept an impressive pace considering it was the hottest part of the day.

Slowly, as the hours crawled by, the terrain began to shift. Soft peaked dunes turned to short slopes and here and there, cracked mud appeared in patches. Link, now able to navigate without watching the sand, kept his gaze on the horizon behind them and waited for any sign of Vog through the buzz of heat.

But there was nothing to see and he didn’t know whether to be relieved or wary.

The sun was now blaring directly into their faces from its five o’clock position in the sky. They were forced to keep their heads down and take quick glances up at a squint. It was yet another thing to jeopardize their journey across the Sea of Din. Would they really cross it before sun down, whatever it was? It was hard to see anything ahead of them in the brightness. He raised this question to Sheik.

“The Sea is five leagues across. It is…a crater of sorts. The Vog may follow us in, but I believe we’ll cross it before the sun sets,” Sheik replied. “Or at least I hope…”

A crater? A crater from what? Link wanted to probe further but a piercing howl split the boiling air and they both froze like statues. It was not even a league away and Link’s blood ran cold with the terrible familiarity it brought. He would probably be on his death bed and still recall the sound.

They drew their swords in tandem and dropped lower as they moved on, adrenaline negating the sun’s glare and leaving their eyes wide open. It wasn’t necessarily the kind of howl that indicated excited pursuit but they weren’t going to risk complacency. They made it up one last dune and then Link understood why the Sea would be the hardest part of the journey.

Stretched before them, black and gaping, was clearly an enormous crater.

It spread from every direction to nearly the horizon, the sand scorched black and hard as its grade dropped downward towards the deep center before them. And from where they halted Link noticed the sand around the crater looked strange – almost like liquid. Hard black stepping stones were placed through the motionless sand to the lip of the crater, allowing passage into the Sea.

“Thousands of years ago a huge meteor landed here in the desert, leaving this crater as evidence of a great wrath. It has been said that Din herself threw the rock down to teach the disobedient people of the desert to listen to her word,” Sheik explained quietly. “Since the event, the sands around it have never settled and have become quicksand for miles. The crater has always been the only way
through without adding days to a journey.”

Link’s gut twisted once more. They would climb down into the crater and make themselves even more vulnerable, trapped in its hold until they reached the other side. Something about the black sand and old, misshapen landscape within the crater made Link feel deeply unsettled.

“If all goes well, we will reach the other side by nightfall,” Sheik told him resolutely. “We’ll make quick work of the Vog should we encounter them. I doubt they were made for the deserts so we may have an advantage.”

Link tried to hang onto that optimism because Sheik could really be right. The Vog were born in the forests of the Nether; they would be at possibly the same disadvantage Link had been.

They reached the smooth black stones, their circumference no bigger than a dinner plate. Link stepped gingerly onto each surface, pausing for one panicked moment when the rock seemed to sink slightly with his weight.

“My ancestors placed these rocks here with powerful spells,” Sheik said quietly, moving from stone to stone with obvious familiarity. “I crossed the Sea so many times in my youth and throughout the years they have remained.”

It should’ve been reassuring but nothing could truly quell Link’s anxiety as they arrived at the edge of the black crater and started down the steep slope. The way was rocky and jagged, some parts soft and weak while others were as hard as diamond and sharp as his sword. The black was like midnight, like obsidian, a darkness that seemed anything but natural. Even despite the ages Sheik spoke of, there was burnt smell that lingered about as they finally reached the bottom. The wall behind them swelled up to half the height of Hyrule castle, the isolation now a reality that did nothing to calm Link’s mind.

Within the depth of the crater, the sun was now completely eclipsed and left them in cool shadow, relieving their hard day of heat stroke. Link tried to find the advantages of the Sea, despite the eerie feeling it gave him; it would make travel easier without the bright glare and the mushy terrain. Walking on firm ground finally allowed him to feel secure in his movements once more. Even if the Vog were to follow them in, Link would be quicker on his feet now than in the loose sand.

“Keep a sharp eye,” Sheik warned quietly as they began their trek. Sheik spun his sword in his hand, a movement he adopted when anxious as he cast his eyes around them warily. “Dangerous things have taken residence in this crater.”

Link just nodded, gripping his sword in his own show of anticipation, and followed the Sheikah closely. The landscape of the crater was haphazard; boulders ranging from the size of houses to the size of his fist littered the glittering black ground and dramatic rises and drops kept them treading as carefully as prey. There was an unsettling quiet that surrounded them and a sharp worry sat in the pit of Link’s stomach. Everything about the crater seemed to insist they get out. The foreboding sensation was almost an actual push against his skin, urging him to leave.

“What an awful place,” Link muttered, grimacing at the strange crunch his steps made in the scorched, ruined sand.

“The feeling never goes away,” Sheik said with a nod. “It’s like a sickness. I’ve always hated this place.”
“Then why willingly go through it?”

“Sheik and I…we were practically bullies to each other. We egged the other one on constantly,” Sheik replied, a fondness entering his voice despite the dark feeling pressing in around them. “We gave each other courage through taunts and teasing. We both hated the Sea, but if one of us stayed behind the other would never let us live it down.”

Link couldn’t help but smirk a bit at this. It reminded him of he and Sheik’s own relationship, back before everything became so difficult and complicated. They were constantly nipping at each other in spars or meetings. Any trips they made were punctuated by insistent teasing…it was comfort for Link. He could imagine, living in a dwindling tribe with a grim future, it was a comfort for Kalyh and Sheik as well.

“How old was she when she was killed?” Link dared to ask.

“Fourteen. As was I,” Sheik answered in a flat voice. Link grimaced.

They were almost of marrying age. And Sheik had said before they would’ve married had the war not happened. Link didn’t know how to feel about it. Because he wished so badly the war hadn’t happened, not just so he could’ve lived his life fully, but so Sheik could’ve had a future with his people. But then Link was also grateful the war had happened in some ways because he never would’ve had the friendship they now shared.

“I wonder if I had been sent back…would this future still exist? Or would time have been reset for us all and you would have had your future with Kalyh?” Link wondered as they skirted around another hulking boulder.
Sheik halted, turning and shaking his head with a glare. “Don’t even think like that, Link. Future, past… it doesn’t matter. This is where we are. If you had gone back maybe we all could’ve started over, yes. But time isn’t a straight line and Zelda gave you a choice. I will always respect that choice.”

“But if I had gone back then maybe this wouldn’t be happening,” Link argued, beginning to feel frustrated. Because he hadn’t really thought about his choice since revealing his reason behind it in the Nether.

“If not this, then something else,” Sheik pressed, shaking his head again. “I believe your fate would’ve been tangled with the prophecy of Termina no matter what you chose. The texts have always spoke of the Hero of Time… disappearing into another land.”

Link knew what his companion was talking about – he’d read the texts, too. They were always too vague and cryptic to take at face value but he had to believe what Sheik was saying. Since learning of Termina, the idea had always drawn him in. Would he be caught in the current of fate and prophecy, disappearing into that land?

“At least you would’ve had your future,” Link amended tiredly. “Regardless of impending war, you would’ve had a chance and you would’ve had your people.”

“The Sheikah are cursed, Link,” Sheik said, voice icy despite the heat of the desert. “I have never had a future. I accepted that long ago.”

And with that, he turned away and led them on. Link didn’t dare ask what he meant; they didn’t need to start an argument in such a dangerous place. He couldn’t guess at what Sheik was referring to and why it made him think he had no future, but the Sheikah was clearly done opening up.

Zelda gave you a choice. I will always respect that choice.

Emotions warred in his head as he tried to add up all the confusing things Sheik had been saying since the Nether.

I meant to tell…

I don’t want to leave you.

I’m glad you stayed with me.

When you told me… when you said you stayed…

You were my…

Link grit his teeth hard, working angrily to push the memories back out. He never wanted to think about that cave again. He never wanted to feel that helpless. He focused on Sheik’s back, watching his sword’s sheath sway against his shoulder blades and Link focused on the rhythm until he felt calm again.

The terrain slowly sloped lower and lower as they approached the center of the crater. The day still offered another good three hours of light and, if they continued at their unhindered pace, it was likely they would reach the surface before nightfall.
In the distance below them Link began to see what appeared to be a statue. It wasn’t very big but he recognized it as the likeness of one of the Goddesses; presumably Din. And there was an altar below her, bowls and dried desert flowers and crystals scattered around it. The sight was so eerie with the vast expanse of black and distant walls in the backdrop behind her heavily eroded form.

“People still make pilgrimages to this place,” Sheik explained, now shoulder to shoulder with Link as they approached the weathered statue. “My adopted mother first took me here when I was seven, before I began my training.”

“Would you like to stop for a moment?” Link asked quietly, seeing the wistful look on the other’s eyes and feeling his chest twinge at the sadness.

They paused in front of the altar, crystals glowing dully in the fading sunlight and bowls singing lightly in the desert wind that had managed to find its way into the crater. Sheik’s eyes fixed intently on the completely eroded face of Din, the Goddesses he was taught to worship as his own. Link couldn’t imagine what it felt like to look up at the deity he had lost faith in but was raised to trust. The Kokiri didn’t put too much of their focus into Farore, but instead in the spirits of the forest.

Sheik shook his head. “We must move on.”

And so they did.

They travelled in silence once again, swords still drawn in case of attack. But it appeared there was nothing in the Sea with them. More than anything, it worried Link that there was no sign of Vog or other. Even Sheik looked concerned.

“There’s usually at least a Lizalfos in here,” Sheik commented as they closed in on the other side of the Sea. “This is...too easy.”

“Do you think the Vog being so close would scare off anything in here? They don’t exactly smell natural to this world.”

“Perhaps,” Sheik considered, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced.

And then, as it always seemed to be, everything happened very quickly. Three dark shapes closed in from three different directions and had Sheik not shouted out *Behind you!* Link wouldn’t have blocked the blow to his skull.

Flickering in and out of sight were the large yellow eyes of a Poe. Before Link could register the one before him, another one zipped forward, catching his arm and throwing him sideways into an adjacent boulder.

Link’s head rang, but he hurried back to his feet as one of the Poe charged him, cackling and barely visible in the daylight. Dehydration weighed down his mind as he barely blocked the third swipe and spun around to slash the Moon Blade through its torso. But it did just that: went right through its torso as it faded just in time to miss the fatal blow.

He’d forgotten how much he hated fighting Poe.

Sheik was parrying with the third one and also trying to taunt the second one swooping in on Link into attacking him instead, but there was nothing for it. As the first wobbled back and giggled, the
second tumbled towards him with its lantern. With a frustrated grunt, Link side-stepped the maneuver and struck it down a mere instant before it faded once more. As it shuddered and wailed, an opening was left for the other one to swing its lantern into his temple with a shrieking laugh.

Link collided once more with the same boulder, head ringing sharply and warm liquid quickly trickling down his neck. The blow was potentially serious; the world tilted back and forth as his vision shifted in and out. But despite it, anger flooded his brain – stupid desert, stupid dehydration, stupid Poe. The Hero of Time, knocked round by a Poe. He looked up to find the same one racing towards him, its laughter so shrill it did nothing but incense him further.

Link thrust his sword up through its body before the strike could hit its mark and ripped it back out with a tired grunt. The thing shivered and dissolved before him, leaving nothing but its little blue soul to hover amongst the midnight sand. He wanted to stomp on it for good measure but he was too dizzy.

“Link, are you alright?”

Sheik backed away from the remains of his own Poe and pulled Link upright by his waist.

“ Took you that long to take out one?" Link taunted, finding some of his bearings and sheathing his sword. The landscape was still spinning a little as he felt Sheik’s hand pressing against his head. Sharp pain bloomed across his scalp and down his face, making him wince.

“I need to sleep soon. It’s slowing me down,” Sheik admitted, eyes worriedly assessing the wound. “This is pretty deep, Link. You need potion.”

“Wrap it up for now,” he insisted. “The potion will sedate me too much. We need to get out of this damn crater.”

Sheik didn’t look happy about it but he pulled off Link’s headscarf and rewrapped it tightly to try and staunch the bleeding. Link closed his eyes and held onto the boulder as he focused on the soft touches of Sheik’s fingers…

“Finish off the canteen and we’ll go,” Sheik ordered, voice breaking Link abruptly from his wanderings. His eyes snapped open and his head felt tight, but he took the canteen and finished it off in four gulps.

After a quick sweep of the area, the three little Poe souls flickering together in the aftermath of disturbed sand, they left for the edge of the Sea. Link’s balance was still skewed from the blow and he was confident it had left a concussion. Sheik stayed close, correcting his stride anytime it faltered – and it faltered a lot. Link’s vision would sway and spin every few minutes, his body periodically careening to the side to his frustration.

“I swear to Din if you tell anyone the Hero of Time was knocked out by a Poe…” Link grumbled as Sheik was resigned to maintaining a grip on Link’s upper arm to keep him on course.

“Must you really suck the joy out of everything?” Sheik teased back. But Link could sense the undercurrent of concern in his voice as the Sheikah’s head stayed on a swivel through the darkening landscape. The sky was turning a velvety apricot now and, if all went well, they’d be out of the Sea in a matter of minutes. But still something felt horribly desperate as Link struggled to keep himself upright and moving.
"I really hate this place," Link complained as he nearly ate it over a jagged rock sticking up through dark sand.

"It’s better than the Nether," Sheik countered, practically dragging Link up the slope of the crater now. Rocks tumbled from beneath their feet and Link couldn’t help but cringe at how much unnecessary noise he felt like they were making. Or maybe it was just him with a concussion.

"Don’t belittle my complaints, Sheik," he sighed, his vision starting to blur further and the wound at his temple throbbing horribly. "I think my head is…"

He felt even more disoriented as Sheik looped an arm around his waist and practically half-carried him up the steepest part of the slope. But Link couldn’t even see properly anymore – fine details blurred and all he could perceive was the orange sun as it rose over the dunes, one disjointed step at a time. The wind was straight and hot and dry and Link’s mouth felt like a miniature desert.

"Come on, Link," Sheik insisted, an edge to his voice that should’ve panicked Link. "You’re fine. We’re almost out."

"It’s just…a concussion," Link insisted, legs giving out and Sheik pulling him back up in a motion that made him nauseous. "Stop worrying. I’ve had worse."

"That’s not the point, Link." They finally made it up and out of the crater, ten black stones between them and safety – well, more dunes that stretched to the horizon if one could really call that safe. "You’re bleeding and there are Vog following us."

He had a point, but Link was too focused on the steps. He couldn’t even walk in a straight line; how was he going to balance on them? Sheik seemed to realize the same thing and gave Link a sympathetic look. "I’m going to have to carry you."

"No," Link moaned, but with hardly any conviction. Sheik was right and he hated it.

"Link, you’ve carried me," Sheik reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah. Just get on with it. And keep your mouth shut about it," he warned as the desert started to spin again and pain shot through his head.

"Wouldn’t dream of tarnishing your prestigious reputation."

"Don’t be snarky."

As Sheik lifted him, the world whirled around even more. He hung over the Sheikah’s shoulder, feeling the blood rush to his head and soaking the bandage. A queasiness gripped him again and he seriously start to worry he would be sick as Sheik crossed the steps with unnatural ease of balance and strength – or maybe Link was just imagining it from his upside-down vantage point.

It was only a minute or two later that Sheik was putting Link back down, terribly dizzy and ill. The head wrap was swollen with blood and liquid running down his jaw in hurried drops. Sheik reached out to check the wound when there was a howl, so loud and piercing, they both jumped.

"Give me the potion now," Link hissed, gripping Sheik’s arm tightly to stay upright and drawing his sword with the other. Horror swept through him; even with the potion, it would be a good twenty minutes until he was well enough to really fight. The numbing effect of the mixture would
also inhibit his reflexes and dull his senses. He was going to have to rely far too much on Sheik. But he knew in another few minutes he’d be unconscious and ultimately a burden. They would have to make due.

Sheik fished the potion out of his pack and shoved the bottle in into Link’s waiting hands. He drew his own sword and pulled Link down into a crouch he could barely keep balanced. The potion burned his throat as the howls continued, echoing up to them from the crater. They hovered at the edge of the quick sands, readying themselves for imminent attack.

“Did you bring a bow?” Link asked, panting from the rush of warm moving through his body. He could feel it buzzing through his throat and stomach and numbing the throb from up his spine to his skull. “We’re in a pretty advantageous position.”

Sheik nodded, digging around in the pack once more. Link tried to focus his gaze into the crater and despite his dizziness, he spotted them. A pang of terror rang in his stomach at the sight of them again. Their matted fur, their rotting flesh..he didn’t know if he could really already smell them or if it was his mind torturing him. They were covering ground fast. But did they know about the quicksand? The Vog made it in somehow. If they could just defend the stones, it would be a short confrontation.

“Think you can see straight enough to not waste arrows?” Sheik asked, handing him an worn, oak bow.

“No idea.”

Sheik just sighed. “Just try not to fall over, Hero of Time.”

Link would’ve elbowed him in the ribs but the Vog were scaling the slope and nearing the sands. Their hot, stinking breaths filled the air with a miasma of rot as, to Link’s grim delight, the two at the front charged headlong into the quicksand.

With pitiful yelps, they struggled violently through the unforgiving sand, dragged down into suffocation. Three others nearly succumbed to the grab but were tugged out by their comrades. Huffing and growling, five Vog stood before them, empty eyes gaping in the dusk.

“Very clever, little things,” the middle one snarled. “But we make fire.”

Of course they did. And Link hadn’t thought that far. But Sheik had, apparently, and didn’t care. In a flash of movement, he nocked back two arrows and shot them into the foreheads of two separate Vog. They roared in a duet of pain and toppled backwards, into the crater. The other three let loose a tirade of fireballs, staining the sand angry red.

“Get down!” Sheik roared, drawing his sword and swinging violently at each fireball, volleying them back to the Vog. One of them hit the middle Vog, sending it back into the crater with a high whine.

Feeling particularly useless and standing despite Sheik’s order, Link managed to shoot three arrows in three different places at one of the remaining Vog, leaping dizzily out of the way when a fireball exploded right where he had previously been. Fire still shot out at him, catching one of his sleeves. He patted it out in irritation, struggling to his feet as Sheik shot down the last Vog.

Fire still lingered on the sand as quiet filled the air. Not a sound came from the crater and Link
listened intently, struggling for the smallest whine or faintest growl. The Vog couldn’t be that easy to kill, could they? Not in his experience…

Sheik retired his sword and hurried over to Link, who was trying not to sway where he stood. A hand gripped his elbow and bright red eyes studied him. “I need you to do something. Because I can’t.”

Link gave him a confused look, his surroundings a little too surreal for him. He suddenly got the strangest feeling he was dreaming. “Um, sure. What?”

“I need you to cast a spell to sink these stones,” Sheik explained, pulling Link back over to the quicksand, now illuminated more by the remaining fire than the half-sunken sun. “I know you’re weak…but I just can’t.”

Link nodded. Of course. Sheik was still too wary to use his magic. It wasn’t worth the risk, especially with the real danger of the Vog waiting to follow them below in the crater. He had no idea how badly the spell would drain his Mana – how hard could a sinking spell be? – but he also had to contend with the powerful spells that had been holding them in place for years.

“What is it?”

Sheik spoke three words to him, obviously in Sheikah, repeating them a few times for good measure. “It’s the same as a pushing spell but this is the only thing that will work on the stones. It will push them down far enough to deter the Vog from following us.”

“It’s not going to kill me, is it?” Link asked blearily.

“No,” Sheik promised. “I may have to carry you again, though.”

Link groaned. Focusing was hard when fighting against the annoying buzzy numb of the potion. He managed to concentrate on the surface of the smooth black stones, though. Using the same movements as the pushing spell he’d used to save Sheik so long ago, he mimicked the strange words, hoping he wasn’t butchering them.

And, apparently, he wasn’t. Power leeched from him in an overwhelming intensity, magic coming out in a stream from his fingers like he had never seen before. It was golden and surged like smooth electricity from his hands, pushing the black stones down into the liquid sand. He had never felt something so profound or so terrifying, as though someone was using his body. It felt volatile and foreign – he never imagined Sheikah magic being so demanding. Sheik mostly used Hylian spells around him, never something so chaotic.

And then, as his vision started to fray around the edges and the stones were completely submerged, Sheik reached forward and closed Link’s outstretched hands with warm fingers. The connection was severed and Link felt completely empty in a way he never had before.

And that was the last thing he saw; long fingers, worn wraps, sharp knuckles. Then nothing.

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If I may be so vain, the travel through the desert is my favorite part of this story.

Thank you to all who review every chapter, especially to those of you who give me like 6+
paragraphs of a review. I literally grin the entire time I read that shit. You guys are too much. And thank you to all of those who don’t like to leave reviews but still read – you guys are just as great.

Sincosma on Tumblr – come boop me pls.
The way Link felt when he woke made him wish he would just lose consciousness again. Throbbing skull, busted lips, aching limbs, and cold, clammy skin. He felt like death. In fact, death wouldn’t be so bad. But then, it would, because Link remembered himself and panicked. Forcing open his eyes, he took a gasping breath and dragged himself up off of horrible, shapeless sand.

Everything around him was black, like waking up in a void, and he again feared he was back in the Nether. Link’s heart struggled to pump adrenaline into his sluggish body and he felt around in the dark for a weapon, anything.

“Link, it’s okay,” a calming voice said next to him, hands coming down on his arms. “Breathe. We’re safe. We’re in the desert. Everything is fine.”

Link breathed. Okay. They were safe. Okay. Desert. Right. Fine.

He ran through the words like a checklist, working to master himself through the aching pain and deep darkness. Link’s mind was a splattered mess and he needed to take stock of things so he could form coherent questions. And Sheik seemed content with giving him that time and offering an anchor to the real world as his warm hands stayed positioned on his wrists.

They were crossing the desert to reach Vrika, Sheik’s birthplace. They were searching for the Order. They crossed a crater.

Link was hit in the head – oh, Goddesses by a Poe of all things – and had a concussion. He was severely dehydrated.

He took potion in the middle of the fight – he didn’t plan on trying that again, either – and somehow managed to help. Maybe.

Sheik took the Vog down – wait, had he volleyed fireballs with just a normal sword? When had Sheik learned that skill? Sheik needed Link to cast a spell. It was a spell to sink some fancy Sheikah rocks. It was some fancy Sheikah spell. Then…

Okay, Link was efficiently caught up. Mostly. “What was that spell?”

“Drink and I’ll answer. You’re getting a little too clammy, Link,” Sheik demanded, removing a hand to shove a full canteen in Link’s hands. “Drink the whole thing, too. We have six left, so don’t give me the water conservation speech.”

Link wanted to argue…but his body wasn’t having it. He drank desperately at the water, trying to pace himself when instant nausea hit. Hands still remained on his arms, though, pinning him down in the night. And Link couldn’t even express his gratitude for the attention – the darkness was too unhinging after their flight from the Sea of Din.
“That spell was…essentially Chaos magic,” Sheik explained. “More specifically, Sheikah Chaos magic. It was the only thing that would push those stones down.”

Link felt his jaw go slack a little. Chaos magic. Sheik had taught him Chaos magic? And he had picked it up so quickly? How? He hadn’t studied a thing about how to perform Chaos magic. So many questions bubbled to his lips, the first one making it out as, “I thought Chaos magic needed a base.”

“That spell’s base was the sand,” Sheik explained patiently. “Most Sheikah spells are based out of the black sand. Or the ore in Vrika. It runs through the mountain and we paved our streets with it.”

“But isn’t having a base for Chaos magic a little more…deliberate than that? I wasn’t even thinking about the sand,” Link pressed. He knew so little about magic to begin with. He had long since resigned himself to just basic spells. Never had he tried to become a skilled magic user; Zelda and Sheik had plenty talent to make up for it.

“You were covered in sand, Link,” he pointed out.

Well, okay. True. “It was a little scary…”

“I’m sorry I had to make you perform that spell,” Sheik said regretfully. “I didn’t want to…but I still don’t.”

“I know,” Link assured him. “It’s okay.”

Sheik must have been at a crouch because he removed his hands and seemed to settle next to him, his knee pressed against Link’s leg. Link, again, could not even begin to explain how much he appreciated the contact as his eyes finally began to adjust to the black. Stars faded in as pinpricks of light, offering little of the landscape to see, but it was comforting. Link assumed no fire was lit, just in case the Vog somehow made it across, however unlikely it was. Although there would be very little of the moon to shine, Link assumed at had still not risen from the horizon.

“I doubt the Vog are dead,” Link commented, finishing off the last few sips of his canteen and feeling around for the pack to return it. His hand brushed against Sheik’s side and Link forced back the strange thrill the contact gave him in the dark.

“The ones that fell to the quicksand and the one I lit on fire are probably dead…as far as the ones hit with arrows? No, I doubt they’re dead. So we can at least expect four when we return to the Sea, if they’re as persistent as I fear they are.”

“How long until we reach Vrika?” Link inquired, rubbing at his face and forcing the sand out of the corners of his eyes.

“Two days, if unhindered. The Sea, thankfully, was not as harsh as I feared. But the last leg of the journey will be more trying than the first. The landscape between Hyrule and the Sea is full of higher dunes because of the cool winds still coming from the northeast. Now we’re in the basin of the desert. The land is flatter and the storms are violent,” Sheik described.

Link shook his head. “I’d like to reiterate how much I hate this place.”

“You’re not alone in this sentiment. Let’s just hope our luck continues,” Sheik agreed with a sigh.
“Luck? Getting knocked in the head by a Poe and nearly burned alive by Vog is not really what I would call luck,” he snorted back.

“Well, it’s better than dead,” Sheik reasoned and Link could hear the grin in his voice.

And Link couldn’t help a quiet chuckle. The laugh was a small oasis in their desert of turmoil. Link hated how helpless he felt in such an extreme place but Sheik knew the way and was there and alive and there was no sign of that relieved awe wearing off.

“You should sleep,” Link ordered. “You told me you were tired in the Sea. I’ve slept plenty. I’ll take watch.” He could sense Sheik was about to argue so he added, “And don’t make me knock you out.”

He earned a frustrated sigh, but felt the Sheikah shift, lying so close Link could hear the muffled breathing. He couldn’t help but smile – something told him the closeness wasn’t just to quell Link’s wariness. Leaning his still aching head back, he let his eyes grow unfocused under the stars. Now with the water in him, the warmth felt nice even despite the hint of sweat now on his forehead.

A dull twinge on his right arm told him there was a bit of a burn there, probably originating from some point during their short battle with the Vog. Link couldn’t worry about it, however, not when he was listening intently to Sheik’s breathing as it slowed more and more.

Finally, his companion was finding sleep. Relief filled him; Link knew what Sheik’s sleeping breaths sounded like from the year of war.

It had been a few days since Link had really taken watch so the quiet was almost unsettling. There was nothing to see so he just listened to the whisper of wind over the fine grains around them. He hadn’t had a chance to really examine the landscape after their escape from the crater; he wondered what the morning would bring when he looked to the horizon.

And even despite where they were, what they were doing, and what lie ahead, Link found a strange optimism in the weak starlight. Because things would be okay. Because Sheik was lying next to him, alive and resting. And whatever uncertainty faced them concerning Sheik’s enhanced abilities…well, Link would fight until death to keep Sheik true to himself. Without question. Hopefully, it would never come to that.

After those thoughts, his mind drifted. He watched the stars slide over the sky like candles through dark water. Link wondered idly if Termina held the same stars. Maybe one day he would see for himself. And not because of war.

A quick gasp startled him for a moment, his body locking up for an instant and then reaching compulsively for his sword. Movement amongst the sand and an arm brushing his reminded him it was only Sheik. Before Link could really comprehend what was happening, Sheik seemed to spring back into wakefulness with a sharp cry and a quick ring of a dagger.

Of all the times to forgo a fire…

“Sheik!” Link shouted, jumping to his feet and hoping he was about to tackle the side of Sheik that wouldn’t lead to impalement. His body collided, thankfully, with the weaponless part of his companion and felt for a wrist before the Sheikah could hurt either of them. “Calm down. It was just a nightmare.”
Link attempted to pry the dagger from the vise-like grip, surprised by how much stronger Sheik had become since his resurrection. Of course, he had been incredibly strong before but now…it was inhuman. And Sheik was still disoriented, chest heaving under Link’s grip and struggling to get away.

“Sheik, it’s okay,” Link ground out. “Put the dagger down.”

The long fingers went slack and Link managed to yank the weapon away, the blade slapping on dry sand at their feet. Sheik seemed to slump just a bit and Link felt a prick of fear. Was he okay? What in Din’s name had just happened? That had to be one hell of a nightmare.

“I’m sorry,” Sheik murmured hoarsely. “I’m alright.”

Link nodded and began to move away, giving him space. But it appeared Sheik didn’t have the strength to stand anymore so Link stayed there, holding him up. “You don’t seem alright,” he commented, trying to not sound as worried as he really felt.

“It was just…overwhelming,” Sheik explained tiredly.

“What happened?”

“I was possessed,” he whispered. “I could feel some deep power inside me. Controlling me. It felt horrific.”

A sharp chill ran up Link’s spine as he thought of his own dream. He could still clearly see those cold blue eyes as Link was pinned down, dagger pushing into his jugular. The memory had stained itself to his mind much like…

Link’s stomach dropped painfully as the memory of the night Sheik had been attacked by Evanna’s magic returned to his mind.

Sheik had been left with a mark; a black crescent moon. The mark of Amrita. Evanna had said it was protection against his cancer returning.

Cancer. Sheik had been dying from a sickness in his lungs – had it grown there on its own or had Evanna been responsible for that as well?

_Fear the marked ones!_

“Sheik, tell me what happened in the dream,” Link demanded with a shaking voice, helping the Sheikah sit back on the sand. He wished he could read those red eyes but the darkness yielded nothing. “I need to know what happened.”

“It was night. It was the battlefield. Foursky…he cast Hexam and took the soldiers. And he took me. I…I killed you, Link. And then _I_ died. Like we were connected somehow,” he described, voice laced with horror. The same horror that was filling Link to the brim.

No. That couldn’t happen. He could accept the war, but the dream had surely just been an interpretation of what was to come, not a complete vision of the exact events.

Sheik’s possession…Link had been sure it was a manifestation of his own guilt, not part of the
premonition.

“What were you saying in the dream?” Link pressed, feeling the edge of panic in his voice.

Sheik reached out blindly and grabbed his wrist. “What is it, Link?”

“Consider this my retribution,” he quoted. He was shaking and he knew Sheik could feel it but his body vibrated from adrenaline and Link couldn’t hide his fear any longer.

Those fingers tightened painfully around his arm as the voice came out just as tight and sharp. “How do you know that?”

“Because I had the same dream.”

“No, Link, it was just a dream,” Sheik denied, the shake of his head apparent through their contact. “There’s no way…”

“Sheik, the mark,” he stressed. “Fear the marked ones.”

And then it seemed to finally dawn on Sheik. He snapped into realization and was on his feet in seconds, feeling around in the sand as Link sat there somewhat shell-shocked.

That had been the motive all along.

Mark Sheik and use him as a weapon with Hexam; no wonder Evanna had looked so pleased about Sheik’s new power.

The words and the fuel to use them – Vaspra – had always been Foursky and Evanna’s end game. They had been slowing building careful walls around him, Sheik, and Zelda for months now, all leading to one inevitable outcome.

They would possess Sheik and the Royal armies of Hyrule. Surely Evanna had marked all the men of Hyrule by now with all the free time she had had while they fought in the Nether for her.

They would take the kingdom. They would kill all who opposed. According to the prophecy, Link would be invulnerable to Hexam…but against Hexa? Against a killing spell? He doubted it. There was only one thing keeping all of this from truly happening:

The Order.

Link returned to reality as he heard a rustle of fabric and then something cold and hard met his palm. “Destroy it, Link. Ruin the mark so they can’t use me,” he spat bitterly.

Link’s stomach locked up. “Sheik, I don’t know if…”

“What choice do we have?” he shouted. “Light a fire and get this thing off of me.”

Of course, Sheik was very right. But the idea twisted his stomach up even more than he thought possible. Carving into Sheik’s back was not his idea of helping. “But how do we even know if the dreams are true? This might not even happen.”

Suddenly Link sensed proximity and could feel Sheik’s breath against his cheek. Long fingers
closed his own around the hilt of the dagger. “Or maybe it will. Do we really want to take that chance?”

Link sat there with the dagger in his hand as Sheik rifled through in his pack again. He felt sick. He knew he had to but with every fiber of his being he didn't want to. Sheik felt out for Link’s free hand and he allowed it to be guided over the little bit of wood they had left, knowing the request before it was even made..

With a grimace, Link cast the spell to create fire and watched their little campsite glow to life. Sheik was crouched across from it, shirtless and looking wild. The light was far too bright after hours of blackness. He sincerely hoped the Vog hadn’t made it out of the crater – he was creating a beacon if they were.

Sheik’s back now to the fire, Link settled beside him and studied the mark – it was just as dark and clean as a fresh tattoo, inked deeply into his bronze skin. Link laid his hand over it for a moment, wondering if he could sense anything from the shape. Was there any real magic to the mark itself? Or was it just an antenna for the spell? He felt nothing against his palm despite his efforts.

“Just do it, Link,” Sheik insisted, his voice flat and hard.

So he did.

Link slid the dagger against Sheik’s skin, slicing as deeply as he dared. Would he just need to slice through it or did would he have to skin the entire area? His stomach flipped as blood bubbled to the surface immediately and Sheik tensed under his hand. Link thought back to the cave in the Nether, watching Sheik’s blood flow unbidden from his stomach. He never wanted to see that blood again.

And there he was, causing it.

“I’ll just blur the mark,” he promised when Sheik twitched in pain but made no sound.

Link worked quickly, slicing deeply through flesh that wept red in the blade’s wake. It was sick and horrible and Link wanted to stop. Images of his dream kept flashing in his mind; the way all feeling had drained from Sheik’s eyes, the awful sting of the dagger tearing through his throat...

*Consider this my retribution.*

*You were my…*

He sat back, unable to go on and feeling so ill he could no longer focus his gaze. Thankfully, the task was done. The mark was destroyed. Sheik’s skin would never look the same, but he knew it was ultimately worth it?

“Thank you, Link,” Sheik said quietly, leaning forward and pressing his fists into the sand. He hung his head over, looking exhausted.

Link couldn’t find any words so he cleaned the dagger and pulled some bandages out of his pack. Both were silent as he cleaned the wound, only slight twitches running over Sheik’s shoulders as the cloth passed over tortured skin. Wrapping the gauze tightly around Sheik’s chest, Link wished he could just use potion rather than leaving a wound open in the desert.

But potion would heal it and leave no scar; it would leave the mark intact.
When he finished, Sheik didn’t seem to have the strength to do anything but lay back down on the sand and close his eyes. Link thought about killing the fire but he couldn’t bear the darkness it would bring again.

So he simply sat there, watching the desert wind play with Sheik’s hair until his anxiety began to subdue. And really, he needed food – Link couldn’t even remember the last time he ate. His stomach had been in too many knots for too many days so he fished out some dried fruit and nearly inhaled it.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep again,” Sheik said.

Link glanced back down to see red eyes fixed upwards to the stars. “At least lay there and rest,” he suggested.

His companion nodded, flicking his gaze over to Link. “You should get some more sleep.”

Link shook his head dismissively, earning a long sigh.

So they remained in silence, Link staring at the fire with a less empty stomach and Sheik staring at the stars in thoughts leagues away. Was he really safe? Was that really all it took to keep that dream from becoming a reality? And why had they had the dreams in the first place? Link didn’t normally have premonitions and neither did Sheik.

Well, except in the war. The last prophecy they’d been in the middle of. And here they were again, smack in the center of the next prophecy to ruin. So had the Goddesses shared these dreams? Was it set in stone? Or was it a warning to change their course?

Why couldn’t the Goddesses just speak to them?

“I think you were able to sense things in the Nether after I died because the Nether twisted you. The Nether seems to twist everything. You couldn’t sense anything there at first because you were…” Sheik said quietly.

The thought was so out-of-the blue, but Link immediately caught onto what was being said. “Still a whole person?”

He glanced over to find Sheik shaking his head. “You will always be a whole person, Link. But the Nether gave you a little more darkness than you had when you arrived.”

“So what does that say about you? You were still able to sense things to a certain degree,” Link countered.

“Need I remind you I am one of the Shadow Folk?” There was a small amount of humor in those eyes and Link could imagine a smirk underneath that cowl, reminding him…

“Those marks on your face – what do they symbolize?” Link inquired, knowing he was broaching a possibly touchy subject but hopeful Sheik was still in a sharing mood after their tumultuous night.

Link had asked direct questions about the cowl’s constant presence before, knowing the answers all-too-well considering how many times he had heard Sheik explain it to every Lady of the Court. It was for the protection of a warrior and his family to hide their identity, the fabric also covering any revealing expressions in a fight. And it was only the trained warriors that chose to follow this
practice. Link wondered if the tradition was really so strict, however, that he only saw his companion’s face in death.

Sheik’s eyes widened a little, obviously caught off guard. But he recovered and replied, “It’s a mark a warrior takes after their first kill. It is the inversion of our eye, the three triangles down under the mouth. It’s just a ceremonial distinction.”

“It looked like it had been cut into your skin.”

“That’s because it is. Scarred and inked in the color of our people,” Sheik explained softly, sitting up into full firelight. And then, to Link’s great surprise, Sheik pulled down the cowl to reveal his face for only the second time ever.

And then, without the chaos of death and blood, Link could actually take it in properly. It was the same face that gasped for air and spoke his last words…but it was also the face of someone very alive and, although there were so many changes, was really just the same person.

Just Sheik.

Despite his persistence in keeping the cloth up, the color of his skin was uniform and dark. The line of his jaw was sharp and angular, pointing evenly down to the red scars on his chin. His eyes lingered, for a moment, on the man’s lips. But he pushed his eyes away before his thoughts could coalesce into something rather embarrassing.

“How old were you when you made your first kill?” Link asked, unable to stop staring but hardly worried about his open display of scrutiny – Sheik didn’t seem to mind, actually.

“Fourteen. My first kill was in Vrika, one of Ganondorf’s monsters.”

Of course it was. Link grimaced. “That’s too young.”

“How old were you when you first killed?” Sheik hedged, his face shifting to a frown that fascinated Link now that he didn’t have to imagine the expression anymore.

Link started a bit…living in the forests, he had fought many creatures. But the creatures never really died. They were reabsorbed by the spirits of the forest and made new again. What was the first thing he had truly destroyed that hadn’t come back?

“I was ten. Queen Gohma had infected The Great Deku Tree under Ganondorf’s orders. My only choice was to destroy her,” Link answered in surprise. It hadn’t occurred to him that he had become a warrior even younger than Sheik had. He’d been so focused on saving The Great Deku Tree that he had not hesitated once in that battle. And despite its alignment with Ganondorf…Link had killed a living thing and he was only just now contending with it.

“That is too young,” Sheik stated, giving Link a serious look. “And that was essentially, for you at least, only three years ago.”

Once more, Link hadn’t really thought of it that way. And he didn’t want to think of it that way because it made him feel a little sick. He shook his head. “It feels far longer than that.”

Sheik just nodded and, instead of pulling the cowl back up, turned his gaze to the fire and brought his knees to his chest. And the picture before Link was more calming than anything else could’ve
possibly been. Sheik was there, alive and almost vulnerable, in the position Link had long associated with Sheik being comfortable. Like he was a cat. The thought made him smirk.

They stayed that way until morning, watching the fire die as the sky aged into a deep azure. Link tried in the beginning to keep his eyes away from Sheik but it was clearly a fruitless endeavor considering how impossible it was – a force that almost felt like magnetism kept forcing his glances. And besides, Sheik’s gaze stayed on the fire, far away in his thoughts once more.

Link watched the occasional work of his jaw, the rope-like muscles that flexed over the bone. With the cowl out of the way Link was allowed to see all the other little tics the otherwise calm and stoic Sheikah had. It seemed he was a pretty compulsive lip-chewer and it was a wonder how he managed to have such full lips considering how roughly he abused them.

Link’s mind descended to other thoughts and…Uh, okay. Time to think about something else.

When it was light enough to travel, the sun still hidden by the horizon behind them, they packed up. Link was now about to see the landscape was exactly as Sheik described – much flatter and the dunes only smaller scooped slopes now. He fished through their fire and found hardly anything worth taking. They had enough wood now for maybe one more fire.

While he’d been packing, Sheik had put his shirt back on and tugged the cowl up once more, much to Link’s dismay. Watching the defined, lean muscles ripple under firelight all night hadn’t been the worst thing he’d ever watched. And with that thought, Link pulled up his own cowl in hopes of hiding the annoying blush it was all bringing on.

_Shit up_, he told himself.

Although Link was now quite accustomed to the terrain, the basin of the desert was thankfully much easier to walk on. In fact, some parts were hard-packed sand and scrub plants crawled desperately out of cracks in the ground. As they travelled, Sheik explained how they would use spells to draw the water from the plants in desperate times and dig shelters in the hard parts of the sand. They kept an ever-present eye behind them in case they were being tracked but the blurred horizon offered them nothing.

It was midmorning when Sheik stopped, so suddenly, Link bumped into his back.

“What?” Link asked hoarsely, throat already dry and useless in the rising temperature. He squinted at the horizon, trying to follow Sheik’s wide-eyed stare.

And there, maybe another day and a half’s travel from them, was the mountain. It was like a perfect black triangle sitting amongst the heat waves that gave it the illusion of dancing. Link’s stomach did a little flip and he put a hand on Sheik’s shoulder, not sure what to say or do.

“I haven’t seen it in six years,” Sheik said. His voice sounded as uneven as the ground they walked upon. Link couldn’t imagine what it felt like to see one’s home again after such a long time.

They stood there for a moment longer, just watching the little black tooth beyond the dunes, and then Sheik seemed to snap out of his rapt stare. Link’s hand slipped off his shoulder as his friend continued on. A little pit of worry grew in his stomach now that they were within sight of Vrika. The reality of what awaited them truly sunk in and he worried for Sheik’s sanity.

He was so unstable. Just as unstable as Link, as was proven since reaching the desert.
What would returning to his home and his changed people do to him?

Although their path was more forgiving in the basin, the sun was not. Somehow it was brighter and hotter and Link was drinking more than he had ever intended to avoid his heat stroke from the previous day. Sheik, as before, seemed to need no water. In fact, he wasn’t even sweating. But he also didn’t look like he was having the best time of his life, either.

When they stopped at midday, Link insisted Sheik sleep. And to his surprise, he did.

Link kept a vigilant watch over the dunes as Sheik slept beside him. Like Sheik had described earlier that day, they had dug a small shelter into the hard, cracked sand. Although it didn’t really shield as much sun as they needed it to, it did give them the illusion of security and Link could live with that.

As the sun moved from its zenith, Link became aware of a gathering of clouds – a rarity to begin with – to their west. The mountain now lay directly before them, just under the dark brewing there to contrast with the bright blue sky and Link frowned. He didn’t know if those clouds would be heading their way but he could only hope they weren’t the prelude to a sand storm.

The sun moved swiftly into its three o’clock position and the stifling heat forced him to disrupt Sheik’s – thankfully – peaceful sleep. The clouds were developing into even darker hues as he pointed them out while Sheik re-equipped.

“Let’s hope they stay west. The winds from the western sea are very strong, however,” Sheik wondered, looking more concerned than Link liked. “We may be facing a storm before the day is out.”

As they trudged on, Link tried to distract himself from the suffocating heat by asking about more of the surrounding geography.

“The rainforest extends to the sea. The climate is hot but far more humid than the desert. To the north,” he pointed to their northwest, “is a mountain range that eventually joins with the range north of Hyrule, ending at Death Mountain. North of the mountains is a large tundra, home to our neighboring Kingdom Labrynna.”

“So is this desert and the rainforest part of Hyrule?” Link wondered. He had studied many maps through time as Hyrule was settled and divided into different provinces. But the area beyond the Desert Colossus was always grayed out and barely detailed. But it was still on the map. He never found any texts describing the deserts and he figured it had a lot to do with Sheikah secrecy.

“It’s a territory of it, I suppose. The desert offers nothing economically to Hyrule, however. Or really to anyone else. The rainforest offers more, but it’s trapped between the desert, the mountains, and the sea. The riches there aren’t worth the dangerous road to them.”

“So how did your tribe end up out here?” Link inquired, nearly tripping over a scrub plant and kicking it irritably for good measure. “The Sheikah could’ve picked an easier place to visit.”

“But that was the point,” Sheik explained, sounding a little amused. “When the original desert tribe split, many of those who would become the Sheikah of Vrika wished to be cut off from everyone else. Others, like the Kakariko tribe Lady Impa hails from, became the servants of the Goddess Hylia and swore to protect the Royal Family and all of Zelda’s reincarnations. But the kingdom of
Hyrule was simply just an idea back then. The lands were ravaged by civil wars and the fighting between the desert people was just another addition to a still settling nation. Many Sheikah were tired of the bloodshed and wished to live peacefully, away from the warring tribe that would later become the Gerudo.”

“But the Sheikah of Vrika were dragged back into bloodshed nonetheless,” Link said with a sigh.

“It was inevitable. Like the Hylian, the Sheikah have also inherited too much magic to be left out of conflict. As long as we are magic users, we will be cast as characters in every war this land holds, much like the souls of you and Queen Zelda,” he described as their footsteps crunched over pockets of hard, cracked sand. Link could almost imagine the Sheikah from hundreds of years ago walking over the very same sand in their quest for peace.

“The Sheikah have so much history intertwined with Hyrule…I had no idea,” Link laughed with a shake of his head. “How your people managed to stay out of the history books is impressive.”

“I’d like to reiterate that we are called the Shadow Folk for a reason.” Link could hear the smirk and elbowed the Sheikah in the shoulder.

There was a distant rumble and he focused his attention ahead of them again, where the skies were now black, shadow wrapping the distant Vrika in a blanket of rain. The storm was getting closer and Link groaned.

“Looks like the sea will betray us and push the storm into the desert,” Sheik commented, sounding as distinctly unhappy as Link felt. “There will be no avoiding it.”

“I’m assuming we won’t be lucky enough to get any of that rain?”

Sheik shook his head. “The rain will evaporate in the heat and the winds will pick up the sand.”

And so they marched towards the storm, as though they were participating in a very long range joust. Link just wondered who would be knocked down in the situation. Most likely them. The only sandstorm he had ever been in was the perpetual one in the Haunted Wasteland between the Gerudo Fortress and the Desert Colossus. He imagined the one before them would be much worse.

Soon enough cold wind started moving in and offering a deceptive relief from the heat. The clouds stretched out towards them like massive hands, the cracks of lightning echoing through open air and shaking the sand beneath their feet. Winds began to pick up streams of sand and throw them every which way. Link pulled up his headscarf after getting a face full and groaned irritably. He had no idea how he was going to be able to see in the storm if he couldn’t even handle its prelude.

Far too quickly was the five o’clock sun blocked out by a dark brown fog of sand. A roaring sound filled Link’s ears and flashes of lightning illuminated the cloud every few minutes. As the monstrosity raced towards them, blanketing them in shadow, Sheik looked back and shouted something he couldn’t hear over the mayhem.

“What?” Link bellowed back.

But Sheik seemed to give up as the storm closed in and sand whipped violently around them. He reached out and laced their fingers together, yanking Link next to him and pulling his cowl up to cover his entire face. He felt a nose bump into his temple and amidst the roar, he heard, “Keep your face covered! Hang on to me!”
The full force of the storm finally knocked into them, more violent and powerful than he would’ve ever expected. He was nearly knocked off his feet, but his connection with Sheik kept him standing. Forcing himself into a crouch, Link struggled to remain upright so he could stay on top of the sand that was continually piling up over his feet.

Primary objective: don’t be buried alive.

Debris pushed hard against his thin headscarf and thankfully none of it managed to get through. Breathing was difficult but the fabric did a surprisingly good job of filtering enough for him to stay conscious. The limited air made him want to panic but Link forced himself to focus on the fingers wrapped with his and the shoulder pressed against him.

Occasionally a wild gust would unsteady him and Sheik would drag him back to his feet, keeping them close together and tightening their hands. Link was positive there was no blood left in his fingers – and hey, maybe he’d lose them all together – but it was better than being buried under a desert’s worth of sand.

He had failed to ask Sheik how long the storms tended to last or how big they could get, he realized in dismay. Link had no sense of time but, judging by the ache in his ridged muscles, it had to be at least an hour. And over time, as the pain in his knees became a sharp stab, the winds seemed to weaken and the loud roar was mostly behind them.

“Link,” Sheik yelled, “let’s get moving. We’re almost out.”

He chanced a slit of space in his headscarf and found the sand-to-eye ratio was decent enough to keep it open. And, hilariously, the landscape looked about the same. Link glanced behind them and the massive, rumbling dust storm was rolling away into the east. Sand still swirled around them in a flurry, but it was manageable.

Link disentangled their fingers and flexed, a painful buzz shooting up his arm from the lack of circulation. “Well, that was just as awful as I expected.”

“Well, at least it wasn’t a surprise,” Sheik quipped back, far too witty for someone who had just fought through an angry sandstorm. His companion shook his head and sand scattered off him in a mist. “That was pretty mild, really.”

“I don’t want to see what you consider severe, then,” Link complained, brushing off his clothes and trying to blink away a desert’s worth of sand still scraping his eyes.

With the storm rumbling and roaring behind them, they trekked on once more. Link couldn’t help but feel relieved. The storm hadn’t delayed them too terribly and when he held his hand to the horizon at dusk, Vrika was around the same size. They had at least one day left of travel and he would gladly run into the arms of a rogue Sheikah to get away from the Goddess-forsaken desert.

Now that they were closer Link could see the jagged mountain in more detail. It had no trees; only veins of white and black seemed to run through brown and gray rock. While it had looked like a perfect triangle from a distance, it was clear the top was a crooked point so sharp it looked as though it would skewer the clouds still lingering above it.

“So, what are we to expect from the Order?” Link inquired as they set up camp in the fading light. Stars were already peppering the navy sky and the heat was a little more wet than previously. They
were starting to close in on the humidity of the rainforest and Link honestly didn’t know what was worse: dry mouth or sticky skin.

“They will probably attack us,” Sheik replied as he wiped down his sword and emptied the sand from his sheath.

“Can’t we just wave a white flag and skip all of that? We’re running out of time,” he suggested.

Sheik gave him a shrug. “I think even if we lay facedown on the sand they would still attack. It’s the Order of Hexa. They have an entire smoke screen of mystery surrounding them. I know nothing of their customs compared to that of the Sheikah.”

“Fair enough,” Link agreed, “but if they do follow Sheikah customs, what will they do when we show up in their city?”

Sheik gave him a raised eyebrow. “They will probably attack us.”

Link slapped a palm to his forehead and groaned. “I thought the Sheikah were civilized.”

“We’re as civilized as Hylians,” Sheik countered, humor lingering in his eyes.

Link sighed and flopped backwards on the sand, finally abandoning his attempt to become sand-free. “Don’t get snarky.”

Sheik just snorted.

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If you didn’t listen to Sandstorm by Darude while reading this chapter, you missed a life-altering opportunity.

So things are getting gay and I hope you’re all happy about it. Thank you for reading and reviewing and putting excited keystrokes in the tags when you reblog the posts on Tumblr.
Chapter 23

XXIII.

Night fell softly and they sat in humid darkness, the barest curve of moon above them. Sheik had supposedly gotten enough sleep to recharge and sat up the whole night. Link slept off and on for hours, waking up with a gasp from whatever nightmare decided to plague him. Sometimes it was just flashes or color, distant screams, and howls. Other times it was his mind’s own mutation of the initial premonition.

When Link woke up an hour or so before dawn, reemerging from the bite of Sheik’s dagger to his throat yet again, he decided he would give up the chase.

“Did you get any real rest?” Sheik asked quietly in the darkness.

“A little,” Link grumbled, leaning his forehead on his knees and sighing. Waking up time and time again in cold sweats was enough kill any optimism he found the day before. “I can’t get that dream out of my head.”

“Neither can I,” Sheik admitted.

They sat in quiet companionship after that, turning to the east to watch the sky erupt in a cascade of water colors. Link tried to take solace in the show, in the warm presence next to him, in the knowledge that the twisted Sheik in his dreams would no longer be a reality. And, after some concentration, he found a moment of calm in the chaos as the sun peeked over the horizon.

It was time to journey on.

Vrika was growing bigger and bigger and, although Link still couldn’t view the base of it over the warped horizon, he also couldn’t imagine it getting any wider. It swelled up and up, dwarfing Death Mountain by noon.

“I didn’t realize how big Vrika was,” Link panted as they stopped for rest, the heat so oppressive even Sheik was rendered useless despite his improved stamina. Link downed the rest of his canteen, compulsively checking three times to see there were four left.

It would more than enough to reach the city – optimism cautiously pooled back into his mind at this fact.

“Vrika is sometimes considered the big sister of Death Mountain. Both of them book end the mountain range arcing from southwest to northeast,” Sheik explained, pulling off his head scarf to shake out his hair in a small eruption of sand. “Vrika is twice the size of Death Mountain.”

Link flopped back on the baking sand, covering his burned face with his headscarf, and let out a moan as he stretched out sore limbs. “This return trip might kill me. Never have I wished for that Ocarina back as much as I do now.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, especially considering the Vog that may be waiting for us in the Sea of Din. It’s a long shot…but we may not have to worry about that return trip,” Sheik countered.
Link pulled the headscarf off his face and fixed Sheik with a surprised look. “Huh?”

“You’ll see.”

“I don’t like when you do that,” Link complained, giving him an exasperated look and draping the fabric back over his face. “Is it in the Vala to be cryptic all the time?”

“Yes,” Sheik quipped, “right next to never let the Hero of Time win in a spar.”

Link threw a fistful of sand at him halfheartedly. “I wish Zelda would believe me when I tell her how much of a smartass you are.”

But the banter warmed him up in a way the sun never could. Slowly, since leave the castle, they had fallen back into their rhythm. It was a slightly uneven cadence now but Link could still pretend that nothing had changed between them. Sheik was just a Sheikah from the desert and Link was just the Hero of Time. Because in that moment, they were not Sheik the Nether Monster and Link the Broken Hero.

They lay there, trying to move as little as possible as the sun baked them into sleepiness and Link was about to drift off a little when…

“Link.”

Sheik’s voice was off, like a door hanging halfway of its hinges. Link was upright in seconds, looking around wildly. He spotted Sheik sitting in the sand, his hand crawling at the back of his neck and eyes impossibly wide with shock and fear.

“What?” Link demanded, leaping to his feet. “Sheik, what?”

“The mark…it’s…”

But Link didn’t wait for him to finish; he reached over to pull down the collar of Sheik’s tunic, hoping, praying it wasn’t…

The skin was healed and the mark was a flawless crescent moon, the black ink such a contrast to the bright sunlight it didn’t look real. His stomach dropped to the sand under his feet and his breath caught in his throat as dread struck him.

“When?” he demanded. “When did it heal?”

“I didn’t feel pain when I woke up yesterday morning. I really didn’t feel anything and I didn’t think anything of it…” Sheik replied, the panic growing in his voice. His fingers pushed Link’s out of the way, spreading over the skin like he still believed he would find the terrible wound Link had made if he searched hard enough.

Evanna placed the mark there…and it couldn’t be removed.

Anger, red and intoxicating, flooded his mind like a volcanic explosion as he kicked a nearby shrub and cried out in fury. “I’m going to kill her! I’m going to kill them both!”

Sheik had jumped to his feet and gripped Link’s shoulder as another scrub plant fell victim to his
anger. “Link, calm down.”

“Calm down?” Link bellowed, feeling that creeping hint of insanity from the Nether unravel his mind once more. He felt dangerous as Sheik’s fingers tightened into the muscle at his shoulder, some involuntary part of his mind urging him to run, to expend the painful energy building up in his chest. “How are we going to get that mark off you, Sheik? Tell me how and then I’ll calm down!”

“We need to think of other methods,” Sheik reasoned slowly, moving his other hand to clamp down Link’s other shoulder. “But you have to calm down.”

“No!” Link cried, the volume tugging at the limits of his throat while he gripped Sheik’s forearms, both pushing and pulling. “I can’t—”

“Link,” Sheik interrupted, shaking at his shoulders.

But Link could barely feel it, barely see him past the rushing in his head. It was just like his post-war panic attacks all over again as a cloud of hallucinations and confusion hung over his head, amplifying his panic. The insatiable anger and terror felt like a current of magic constricting his lungs and heart. It felt like he was dying.

“Link, focus!”

“I can’t lose you again!” The words burst out of him, the sun too overwhelming to keep his head up any longer so he shouted it to the sand. “I can’t. You’re the most important thing to me. If that premonition came true…”

And then Link was jerked forward, long arms pulling them hard together in a tight embrace. With his face securely against the curve of Sheik’s shoulder, the waves of anger and fear broke like a tidal wave upon rocks.

The emotion to replace the fear was almost just intense but somewhat a relief. Because he couldn’t remember the last time he had been hugged like that. He had hugged Malon, he had hugged Zelda…but only to comfort them. He couldn’t remember the last time someone hugged him to offer comfort like that.

Sheik smelled like the incense that always lingered on his skin and sweat and sand and sun. But he could breathe it in forever if it meant he didn’t have to face the world.

“You’re not going to lose me,” Sheik told him gently, voice so close to Link’s ear. “I won’t let it happen. We’ll find a way, Link. I promise.”

His arms tightened and, for the first time in the longest time, Link felt safe. And he felt capable after so long of feeling powerless and at the mercy of prophecy. He felt the support he had been searching for during the war, trying to hang onto every friend he made even after losing most of them to Sagehood. So many promises had been made to him and he had learned long ago that it didn’t matter how much someone meant it – fate didn’t keep promises so they would inevitably be broken.

But he could believe this one. Because it was Sheik and Sheik had never let him down.

They stayed that way for a few minutes and he could tried to memorize the pattern of Sheik’s heart
thumping against Link’s chest. Something told him Sheik needed the contact as much as Link did. They needed each other, just as they did in the war. At least that much hadn’t really changed.

And then Sheik’s body suddenly tensed, going as rigid as stone.

Link pulled away to find red eyes worried once more. “What?”

“The Vog are coming,” was all he said.

They both sprung into motion, pulling on gear and gathering packs. They cast their eyes back to the mountain and hurried west. Somewhere between a jog and a fast walk, they struggled through the small pockets of sand with little grace, constantly glancing backwards to see nothing. But the Vog were fast; Link could only hope they made it to Vrika before the creatures caught up.

At least Sheik was able to sense them coming…somehow. Link wanted to ask how but he didn’t have the breath for words.

The sun was now falling behind the mountain which lay only a few leagues away. As the horizon rolled into view and the sand turned to hard, cracked mud, dark green mountains sloped behind its girth.

Rainforests were just growing at the horizon and then, an hour later, white buildings became visible. The biggest one lay closest, three tall spires reaching up towards the shifting sky. But the right spire was broken and, as they drew ever closer, it was clear that many of the buildings were half-destroyed.

The mountain was enormous, completely blocking out the setting sun. They had maybe only two hours left of light as the city of Vrika was laid before them. If the sight of it gave Sheik any pain, Link wasn’t in the position to react considering the rigorous pace they were keeping.

Link could only hope the Order would help them when they reached the city. Or maybe he and Sheik would be killed by them along with the Vog. But anything was better than becoming Vog dinner.

Closing in on the city, they reached a building farther to their right – a two-story, square structure missing its roof – and Sheik led them inside and up the stairs. The walls were made of some white stone stacked like bricks, the floor made of a strange soft wood Link could only assume came from the rainforest.

And speaking of rainforest, the air was now completely devoid of its dry wind and instead heavy with humidity that demanded sweat from his skin.

The inside of the house had been mostly gutted. There was no furniture and the only things left were what had been carved into one of the walls: the Sheikah eye, only this one lacked the tear below it that symbolized the Sheikah genocide. Despite the years of abandonment, the very distinct smell of Sheikah incense filled his nose and made him feel dizzy.

Very little light filled the sky above the ruined roof, and when he turned to Sheik, it was clear his companion was beyond overwhelmed. His red eyes flittered over the walls, taking in everything from his childhood with a very distinct agony that Link couldn’t bear to see.

Through the wide, empty windows the rest of Vrika sprawled before them, stretching all the way
up on the mountain. The last few buildings had been built into the rock of the mountain, dark and empty. Rainforests embraced the mountain, trees thick and webbed with vines. Many of the rooftops between them and the mountain were broken or gone and in the streets Link could still see signs of what had happened there; abandoned weapons, broken armor, and pieces of crumbling furniture.

It was all too much. Link couldn’t begin to imagine what Sheik was experiencing.

They crouched in the deep silence of the stone house, not daring to look out the window facing east but listening intensely for the sound of the Vog. However, nothing met their ears for a long time and Link spent the long minutes watching Sheik, who was very much not handling being home once more. His shoulders shook and his grip on the hilt of his sword was so tight his fingers were turning blue.

And then there was an eruption of growls and human shouts.

The Vog had arrived and the Order was fighting.

Link drew his sword instantly and grabbed Sheik’s arm, dragging him to the stairs. Perhaps the Order would be less inclined kill them if he and Sheik helped. His companion followed without resistance, seemingly too shell-shocked to resist. Link was almost about to leave him there, but he needed Sheik to bridge the gap between a very obvious Hylian and a company of very angry Sheikah.

“Get it together, Sheik,” Link snapped, hurrying down the steps and bursting back into the street paved with the same smooth, white stone. Far down the thruway he saw several figures swathed in black dart past. “We need to help.”

Adrenaline chugged through Link’s veins as he endeavored to focus despite his extreme exhaustion. Their objective was swaying the Order to align with them; aiding in the fight was their only opportunity to stay alive, something that was essential to creating said alliance.

Sheik gave a short nod, appearing to master himself a little more, and drew his sword.

They raced towards the metallic ring of swords and unnatural howls that now filled the wet air. They wove between houses, some small and others towering, and it was clear some of what they sprinted over were bones of long-lost casualties. Link glanced back at Sheik to find he was completely aware of it as well.

What horror was this causing in Sheik’s already troubled mind?

There was very little light left when they arrived to the setting for their battle: the huge building with three sharp spires. Before them lay a huge stone courtyard with a broken fountain full of rotten water. Here, three Vog were battling five lithe figures in dark clothing and what were clearly six Gerudo women, their dress similar to Link and Sheik’s in contrast.

They had no time to stand there – one of the Vog seemed to notice their arrival and charge, effectively pulling them into the fray.

“You smell like home,” it snarled as it leapt for Sheik, who in turn easily dodged the advance.

Link slashed through a tendon on its back leg as the others seemed to all notice the newcomes in
the battle. But he barely saw the eyes they had attracted as he danced between blows and parries.

The Vog whom he had wounded whipped about with a yelp and snapped at Link, just missing his right arm. He blocked another swipe and lurched forward to drive the Moon Blade up through its jugular as Sheik impaled its stomach in a spray of gore. The creature let out a pitiful cry as it fell on the white stone ground, blood spreading in an ink black pool.

Another Vog was killed not far away, felled by three figures in black – surely the Order – which only left one more that seemed to be doing an excellent job of evading the attacks of the other warriors. In a flurry of unexpected maneuvers the Vog managed to pin down one of the Gerudo, fangs about to descend upon its captive until a wild shout rang through the air.

A warrior, their movements impossibly fast and lethal, closed in on the last creature. Link saw a cowl pulled tightly over their face and the burn of red eyes. Time seemed to slow dramatically as the Vog lunged downwards for the Gerudo and the Sheikah landed not an arm’s length away.

In a snap of movement, something blue – clearly Vaspra – was brought into wrapped hands as, loud and terrible and sickening, an all-too-familiar word filled the courtyard like a thunder storm.

“Hexa!”

The syllable sounded far different than how they had all been pronouncing it. An electric blue column of light filled the courtyard, blinding Link for a painful moment. A reverberating hollow bang echoed out and then, when it was over, the Vog lay dead and smoking. The Gerudo woman scrambled from beneath the fallen beast, crawling through the blue dust that lingered around the body.

The figure pocketed the Vaspra as other women pulled the rescued Gerudo close, turning their wide gazes the new arrivals. Recognition passed between Link and the woman who had almost been killed by the Vog – it was Blithos’ mother.

Sheik was quaking next to him, but not in fear. It was as though he were trying to contain something awful soon to combust. The figure turned and, in a flash of movement, the rest of the Order crossed the wide circumference of space around them and aimed their long swords to Sheik and Link.

“Who are you?” Sheik demanded, his voice twisted in emotion Link couldn’t understand. His companion threw down his sword in a show of surrender and knocked the Moon Blade from Link’s grip, both falling in a disjointed clatter as they took in the group of crimson eyes fixed on them. The Hexa user stopped before them, gaze locked on Sheik as though he were a rare breed.

And perhaps he was.

Link could just guess at the shared pain of realizing members of your people still lingered.

Among the leaders’ red eyes and furrowed white brows, three deep and roped scars interrupted forehead, nose, and cheek. It was clearly the remains of a disfiguring wound that Link didn’t want to imagine where it had its origin. But the face was young from what could be seen above the cowl. The rest of the Order appeared older, more weathered.

“Am I familiar to you?” the figure asked, revealing a hard and androgynous voice. Sheik visibly flinched beside him. “Or have we both been twisted beyond recognition?”
The leader reached up and pulled off their cowl and headscarf, revealing the image of a woman

White-gold hair like the moon fell to her shoulders in various knotted braids and the true depth of her silver scars was revealed in startling contrast with her warm brown skin. They warped her hairline and tugged into her scalp, dragging diagonally down to her jaw and warping the shape of her right eye. The left corner of her mouth was pulled into a deep scowl and the perfect red markings like Sheik’s were put into her skin, obviously made after the wounds were healed. Scars on her throat alluded to more that couldn’t be seen and, even despite the disfiguration, it was clear she was very young and beautiful.

Maybe Link should’ve felt shock but it was the cruelty of fate; Link knew they were staring at Kalyh.

Although the scars had clearly severed many of the muscles in her face, she managed a smile and said something softly in Sheikah. The rest of the Order withdrew and sheathed their weapons, turning away obediently to see to the dead Vog.

Link finally pulled his eyes from Kalyh and realized Sheik was about to explode. He was prepared to reach out and touch his friend’s shoulder but a burst of energy erupted from Sheik’s body and Link was pushed back several steps, as was Kalyh.

“I watched you die,” Sheik growled, the tone off and guttural.

Kalyh replied, but slipped into Sheikah, the meaning lost to Link. But Sheik seemed to lose control even more at the words and another burst of invisible energy rocked them again. Sheik spoke back in Sheikah but the words were jagged and unsteady. Kalyh was growing as fearful as Link and her eyes flickered to his as though she was about to ask what was happening.

Link went back the few steps he’d been pushed, hand reaching out to press Sheik’s shoulder. He didn’t know how to calm an overpowered Sheikah and he doubted Kalyh knew either but what else could he do?

“Sheik, you have to calm down,” he said carefully, mirroring Sheik’s own words from earlier. Two meltdowns in one day didn’t bode well for the mental wellbeing of the people saving the world.

“Get away,” Sheik snarled, sending out another surge of energy that rolled like a wave, knocking Link and Kalyh to the ground.

Link heard shouts from the others as the wind was knocked out of him for one painful moment. He scrambled breathlessly to his feet, Sheik’s name on his lips, but the man was already backing up from them, eyes beginning to glow strangely in the closing darkness. The horrible aura that had emanated from him upon their arrival from the Nether returned and with a vengeance.

He stared open-mouthed as his friend appeared to hunch over strangely, body vibrating, and pulses of power disturbing the humid air. Link felt his stomach twist painfully as he soldiered through each attempt to push him back.

“Sheik!” Link shouted, the onslaught becoming a loud hum of sound.

“What is happening?” Kalyh ordered angrily, reaching out and grabbing Link’s arm. But her eyes were far more desperate than angry. “He’s not-”
Another peal of energy knocked into them, their connection the only thing keeping them both upright – her grip was so strong his forearm ached. Link could only shake his head as ice-cold panic trickled through his body.

This had been exactly what Link had feared. The edge he had been seeing in Sheik all week…it had been building to this. This was the truth of his resurrection. He was Sheik, but on a primal level, he was something else entirely. Something uncontrollable. Something dangerous.

And Link had no idea how to stop it.

“T’ll try and calm him,” Link told her, yelling over the wind that was now whirling around the courtyard from the eddy of energy Sheik was generating.

“Maybe I should,” Kalyh argued, face fierce. And Link could respect such determination after seeing your childhood friend become something akin to a monster only moments after meeting again. But she was the trigger and Link knew she would only do harm.

He shook his head. “Stay here.”

And surprisingly, she nodded and let go of him, bracing herself against the heavy forces. Link dropped into a crouch and pressed forward, Sheik’s form blurring and warping now, like the heat waves on the horizon. The oppressive feeling emanating off of his friend reminded him of Ganon’s magic.

No, Sheik was nothing like Ganon. Sheik was just given too much power, too quickly. It was brought on by his emotions. If Link could just calm him…

He was only a few strides away now, the pressure making him nauseous and putting an ache in his head. “Sheik, it’s me!” he yelled, struggling to be heard over the sound. Sheik’s eyes glowed red so sharply Link almost couldn’t look at them. “It’s me! It’s okay! You have to calm down! You-”

And with a quick slash of Sheik’s shaking arm, a huge tongue of flame whipped out of thin air and scorched Link’s arm, the flame dying instantly against the wind. The pain crippled him for a moment, nearly knocking him down again as he felt his flesh bubble and burn. The cry of pain came unbidden from his mouth and, for a moment, the energy weakened.

And then it was back, twofold.

“Sheik!” he cried, forcing himself forward and cringing at the intensity. “Focus on my voice! I know everything is overwhelming you! I know you’re hurting! But I’m here, Sheik! You’re not alone! Come back –”

“Get away!” Sheik roared, his voice layered with others and altogether terrifying.

It was the voice of a monster.

Link was only a foot away when another roar of flame blasted across his chest, effectively knocking him backwards and burning through his clothes and skin. The pain was blinding and he knew, somewhere in his chaotic mind, there was no way he’d find his feet again. His skull cracked on hard, white stone and his vision distorted in a way he was all too familiar with.
The agony of his arm and chest rang through his body like an alarm, almost so painful he felt numb. Like he was dying. It was like the week of agony he spent curled in a bed as a Goron treated his scorched legs from Dodongo’s Cavern. It was like the Fire Temple, covered in deep, disfiguring burns and groaning in misery as Sheik desperately struggled to force red potion down his throat.

Link stared overhead at the whirl of energy as a cobalt flash of light interrupted above him and terror strangled his thoughts; Kalyh wouldn’t kill him. There was no way. He struggled to lift his head despite the pain and just barely saw Sheik fall, eyes rolling into his head as the wind died down at last.

Shouting filled his ears and Link tried to call out, beg that she hadn’t killed his best friend, his Sheik. But his mouth ceased working and he burned like the fires of Death Mountain as the familiar shadow of death dragged him down, kicking and screaming.

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I’m very curious to know if any of you guessed that the leader of the Order would be Kalyh. I was very proud of that twist when I wrote it back in the day.

Also, for anyone who gives a shit, her name is pronounced Kah-LEE.

Thanks for reading and reviewing and sharing this, as always. I honestly feel like I’ll never be able to properly express how much I appreciate the support. I’ve never written anything with such success. You guys are amazing.
“Wake up, Hylian.”

It was the first thing Link heard, half the sentence like a dream. He didn’t know where he was or what had happened but he at the very least knew it had happened enough recently that his own confusion was utterly irritating.

Link pried his eyes open and was met with a blurry wooden ceiling framed by white stone walls. His throat was painfully dry and incense burned his nose. He didn’t feel terrible…but he didn’t feel good either. After a blinking a few times Link turned his head and found Kalyh, black cowl back in place, staring intensely at him from a chair a few strides away.

“Welcome back,” she said with a bare hint of sarcasm, in an accent just like Sheik’s.

Sheik.

Fear tore through him and he tried to move but his body was slow to respond. Kalyh was on her feet instantly, holding out her hands and saying, “Calm down. He’s fine. You’re fine. You’re going to fall so don’t get up, you fool. I’m not picking you up again.”

Vertigo hit him and he stopped in the sitting position he’d manage to attain. The room was dark and quiet, a door to his right and a covered window to his left. Clearly it was still night…or perhaps an entire day had passed. A candle sat on a small table in the corner, the small source of light still managing to illuminate most of Kalyh’s half-hidden face.

Link had a nagging sensation he was actually in a guarded cell but would reserve judgment until he heard the full story.

“Where is Sheik?” Link demanded, voice hoarse.

“He’s safe. In another room,” Kalyh answered.

“What…happened?” he pressed, trying to rack his memory. He remembered Hexa, the Vog, the energy, the fire…he was burned. His hands flew up to his bare chest and right arm but there was no sign of the disfiguring burns he was sure to have gotten. “I’m healed.”

“I healed you,” Kalyh amended, sitting back in her chair and crossing her legs. “But only because you appear to be a friend of Ra’s.”

Ra? What?

Oh. Right.

“Thank you for your kindness,” Link said gratefully, glad to not wake in agony despite Kalyh’s apparent distrust of him. “And yes, I’m a friend of his. Although I know him as Sheik.”
She nodded shortly. Her eyes pinned him to the spot for a few more moments, as though she were waiting for something. “What happened to him?” Kalyh finally asked, her voice laced with uncertainty.

“It’s…such a long story. I don’t even know where to start.” And he really didn’t. Sure, Kalyh probably knew a lot of it considering how likely it was that the Order had followed them for a brief time in their journey, but not the full extent of their time in the Nether and their plans moving forward. And despite what happened and how little he knew of Sheik’s current mental status, Link really wanted him to be present for the full conversation.

So he told only as much as was needed; the story of the Nether.

“He was…recycled?” Kalyh demanded, eyes fierce with anger and sadness.

Link nodded. “The Void Walker was rather vague about the effects it would have on him. What happened earlier…I didn’t know it was going to happen.”

“Why would travel with someone you don’t even know if you can trust?” Kalyh spat. “You could’ve been killed. You could’ve gotten the entire Order killed. There are only a handful of Gerudo left and, had they been killed, they would be no better off than the Shei-”

“I know,” Link interrupted, starting to feel irritation creep through his chest. He wasn’t going to even try and explain how deep their partnership went or how, even despite the changes, Link trusted his companion with his life. “But it was only because we’re desperate.”

“Desperate for what?” she asked, her tone growing tight with old rage. “Your people have already taken enough from mine. And you’ve already handed over the most powerful weapon in the world to that tyrant and you think you can just come to us, desperate? Do not stay your tongue with me – tell me exactly what you’re here for!”

Link sighed in frustration. He really needed Sheik to back him up but judging by the look in Kalyh’s eyes, that wasn’t really going to happen. Link would be forced to explain some things without him. “War is coming. Sheik and I have both received the same premonition. Foursky will learn both Hexa and Hexam and he will take Hyrule, killing everyone in his path.”

For the first time in their conversation, Kalyh looked anything but angry. Her expression shifted into something far different, part calculating, part completely unreadable.

The Sheikah stood quickly from her chair and was suddenly in his personal space, glaring at him like she was trying to read his mind. He didn’t back away but the display still managed to unnerve him. “Foursky can’t learn the words. I destroyed that library.”

Well, at least that theory was now confirmed.

Link shook his head. “I think…he will learn it from you and your people. Somehow. But that’s why we’re here – to get you to the castle, to keep all of you and the words safe.”

“Safe?” Kalyh said with a bark of grim laughter. “There is no safe in Hyrule. Why do you think I brought the Order out here? There is no place safer than Vrika, the city of the dead in the shadow of the mountain.”

Link shook his head yet again as she spoke, becoming aggravated by how stubborn and dismissive
she was being. Perhaps he should’ve expected this from a group of Sheikah survivors. “And you think Foursky won’t come out here for you? Evanna is pretty skilled at knowing a lot of things she shouldn’t. She’ll come out here for you and take the knowledge –”

“The knowledge can’t be taken, Hylian!” Kalyh roared in a sudden burst of rage, turning from him in an erratic motion. Clearly he had hit a soft spot, although he wasn’t sure what the soft spot actually was. “It must be taught. That is what keeps us safe out here.”

Link could feel what they had come for slipping away, the conversation going beyond his control. He wished Sheik was there, speaking some magical Sheikah words to make this hardened warrior see reason. Link wouldn’t deny that she had plenty of reasons to hate the Hylian race and refuse to be aligned with their cause…but perhaps he needed to dig deeper than that.

“It’s prophecy,” Link argued, forcing himself up off the bed and fighting to stand despite the way the world tilted. Kalyh whirled around, a head shorter than him but plenty menacing. “It is prophecy that Foursky invade our lands and possess Sheik and the Royal armies with Hexam. Sheik will be used as a weapon for the Kingdom of Amrita. I can’t let that happen to him.”

“You can’t let that happen?” Kalyh snarled, advancing on him once more to crowd him. Still, he stood his ground and held her stare as though she was a wild animal. “This has nothing to do with you! I know who you are, Hero of Time, nothing more than a glorified dog for the Goddesses! You know nothing about the horrors of these words! You would use me as a weapon to fight your wars and you drag the few surviving Sheikah into it! Our people have suffered enough! You’ve spilt enough of our blood, you selfish-”

And then Link snapped. No longer could he stand there and witness her hateful speech. They were wasting precious time arguing over bad blood dating back centuries. He pushed her backwards, shoving Kalyh out of his space and advancing well into hers.

“This is prophecy whether you choose to accept it or not!” he bellowed back, throat dry and raw as he forced his words to fill the room. “I have nothing to do with the tragedies that befell your people! Just like you, I’m at the mercy of the Goddesses whims!”

Kalyh looked ready to behead him. “You slept while the world descended into ruin –”

“And Foursky will ruin the world once more!” Link cried out, somehow overpowering her volume and silencing the remainder of her sentence. “He will take the words unless you return with us. If Foursky obtains them he will destroy everything as Ganondorf did. He has all the power in the world to do it now. Either you come back with us or…”

“Or what?” Kalyh asked, eyes hard but no longer full of rage; an intense coldness filled them now. “You’ll kill us? No, Hylian. There’s no need to slaughter what’s left of a cursed race. Only I know Hexa and Hexam. You would have to kill me to truly protect the words.”

Silence filled the small room and Link seemed to remember himself, standing unsteadily in the muggy room and Kalyh just inches away. It was like having an argument with a story – Sheik had only just told him about her a few weeks ago. And now, here she stood in the flesh, just as fierce and obstinate as Sheik had made her seem.

“Foursky will kill him,” Link told her quietly. “He will use Sheik for his enhanced abilities…and then he will kill him.”
Finally, a weaker emotion touched her eyes and, of all things, she backed down. Kalyh stepped away, eyes falling to the floor like a wounded animal. And Link didn’t want to use Sheik as a weapon to win but then who knew if he’d really even won the argument. How could he convince someone so strong-willed to go to the aid of the very people she despised?

Because her anger didn’t just stem from what happened in Vrika, but to the genocides told by the people who had escaped to Termina and formed the Order. It was likely she had been hearing stories about it since she escaped Vrika at fourteen.

“Ra and I spoke of leaving this place,” she said, voice soft and so very different than the enraged one just moments ago. “We wanted to join the Sheikah that guarded the Royal Family, what with so little of them left. We believed the Royal Family had changed since the genocide – or at least hoped to make a change – and that we could help cement that truth in all Sheikah. We wanted purpose in the world, like those who served the Goddess Hylia. And, most of all, we wanted to fight…and that’s exactly what we got. When I first heard Ra had survived, I nearly revealed myself while we followed you. We didn’t know your intentions in all of this so we remained elusive. But I think part of me knew everything would all boil down to this.”

Link couldn’t imagine what had brought on such admissions from her but he stood perfectly still, listening to the other side of the story Sheik had shared.

“We returned to Hyrule to try and prevent all of this but it became clear what Foursky’s true intentions were. I brought us all out here in hopes of keeping these cursed words away from him. Although he knows of Vrika, he will never find it. Its location is unknown to all but Sheikah. We will not leave this sanctuary.”

“Kalyh, you have to help us. This isn’t about the continuation of Hyrule. This is about the continuation of everything. He’s already put Gerudo numbers in line with Sheikah. He already commands terrible amounts of power with the Vaspra we were forced to bring him. I don’t trust the seclusion of this city – for Goddesses’ sake, it’s under a giant mountain. I have no doubts his hunger for power will bring him here and, against the power of Vaspra, I doubt any of us would stand a chance, words or not.”

Kalyh turned her head, fixing her unreadable stare to an empty corner of the room. The tension in her shoulders reminded him far too much of Sheik. Perhaps it was just Sheikah custom to be an emotional steel trap.

“Go speak with him,” Kalyh ordered quietly. From her tone, Link knew the discussion was over and he had no idea where they really stood now. “He won’t speak to me….or really anyone. You know him better than I do now.”

She handed him a gray tunic that had been draped over the back of the chair – he had hardly noticed – and started for the door. Link slipped it over his head and followed as Kalyh used a quick spell, similar to that of Hylian spells, to unlock the door.

The hallway was surprisingly cool, clearly more central to the building and cut off from open windows. The floor here was made of the same white stone really everything was made out of and his boots clicked softly on its surface. Kalyh led him by torchlight down the hall, their path twisting and turning as though they were in a labyrinth.

Link began to seriously wonder if they were going in circles until they approached a door guarded by two of the Order, cowls still high on their faces and hard red eyes glinting in torchlight. Kalyh
spoke to them with quiet Sheikah words and they stepped away obediently. Before opening the door, Kalyh cast him a warning look.

“Do not free him unless you’re completely sure he is back to himself. I will end him if he is a threat to us all.”

Link nodded, voice lost to the anxiety of seeing Sheik again and the fear of having lost him already.

The door was opened and he slipped inside. It was shut and locked behind him with the murmur of magic. Well, hopefully Sheik wasn’t still in a homicidal mood. The room was smaller than Link’s, only lit by a candle beneath the covered window. The bed was vacant; Sheik sat in the adjacent corner, hands bound behind his back and head drooped to his chest. His clothing was torn in several places and what looked like strange exit wounds marred his skin here and there through gaping holes in cloth.

“Sheik,” Link whispered sadly, crossing the room in two strides and kneeling in front of his companion.

The Sheikah didn’t stir and Link reached out to touch him gingerly, earning no response as he examined the bizarre marks he now recognized as burns. They didn’t appear as though caused by fire but perhaps by energy. Had Sheik’s outburst caused this? They weren’t serious – they looked almost like scars, actually – but the sight of them formed a knot in Link’s stomach. “Sheik, can you hear me?”

His companion moved slightly, shoulders twitching. Link reached out to shake them, hoping the motion wouldn’t set off another outburst. “Sheik, please. Wake up.”

“Link?” his voice emerged, disoriented and slow as he appeared to come out of a trance. Sheik struggled to lift his head, eyes unfocused and exhausted – but alive. Link’s fingers tightened on his shoulders, wanting suddenly to hold him close and laugh in relief.

“It’s me,” Link told him in a gentle tone. “You’re safe. Everything’s okay.”

And then Sheik seemed to drift back fully, pain filling his gaze and body shaking under Link’s touch. “Link…Link, are you okay? I…I nearly killed you. I’m so sor–”

“Be quiet,” Link interrupted, shaking his head. He didn’t want to hear the apologies. He didn’t want Sheik to blame himself when it was really Link’s fault; he had gotten Sheik killed and recycled in the first place. Link had insisted on coming out into the desert with him. If anyone should be apologizing, it was him. “I know. I’m fine. I was healed, see?”

Link pulled down the loose collar of his tunic to reveal unburned flesh. Sheik’s eyes lingered there, as though if he looked hard enough he would find evidence of the flames despite the reassurances. His ruby eyes grew bitter and he backed out of Link’s touch.

“I’m dangerous. You should leave me here,” he said in a voice so quiet, Link nearly didn’t hear the words. “I can’t control my emotions…I could’ve killed you. I could still kill you.”

“Shut up,” Link ordered, shifting around to untie the Sheikah’s hands. “You’re not dangerous. I was the moron that tried to tackle you while you were having a meltdown.”
Sheik gave a half-hearted show of pulling away to prevent Link from releasing him, but there really wasn’t anywhere for him to go. He rubbed anxiously at his wrists once the binds were taken away, eyes darting everywhere like he was expecting another lapse in control.

Link’s knees ached from the crouch he held himself in so he stood, offering Sheik a hand. It took a moment of contemplation but a warm hand grasped his finally and they sat on the bed shoulder-to-shoulder, observing the strange energy between them in their quiet room.

Tense red eyes slid over the walls, taking in the textures that he had grown up with in a silence as though observed for the dead. And perhaps he was doing just that. But as long as Sheik wasn’t shooting waves of energy from his body Link didn’t mind sitting there, waiting until Sheik was ready to speak.

It was a short span of time later when he finally did.

“I can’t believe she survived. I saw for myself what that beast did to her. I don’t know how anyone could’ve survived it.”

After the conversation he had just had with Kalyh, Link could completely understand how she survived. She was tough. So tough, Link was confident she would’ve handled the Nether without any trouble unlike himself.

But Link wasn’t sure what to say so he stayed quiet, resigned to just listening until Sheik had properly vented the horror and sadness dwelling within him. Maybe, for once, he could do for Sheik what he had done for Link after the war. Maybe Link could be a pillar in the madness for once.

“We read the Vala, respected the codes…those words were the strictest warnings we read. If a Sheikah warrior breaks the Vala they lose their honor – they are stripped of their title and annexed from the tribe,” he explained quietly, hands lying limply in his lap. “She never took a new name so at least she respected that much.”

“Perhaps you should speak with her. There might be more to this that you do not yet know. Who knows what she’s been through since the attack,” Link suggested.

Sheik shook his head and said in a broken voice, “I…can’t. I can’t even look at her right now. I don’t know who she even is. It’s as though I’m seeing a ghost. She’s not the Kalyh I loved.”

“Are you angry at her?”

“No,” Sheik whispered, staring down at his hands; a burn lay on top of his right hand, a disfigured blister in the candle light. “I’m…just so sad. I can’t get away from the darkness of it. I feel fourteen again, when Impa took me from the desert and I grieved over the massacre. I feel so…unstable.”

Link wanted to laugh at the feeling they both seemed to now share. “That’s exactly how I felt after the Nether. Even knowing you were alive, I didn’t know if you were still Sheik. You saw how I couldn’t hold myself together. Even now I have to fight off the madness.”

“Then what do I do, Link?”

The question was more vulnerable and lost than Link could bear.
Everything and everyone felt so broken now and Link couldn’t shake the notion that he had to be the person to fix it. He was the Hero. It had always been his obligation to set things right but then, this prophecy wasn’t like the last.

This wasn’t another generation’s entanglement with the Evil King or demon reincarnate. Link wasn’t cleansing temples or fighting hordes of monsters under mindless command. This prophecy was invisible danger, tragedy, and subterfuge. It was shooting in the dark and wayward shadows. Link knew he just couldn’t set everything right.

But, at the very least, he could start with the small things.

Link reached out and took Sheik’s injured hand, holding it in his and whispering a healing spell. It leached a sizable amount of energy from him and, by all rights he could’ve just grabbed a potion, but there was something far more significant about offering his energy – if he couldn’t offer solace at least he could lend his power. There was a quick flash of light and the wound was gone, leaving unmarred brown skin.

The question still lingered between them, vulnerable and quiet.

*Then what do I do, Link?*

“You do what you can. Hold on to what you can,” was all Link said, keeping Sheik’s hand in his. And those red eyes just bore into him, tidal waves of emotion washing into view when they were normally hidden from sight; seeing Sheik so open made his breath catch in his throat.

And then, suddenly, everything started to change.

A buzzing electricity seemed to bloom between their hands and Link felt himself twitch at the sudden shift of awareness.

Warmth bled up his arms and into his chest like a friendly fire as he gawked at Sheik in confusion. But those vermilion eyes were now on their joined hands in deep concentration. Was Sheik actually causing it? The feeling it created filled him up and pushed away his fatigue and worry. Link felt almost as though he were growing drunk although he had very little experience with the sensation.

“What is that?” he asked slowly. If it was something bad Sheik was really going to have a hard time convincing him.


“Oh,” was all he could think to say. Link didn’t know what that meant or why it was happening, but the feeling it gave him was starting to edge at the bliss he often associated with a fairy fountain as it healed him. “Are you doing that?”

Sheik shook his head and replied with, “It initiated itself – I’m guessing the catalyst was healing spell.”

He lifted his eyes to meet Link’s, the gaze burning like molten rock. It was enrapturing, demanding, and Link wasn’t sure he could look away if he even made an effort to. Never had he seen Sheik look like that, with more emotion in his eyes than the hesitant admissions of the past few weeks combined.
The feeling between them clouded Link’s thoughts and the desire that had been building in him months – Goddesses, maybe even years – seemed to all push to the surface like a glacier crawling forward until it was just suddenly there. It had crept into his mind for so long, lingering in every private talk, tailing him on every journey, and buzzing in every accidental touch.

As the flow of power between them continued with every passing minute, it began to reach an intoxicating level. Was Sheik feeling this just as intensely? It was creating a drowsiness that wasn’t heavy like being knocked unconscious or dehydrated – it instead felt euphoric and light, as though he would float away.

“Sheik,” he said, the name flowing out like water and ending with a percussive staccato in his mouth. Link didn’t even know what he was going to ask, the question dissolving in the wake of their exchange. But Sheik, somehow, was aware enough to clarify.

“I read about something like this a very long time ago. I think…this is called Congruence,” Sheik whispered. The word seemed to echo between them, as though the connection was responding to its own name.

“Um, what?”

“It’s a magical phenomenon. It’s incredibly uncommon…I only stumbled upon it by accident,” Sheik explained slowly, seeming to sober up just a little.

“What exactly is it, though?” Link pressed as the heat grew even faster, as though reacting to their awareness of it. And he swore they were getting closer to each other.

Sheik’s fingers seemed to tremble against his hands for a moment. “It’s a very strong…bond.”

The connection intensified at Sheik’s words and Link distinctly felt like he was going to explode if there wasn’t more contact, more pathways for the energy to travel.

Link lifted one of his hands, only making it inches when a loud familiar screech filled the air.

And then the rapturous feeling was gone and they broke apart so roughly it felt as though they had awoken from a dream and were shoved back into their own bodies. If adrenaline hadn’t replaced the sensation, Link wondered if the abrupt loss would’ve knocked him out altogether.

Link leapt to his feet in alarm and threw a startled look at Sheik, who appeared just as bewildered as he felt.

They both knew the sound: Bloodbacks.

“We need to find our weapons,” Link insisted as another cry resonated through the window and the halls outside the door. It was somewhere above them and Link dearly hoped there were a few floors separating them and the beast.

Without their weapons they were essentially bird food.

Link attempted to open the door but the knob wouldn’t give. Goddesses, the guards hadn’t thought to unlock it before taking off. There would be no leaving; locking spells could only be reversed by the caster and the restraint of the energy wouldn’t allow the door to be broken.
“Fantastic! How are we –?”

Sheik was suddenly next to him, hand extended towards the door, and uttered a foreign word. With a boom of power, the thick wood door cracked in half so loudly Link flinched. The pieces were thrown across the hall, clattering loudly to the stone floor in smoking splinters.

Link knew he was gawking, eyes flitting from Sheik’s smoking hand to the remains of their previously spell-locked door.

“Did you just…?” he began, but couldn’t find the words to finish the sentence.

“I did,” Sheik replied, looking just as surprised.

Somehow he had managed to overpower a locking spell – if there was anything Zelda had repeated so many times Link wanted to push over her chair, it was the rules surrounding most locking or binding spells.

And here Sheik had just defied them.

“I know where our weapons are. Follow me.”

Link stayed close on Sheik’s heels as he wove through the hallways with practiced ease, trying his hardest to sway his mind from worrying over what had just happened.

In a gap of time made immeasurable by adrenaline, they burst into a large circular room with the ceiling vaulting upwards into a dome far above their heads. The chamber sat at what appeared to be the end of the building, pink morning light drifting through tall windows facing the south.

It was clearly the armory – much of what Link could see was very old and left to rust into nothing. But a small section seemed much newer and well-maintained, clearly the belongings of the building’s current tenants. A quick scan yielded results, thankfully, as another screech and a chorus of yells rang from above them. They snatched their weapons and turned to find Kalyh suddenly in the doorway looking breathless.

“There you are! It’s on the roof. Let’s go!” she commanded.

Well, at least they had somewhat of a truce. For now.

They charged after her, back down a maze of hallways to a giant spiral staircase that revealed passage winding upwards. He had to assume by then that they were in the largest, most central structure they had fought outside of – the building with the three worn spires.

Though it had appeared to be several stories tall from the outside, Link learned to his breathless dismay that it was six stories tall. But the atmosphere of danger kept them all determined until they finally burst through the door to the flat, open roof and blooming auburn sky. The spires stood in a row across the huge white rooftop, the nearest to them the center of the battle.

Three Bloodbacks swooped from ground to sky and squawked piercing cries as they became a fierce whirlwind around the remaining Gerudo and, this time, many more members of the Order. Link had neglected to ask Kalyh how large the Order actually was; hopefully that number would remain unchanged after the fight.
They stood far enough from the skirmish that Link could survey the puddles of acidic blood already scattered around and, though everyone tried to dance around the liquid, there was a smell of burning leather in the air.

Despite the advantage flying gave them, the Bloodbacks almost seemed to prefer hopping around on the white rooftop and snapping at their prey. Like it was a game to them; and it probably was, a realization that made Link’s stomach churn. It was likely their fault the creatures were even there. He suddenly feared the possibility that creatures of the Nether were invading other parts of Hyrule as well, like in the texts they had read so long ago in the castle library.

“Ra, get the acid out of the way. We need it off the roof so we can fight,” Kalyh ordered, eyes flitting around as she assessed the battlefield like a general in war. “Hylian, how are you with a bow?”

Sheik tensed at his name and the prospect of using magic; how else would he move the acid? Link threw him a look and then nodded to Kalyh. “What do you need?”

“Join the archers up there. They have an extra bow…unfortunately,” she said bitterly, nodding towards the spire towering above them and the airborne fight that had now started with one of the creatures. “Aim for the eyes. The hide under the feathers is too thick.”

And then she sprinted off, driving headfirst into battle at such a speed that Link couldn’t help but gape for a moment. But he remembered Sheik’s order and glanced back in worry. Sheik would have to use magic and, thus far, he had a pretty poor track record with emotional control.

“Sheik, you can do this,” Link assured him as another spray of acid collided with the rooftop, spilling dangerously close to where they both stood. “I have faith in you.”

Sheik didn’t look to be even in the realm of convinced so Link reached out and gripped his arm, a remnant of the Congruence quivering through them in a nearly distracting way.

Okay, maybe that wasn’t the best idea before a battle.

But it seemed to help, somehow, as Sheik nodded and gripped Link’s hand for a moment before pulling away. “Please be careful up there, Link.”

Link wanted to stay and ensure Sheik was alright but the volley of arrows that rained from above reminded Link he was needed elsewhere. He launched himself towards the nearest spire and the little entryway to a tight spiral staircase. Taking the steps two at a time, Link quickly found himself amidst five Order members and one Gerudo – Blithos’ mother. She seemed to recognize him too as he entered the small circular turret, the scrapes on the left of her face still raw from the Vog that had nearly killed her.

In her neutral, closely fitting clothes and armor, she looked far different than the Gerudo he had known since the war. Even despite the jewelry she still had hidden under the collar of her tunic and the hoops in her rounded ears, nothing about her indicated the normal flashy dress of her people. Her bright red hair was tied into a tight bun against the nape of her neck and her golden eyes were glinting in the morning light.

She let loose two more arrows and plucked a bow off the ground to toss to him, its previous owner a fallen Order member lying motionless behind her. Link nodded in thanks, snatched some black arrows from a central quiver in the middle of the room, and joined the volley.
One Bloodback fell via the efforts of four Order members and Kalyh, her white hair falling loose from her hood and standing out brilliantly in the rising sun to their right. His eyes found Sheik and he felt immense relief as the acid receded in response to several very complicated hand gestures; clearly Sheik had a cap on the magic now. Hopefully.

More acid took its place, however, and Sheik abandoned his task to fight a Bloodback swooping down at him and three others of the Order. Link sent a parade of arrows that way only just slowing it down. The last Bloodback, its attention completely captured by the dozen arrows snapping against its head, darted through the air and slammed into the spire.

The structure shook, the motion forcing his heart up into his throat for fear the old architecture wouldn’t hold. Before Link could determine whether or not they would all fall to their deaths, the bird began to jerk its head repetitively. It was a motion Link knew all too well – he grabbed the arms of those surrounding him and shouted, “Get down!”

Link slammed his back against the wall of the turret, tugging two comrades along with him, and braced himself as a spray of bloody acid exploded through the windows. It collided with the opposite wall of the turret and splashed in a chaotic pattern around the circumference. Gasps of pain filled Link’s ears as the acid burned through his thin tunic. He hadn’t thought to grab his pauldrons out of his pack in the armory; he was beginning to regret it now. The white stone floor and walls were beginning to smoke, the compound somehow managing to eat its way through what had seemed like unyielding surface.

This needed to end now, before they were all burned into a dissolved collection of flesh and bone.

There would be a small gap of time before the next wave of acid – it was his only opportunity to attack before the conditions got worse. With a desperate cry Link leapt up and nocked back an arrow, face-to-face with what used to be the most noble and sacred bird in the sky. It flapped powerfully before him and he let loose one arrow after another, hitting their marks directly in the creature’s glassy, black eyes.

And before Link could even consider the risk, he threw the bow down and jumped onto the window sill of the turret, still slick with acidic vomit that would surely eat through his boots should he remain there. But he wouldn’t – Link drew his sword and leapt across the wide gap between them to the creature’s head, shoving it downward from crown to throat.

Success. He felt sick satisfaction that he would be the one to fell a Bloodback single-handedly.

The beast let out an ear-rupturing scream, falling backwards in a desperate flutter of rough feathers, Link still crouched on its acid-covered beak and hanging on to the sword for dear life.

Perhaps success was a little more subjective…

They plummeted to the roof below, spinning so rapidly Link had no chance of pulling the Moon Blade free. He could ditch the bird but they were falling from several stories up; the bird, if he positioned the fall correctly, could break the impact.

Hopefully.

The sky and roof and mountain spun before him, giving him the worst vertigo of his life as he attempted using his weight to maneuver the still-dying bird.
In a last ditch attempt, Link clutched its breast, enduring the burning pain of talons on his torso to position its body beneath him. It screamed and squawked and frothed acid from its beak, nearly burning Link’s face off as they rushed towards the white stone beneath them.

The impact was horribly jarring and the force threatened to bounce him back up as the sick crack of bones punctuated the humid morning air. The bird let out one more pitiful cry, then expired. Despite his disorientation Link heard a similar cry from somewhere to his right and he prayed that bird was dying too. He got to his feet with a grimace and tore the Moon Blade from the beast’s skull, his whole body aching in protest.

“Link!”

He cleaned his blade on his leg and looked up to find Sheik running towards him, as sweaty and battle-worn as him. Behind him Kalyh had clearly been forced to use Hexa again, depleting her store of Vaspra just a little more; blue dust stained the ivory roof and members of the Order started pushing its body off the building.

It was stiflingly hot and so very quiet with the monsters now dead. The sun was blaring in Link’s face as Sheik reached him, looking bewildered.

“Are you okay?” he demanded, sounding incredulous.

“Um,” Link started, glancing down at the dead bird he was still standing on and then up at the spire far above where heads were peeking down at him, “yeah.”

“That is the most reckless thing I’ve seen you do in a long time, Link!” Sheik snapped, anger pushing past his shock now that he knew Link was uninjured. “What in the name of Din is wrong with you?”

“He has spirit, I’ll give him that,” came Kalyh’s voice from behind them. She was wiping her own blade with a rag and tugged down her cowl to reveal a disfigured smirk. “Impressive.”

“See? Some people actually appreciate the reckless things I do,” Link complained, gesturing to Kalyh as he hopped off the ruined bird. “Give me more credit, Sheik. I have killed things bigger than me a few times.”

It only earned him a glare but Sheik seemed to let it go, although Link was sure he’d hear about it again later. Kalyh tossed Link her rag to finish cleaning the Moon Blade and sheathed her own sword.

“Thanks for your help. Clearly you both seemed familiar with these beasts…care to share with the class?” she asked, the malice now out of her voice. Link couldn’t help but feel like he had just passed some sort of test as the guard left her eyes and she stared openly at them.

“They’re beasts of the Nether, the twisted and over-recycled remnants of Loftwings,” Link explained gravely, scrubbing the corrosive blood off his blade with disgust. “The Vog – those beasts from last night – probably began as something else entirely before they were recycled. Maybe wolves.”

“Why are Nether beasts roaming the lands?” Kalyh questioned.
“The barrier between the living world and the Nether is thin. In fact, in almost every major war, the conflict has been enough to create a tear and allow beasts through,” Sheik described before Link could even open his mouth. “Link and I’s journey there and back must’ve opened it.”

Kalyh looked like the kind of furious that led to sudden death, but in a surprising show of control she calmly said, “Maybe we should continue our conversation from earlier.”

She whipped around and shouted out blunt orders in Sheikah. Members of the Order moved at once, all working together to remove the corpses and clean up the battlefield. The six Gerudo women that he had seen the night before all converged from different areas, moving to help the Order – except for Blithos’ mother.

“Link,” she said softly as she approached, burns in her clothes and armor alluding to the acid that had made its way to her skin. Now, after the heat of battle, did Link realize she had been one of the people he had saved from the acid. While he had begun to follow Kalyh and Sheik, something held him in place as she reached out to touch his shoulder. “Thank you for saving me.”

“Of course,” Link told her with a nod. “I’m only sorry I couldn’t save your people. Or your son.”

Now, free from the rush of fighting, he could more clearly see her for who she was: her face was still so young – she couldn’t be older than thirty – and despite the hardness of her life there was a deep kindness in her eyes that reminded Link painfully of Nameth.

“It is not your job to save everyone, Hero,” the woman said sadly. “We Gerudo used to think so poorly of Hylian people and of you. But you have proved many times that you will fight for all who live in Hyrule. You saved many lives today.”

The praise astonished him – never had a Gerudo admitted their own people’s bitterness towards Hylian – but he recovered and found an easy smile on his lips. “I’m glad I could save yours. Blithos will need his mother when we get him back.”

Unexpected emotion filled her eyes and, without warning, she reached out and dragged him into a tight hug. The Gerudo smelled like the desert and blood and he wasn’t exactly in the mood to be touched by strangers but he endured it for her sake.

“Thank you, Hero,” the woman whispered in a tight voice. When she pulled away, she bowed slightly and said, “I am Lanaia. Myself and the others will assist you in any way we can.”

They had travelled to Vrika for The Order’s support – a task still in progress – but had along the way obtained that of the Gerudo as well. Link thanked her and went to follow Sheik and Kalyh who were waiting for him by the door.

And, to Link’s relief, they were talking.

As he approached he could see Kalyh’s face was softer than he’d ever seen it whereas Sheik looked guarded, cowl still in place and eyes hard. But Link couldn’t shake the feeling of how right they looked standing next to each other.

They were the same race, trained and raised and weathered the same way. Their bodies were lithe and compact and looked as though they would fit together with a perfection that Link realized he envied. It was clear why fate should’ve brought them together as partners. And as lovers.
And Link had no idea how to feel about that.

“Come,” Kalyh said as Link approached. “We’ll heal your wounds.”

They followed her back down the spiral staircase and once more into the cool shelter of the stone building. It washed over his heated skin and reminded him painfully of where the Bloodback’s acid had eaten into his shoulders and arms and the deep slashes in his sides from razor-like talons. It occurred to him, as he followed closely behind Sheik, that he wasn’t the only one with acid burns. The right sleeve of Sheik’s tunic was completely gone and burns covered his forearm, glistening raw in the low light leaking through small windows.

“The pool was left intact?” Sheik asked, surprise coloring his tone.

“Despite their invasion, the energy around the underground would not allow them near it, thank Din,” Kalyh replied, voice heavy with regret. “When we arrived we laid many bodies to rest in the catacombs; those were undisturbed as well.”

Back into the maze of hallways they went and now in the stronger light Link noticed the markings on the ceiling above them, all written in Sheikah. But Kalyh, of course, had no need of them. Noticing Link’s interest, Sheik translated them as they passed.

“That leads to the kitchens, that to the sparring chamber…” he said quietly.

They paused at an intersection of hallways and Sheik couldn’t seem to translate it, emotion passing over his eyes. Kalyh watched him for a moment and then stared up at the red carving in the ceiling.

“Home of Gota,” Kalyh said softly. “Home of Ra.”

“You lived here?” Link asked incredulously. “What is this place?”

“It is the House of Vala. It was our temple. My parents lived here. I lived here and trained here… with Gota, my adopted mother,” Sheik explained in a flat voice.

“He was to inherit the responsibilities of his parents. He was to be our leader when he reached sixteen,” she described, casting a brief sad look at the Sheikah in question. “My father had held the seat until he was old enough.”

Link supposed it made sense. After what Sheik had told him in the creek bed of the Nether weeks ago, he should have realized that Sheik would have been the leader of his people considering his royal lineage. But it still surprised Link as he stared at the red characters that had once looked upon living, breathing, surviving Sheikah. Even Sheik himself. And his parents.

“Do you want to…?” she began to ask, but Sheik shook his head and said no more.

They moved on, a heavy sadness on the air as they finally seemed to reach a great, ornate archway that opened to a descent of stairs. Kalyh muttered a set of words and, in response, torches that lined the stone walls leapt into fiery life. And down they went, their footsteps a disjointed, echoed rhythm as the air got deliciously cooler with every step. They descended maybe two stories when the room opened up into a wide and tall chamber lined in iridescent, rough black stone.

Like the fairy pools of Hyrule, the water was only two or three feet deep in a large basin of white. Tall ivory arches stood in a half circle around the shoreline and the water glimmered and danced in
the torchlight. Beyond the pool stood a blank stone door twice that of a normal one and to their right was a narrow passageway leading into darkness Link assumed were the catacombs.

“This is the reason our ancestors settled here under Vrika. They found the pools in some caves and built the temple around them. These pools saved our people from death for hundreds of years,” Sheik explained as Kalyh led them into the warm, healing waters.

Link laid out in the waters without hesitation, relief flooding his body as the magic did its good work. It was now clear to him how Kalyh healed the burns Link received from Sheik’s meltdown last night. Link closed his eyes and listened to the lap of water at the edge of the pool, trying to imagine he was in the one just outside Hyrule Castle, hidden and quiet, just home from a tour with Sheik.

He must’ve dozed off – what felt like seconds or hours later someone touched Link’s shoulder and said his name in a quiet voice. He blinked back into awareness and saw Sheik crouched next to him looking concerned.

“I’m fine,” Link assured the him with a wry smile. And for once he really was. The type of healing the pools offered wasn’t just skin deep; it could heal a troubled mind as well.

For the first time in weeks Link felt completely placid.

Sheik nodded and offered a hand. When Link took it, the background buzz of the Congruence lingered in his fingers. Sheik clearly felt it as well but said nothing so the moment passed and they departed, the water leaving their clothes completely dry as the fairy pools always did.

Back up they went, through more foreign-marked hallways and into a quiet room Link had to assume was the Sheikah equivalent of a map room.

A large table of soft white wood sat in the center, a heavy chandelier half-lit above it, and the surrounding chairs made of stone but softly cushioned in black velvet. If the chamber had once been a room of royalty and importance…it was no longer that.

It was now the room of refugees, rations and weapons and potions in stacks against walls. Maps and parchment and quills scattered the table as it was clear this was the space the Order spent most of their time in. The air smelled of sweat and leather, the scent of travel and warfare.

The table was a long oval, a very distinct head with a more ornate chair. Neither Kalyh nor Sheik took it and, had it been a month ago when he much lighter of heart, Link would’ve taken it just to be funny. Kalyh sat on one side and Link joined Sheik on the other.

And then they told her everything.

Link couldn’t help but feel relieved when Sheik helped him with the burden of regaling their full tale; it was a long and difficult one and there were certain parts Link didn’t even want to speak of. Kalyh listened quietly, never interrupting in a surprising show of respect and restraint as certain events set her eyes alight with burning questions. It was a stark contrast to the yelling match between her and Link earlier that morning.

When it was finally over – instead of probing them with questions – Kalyh shared her own story.

“After I was attacked…I was bleeding so much and the beast had poison fangs. It left me to die
and nothing else bothered with me, laced with toxin as I was. The wounds were deep and the
poison began eating away my skin. I laid there and waited for death,” she told them, red eyes fixed
on the stone table between them and mouth sitting hard in its permanent scowl. “Even when the
people stopped screaming and the beasts moved on, I managed to stay alive there on the street,
bleeding and shaking. It was maybe a day later when…Gota found me.”

“Gota survived?” Sheik demanded, voice sounding shell-shocked and body rigid with sudden
tension.

“She was dying, Ra. I’m sorry,” Kalyh told him with a sad shake of her head. “She found me and
dragged me to the pool. That water was only able to do so much for me – I fell unconscious in the
pool and when I finally woke she had passed against one of the arches. It wasn’t until years later
that I finally understood why she didn’t enter the pool, why allowed herself to die. Gota thought
you had been killed, Ra, so after she saved me…she had nothing to live for anymore.”

Sheik eyes were hard like rubies, the grief and loss so present Link almost looked away to escape
it. Link only knew of Gota but the story summoned emotion into his throat. For a moment he nearly
reached out to grip his companion’s shoulder, attempt to offer the strength of their new, strange
connection but Kalyh continued on and the moment passed.

“Once I was healed, I looked for survivors – of course there were none. I then looked for you,
following your trail into the desert…I lost it at the Sea. I had to accept that you were gone and that
I was the only survivor of the Vrika tribe. So, I crossed the desert with intentions of going to
Kakariko. None of us really knew what the war had done to Hyrule and I didn’t know if our sister
tribe was still alive or…if anyone was alive. The Gerudo warned me of the demise of the Kakariko
tribe when I passed their gate but I couldn’t believe it. I went to the village and saw the graves for
myself.

“I knew then, after seeing the state of Kakariko and the rest of Hyrule, that I was truly alone. I
wandered for sometime after that. I stole a horse and went into the forest, the only safe place at the
time. I travelled so deep into those woods I eventually accepted that I would never find my way
out. And that’s when a strange imp attacked me and stole my horse. I chased it and…ended up in a
land called Termina. Almost as soon as I arrived I was captured by slave traders and paraded
around as part of a freak show because of my scars. It wasn’t until I was bought by a man near the
desert that I gained my freedom – a man named Foursky.”

Link felt grim shock run through his body, horrified at the idea that Foursky had once been so close
to the words. Or perhaps Kalyh hadn’t obtained them yet.

“I was, for a few years, a citizen of Amrita. The city in the desert was much like Vrika and so
welcoming to someone so familiar. They were all descendants of surviving Sheikah from over
generations and generations, all ancestors of refugees like myself. Foursky took me in, realizing
where I was from and claiming Amrita was a home for the refugees of Hyrule. For five years I
recovered, trained, and started anew. I had a purpose again in the ranks of his army. I taught him
and the Queen Evanna all the magic I knew in return for saving me. I really had no idea what sort
of monster he truly was until, one night, we were to do a raid on a group of assassins who had been
plaguing the Amrita for centuries. We finally had good intelligence on them and attacked their
camp at Snowpeak.

“When I found out they were Sheikah, many of which whom escaped Amrita’s prisons for
displeasing Foursky, I killed the nine other soldiers with me to protect them. But when I discovered
their leader at the time, Kafei, was breaking the Vala and using the words…I ran back to Foursky
like a child. I was forced to lie about the dead soldiers, insisting the Order of Hexa had done it. My foolishness put the Order in even more danger and Foursky commanded me to either bring him their heads or be killed. He revealed his true, terrible nature to me and I realized I had been serving a tyrant no better than Ganondorf himself.

“When I returned to Snowpeak the Order welcomed me back. I couldn’t kill my people, no matter what codes they had broken. Many of them knew barely a thing of Hyrule, let alone the teachings and codes of the Vala. Many of them didn’t even know exactly what tribe they descended from. In staying with them, I learned of Foursky’s treachery and obsession with Vaspra, how the words were the only defense they had against the Immortal King. For the years that followed, I trained and lived with the Order, constantly moving and fighting for survival against Foursky’s armies. We stole bits of Vaspra from him to fuel our use of the words but we never had enough to take him down. We had made plans to take all he had left but…Kafei died last year before we could go through with it. He grew ill from a sickness we could not heal and, in his last days, taught me the words and chose me as successor to the Order.

“Foursky has grown so desperate over the years. He had attempted to find a portal to the Nether in Termina but after centuries of searching and slowly wasting away at his supply, he came up empty. When we learned he would be returning to Hyrule for Vaspra we knew we had to intervene. For six months he’s been crawling into this world, setting his deck to play his hand. Despite his secrecy it has always been clear to us all what he’s been seeking:

“The power of will and the power of death.”

Kalyh sat back heavily against her chair. She chewed on her scarred lip, a trait that looked much like Sheik’s habit. And then, with her story in full light, combined with what they already knew Link felt the full weight of reality press into his shoulders. He let his eyes wander to the small window slits at the ceiling, watching the bright, hot sunlight glow against the pure white stone.

All of their stories were woven together. It was not a prophecy of just the Hero against Evil. It was a cast of characters, all participating in a massive story with too many twists and turns and horrors to count. The first domino had tipped centuries ago – now the rest were finally toppling. And at alarming speeds.

“You say that Foursky is planning to use you as a weapon, Ra…I don’t think you’re wrong although I doubt he could actually manage that without creating a tethering point for Hexam,” Kalyh said in a voice now so tired from the telling of her tale. “But I don’t believe Foursky had ever intended to go to war with Hyrule; we thought his plans were to find the words in the Library and return to Termina as the most powerful man in the worlds. I’m sure now that the only reason war is on Hyrule’s doorstep is due to my actions. He recognized the magic used on the guards when Evanna found the Library was destroyed. I believed we had hidden the evidence of Vaspra… but clearly I did not succeed.”

But then an inconsistency entered Link’s mind and he suddenly realized they had neglected to tell her perhaps one of the most important things.

“Evanna marked Sheik. There’s a black crescent moon on his back. And that happened before the burning of the Library, before your knowledge of the words was revealed. They obviously had intentions of using him then,” Link hedged. “She disguised marking him…”

Speechless shock had masked Kalyh’s scarred face, the fear it gave him silencing his words.
“They’ve marked you?” Kalyh whispered, suddenly sounding lost. “You didn’t tell me she made a tether.”

“There was a cancer in my lungs. I felt it for a few months. Evanna removed it, claiming the mark she left was to ward against any further sickness,” Sheik explained, expression so grim as though he were accepting his fate.

More panic filled Kalyh’s expression and Link could feel any optimism he had left regarding Sheik’s safety exiting his mind. The whole room seemed to be closing in on him and he felt frozen in place, like one of the statues he used to make fun of in Zelda’s courtyard garden.

“Tricked!” Kalyh shouted, jumping from her seat and stepping into a furious pace. “Then we’ve all been tricked. Our predictions were wrong and like idiots, we have been drawn into this war despite our efforts against it. Evanna has used that deception before – infect the lungs to disguise the marking. Many people don’t even know they’re marked unless another person spots it. That is how she marked me years ago. Only it backfired on them, didn’t it? I’m marked and I’m the only one in the realms who knows Hexam.”

“How do we destroy the mark, Kalyh?” Sheik pressed, getting to his feet and standing in the path of her next paced lap.

She stopped, looking at him with sad crimson eyes. “Marks like ours…only the person who put them there can remove them. Nothing short of a Goddess could remove them without Evanna’s spell.”

Horror was a whirlwind in Link’s head, destroying all thought and deserting him to a constant loop of the premonition, of Sheik’s cold blue eyes, of the dagger at his throat, of Link’s death, of Sheik’s death to follow.

The mark couldn’t be removed. If Foursky managed to get the words, the premonition would undoubtedly be a reality.

After their shared revelations, no one knew what else to say. Kalyh lingered for only a moment but was drawn away when another member of the Order came looking for her. Silence filled the chamber as Sheik stood near the wall, looking lost and exhausted. Link rested his face in his hands and tried to find a positive to the situation, something to calm the panic attack that threatened to consume him once more.

Kalyh’s story had validated everything he didn’t want to be true. And worse.

“She plans to come with us,” Sheik spoke after a while. Link raised his head and watched Sheik’s fingers run over the alabaster stone he must have grown up memorizing. Was the texture a comfort or a burden? “I spoke with her on the roof. Regardless of the Order…Kalyh is a Sheikah of Vrika. I am, by blood, her leader. So she will help us.”

Well, at least there was that. Link tried to feel relieved but there was only darkness in his thoughts now.

Darkness for the future.

Darkness for the war.
This also turned out to be an intimidatingly dense chapter. I thought about splitting it up but it honestly seemed easier to keep all the exposition in one chapter. I hope it didn’t become an information overload. But hey! The title is finally relevant! It only took twenty-four chapters to finally reveal what Congruent means!

A big thank you to all my loyal readers and reviewers, all of you that follow me on tumblr and give me support through this journey. Editing and posting Congruent is easily the hardest project I’ve ever done.
XXV.

That night, Link met all the members of the Order and the remaining Gerudo. The Order was twenty-four strong, the Gerudo ten. They were all a blur of tanned faces and yellow or red eyes, all firm handshakes and welcoming words. Sheik spoke with many of them in a sort of wonder – when was the last time he had spoken to a Sheikah other than Lady Impa? – and Link sat with Lanaia as they all feasted.

Link couldn’t help but wonder if the lines of leadership were about to blur considering what Sheik had said after their discussion with Kalyh earlier. Would the Order serve Sheik if Kalyh served Sheik? Would leadership born of bloodlines topple a leadership held by mere rank? It was too much to think about and Link was far too famished so he devoured the food – wild boar from the rainforest – and half-listened to a story Lanaia was regaling for him.

Her and the remaining Gerudo had barely made it to Vrika even as desert-savvy as they were. They were nearly killed in the Sea of Din by a particularly skilled group of Lizalfos; thankfully they won the fight and Link wondered if such a defeat gave reason for their relatively easy passage through the crater.

“It still does not seem real…I feel like any moment now I will wake up and all of my sisters will still be alive. Our race now stands as numbered as the Sheikah. The only hope we have of continuing our people is my son. I want to believe that, considering Blithos is Foursky’s great grandson, that monster won’t harm him,” Lanaia shared after a while, the pain in her voice a tangible weight.

They sat in the same chamber he, Sheik, and Kalyh had spoken in earlier. Torchlight filled the room and the murmur of voices was almost hypnotic. But Link was distracted from it all by her words, glancing over to her golden gaze.

“I doubt Foursky would hurt his kin. The Gerudo male bloodline is valuable, even to him in his immortality. The people of his kingdom are a mix of Gerudo and Sheikah; they carry the same curse of conception so he will want another pureblood sire.”

Lanaia looked as disturbed by the reasoning as Link felt saying it but it was the reality of their situation.

“I just hope…he’s being taken care of,” she murmured sadly. “He’s so quiet and scared. Even shadows frighten him.”

Link didn’t know how else to comfort her so he simply reached out and squeezed her shoulder. He earned a grateful smile and Lanaia left him to join her sisters across the room. So Link sat in his corner and surveyed the room, looking for the Sheikah he had been interrupted from spying on.

On the far side of the room Link found his companion sitting now by Kalyh. They sat alone, close enough their legs were touching, heads bent in conversation. A strange mixture of emotions bubbled in his chest as he watched them, once again looking made for each other. Kalyh pushed her white out of her face and smiled while Sheik spoke. There was a familiarity in their expression,
a connection still tethered despite time and tragedy.

Link felt envious of their connection but glad Sheik was returned to the woman he had loved. Link felt inadequate for he couldn’t be what Kalyh was for Sheik but sad because he wanted happiness for his friend even despite his own feelings.

But Sheik’s cowl was still in place over his face and it might as well have been an iron barrier between them as Kalyh’s was hung loosely around her neck. Maybe her traditions were less restrictive than the ones Sheik had adopted, but Link had been willingly shown what lay beneath the cloth twice, while he kept it in place next to the woman he was to marry. Link didn’t know what to make of it but it manifested into a strange sort of hope he couldn’t place.

Hope for what?

Hope that what lie between them could grow into…

War was on the horizon and his childhood love sat next to him. If war didn’t end them all it was clear what was next. They were two lovers severed by war and time – despite their unlikely fates they were reunited and it was all too serendipitous to just disregard. There was nothing to hope for and the sting of that was a whole new sort of pain in Link’s chest.

But what about the Congruence? A little voice in the back of his head chimed in and his head ached in the confusion of it all.

Link didn’t even know what Congruence was. In fact, he was hesitant to even ask Sheik to elaborate on the subject. Perhaps Link feared it didn’t mean quite what he had hoped it would mean; his mind had been circling the word bond all day. But judging from how it had been described to him, it was just a magical phenomenon. Nothing more. It wasn’t enough to warrant –

“Are you alright?”

Link hadn’t realized his gaze had fallen to the floor in dark thought. Sheik sat down next to him, concern coloring his eyes. “You look bothered.”

Link recovered and gave a rueful smile. “No more than usual.”

“You dislike Kalyh,” Sheik told him, causing Link to start in surprise.

“What?” Link asked with incredulity. No, he didn’t have a problem with Kalyh; he just apparently had a very juvenile problem with the deep history and connection Sheik and Kalyh shared that he could never equate to. That’s all. “I don’t dislike her, Sheik. Why do you think that?”

Sheik just shrugged, leaning his chin on a fist and fixing Link with a luminous stare. “It was just a feeling I got. But I believe you.”

“Is it easier to talk to her now?” Link diverted the subject quickly, mirroring Sheik’s position and watching the other’s eyes stray back over to Kalyh who now spoke with an older member of the Order.

“I suppose,” Sheik replied, sounding not entirely convinced. “But everything here is so difficult for me to process. I’m surrounded by fond and yet terrible memories. Everywhere I turn there’s a piece
of furniture I remember sitting on all the time or a hallway I used to run up and down. And then I see the empty rooms of friends long dead and the remnants of the massacre on the street and...I can’t escape what I’m feeling. Even harder than seeing Kalyh alive after losing her is seeing how much she’s changed. There is a ruthless nature to her now that she never had. I don’t know who she is."

“You’ve changed as well,” Link offered logically – the depth of Sheik’s admissions surprised him once more.

“Yes. I’ve changed far more than she has,” Sheik agreed. “I feel like her and I are leagues away from each other now. As though we branched too far apart and spanning the distance is like digging into a wound that never fully healed.”

Link almost would’ve expected Sheik’s words to encourage him but the raw anguish exposed in those red eyes drove any immaturity from him and replaced it with only deep sadness. Despite everything Sheik had endured, even the love of his childhood was lost to the cruelty of time and bloodshed.

They had all changed and it was those moments of self-reflection that it burned them the most.

“Will you come with me?”

The question pulled Link out of his thoughts and he met pleading wine eyes.


He almost said it all but the deep and fiery need to appease those beautiful eyes kept him silent so Link simply nodded. And Sheik looked grateful, like he had expected a no.

Like Link had ever denied him anything.

Sheik led the way out of the chamber and back into the labyrinth of passageways. Link followed obediently, some stretches of hallway so dark he bumped into his companion. Sheik, now seemingly a little more confident in his control over magic, lit his trademark flame in his palm. Soon they reached a familiar intersection and, although Link couldn’t read Sheikah, he recognized the symbols and knew where they were going.

Link only hoped Sheik’s control would hold out.

They reached a stone door that Sheik opened with a few whispered words in Sheikah; it seemed everything in the House of Vala was opened with magic. There was a horrible tension in Sheik’s shoulders as the door yawned open to musty darkness and Link wanted so badly to reach out and comfort him.

But they instead stood there before the doorway for a few moments as Sheik seemed to be paralyzed by the incense that lingered in the air and the terrible sensation of going back to a home made empty by death. Link conquered his inhibitions and gripped Sheik’s shoulder, the flow of the Congruence between them surprisingly stronger than he expected. Was it amplified by emotions?

Whatever it did, Sheik forced himself to take a deep breath and utter two more Sheikah words, the entire chamber before them erupting in firelight.
The room was circular and spacious, ceiling curved high above them and playing catch with every little tremor of sound as Sheik led the way inside. The walls were dressed in bookcases, hundreds of spines in dusty rows. A large stone table sat in the center of the chamber, covered in stacks of parchment, more tomes, vials of a rainbow of liquids, and other various accoutrement. Cobwebs strung everything together and dust was suspended in the air like smoke.

It was clear nothing had been moved.

It was clear the last person to be in that room had been Sheik himself.

Link followed Sheik who walked as though in a trance to the table, his fingers trembling as he carefully carded through documents all in Sheikah. The handwriting was consistent and neat – Link recognized it was Sheik’s despite the foreign characters – and among the beakers and books, there was a variety of things that looked to be more trinkets than anything of study.

There was a crude doodle of a boy with long hair, messy language scribbled below it. Sitting on it were a few stones, glittering blue and smooth, perfectly sized to be held in a palm. A small skull of a rodent sat atop a stack of parchment, ornate carvings turning it from death to macabre art. There was a hard rubber ball kept from rolling between two inkwells, obviously well-played in its time.

Emotion crept up Link’s throat as he took in the remains of a part of Sheik’s life he had never known about. Sheik, to him, was stoic and strong and capable and mysterious. Sheik was his guide. Sheik was more mature and knowledgeable than him. The idea of a different person, free and inquisitive and youthful standing before that table intrigued him while it also saddened him.

Maybe Sheik had been fresh from a game with the few Sheikah children of Vrika, delving back into his books until dinner time. Link knew nothing of Gota but evidence of motherly care lingered around them in a carefully folded tunic over a chair, a full jug of water at the corner of the table, and a re-sewn cloak hanging on a hook by the door.

This was Sheik’s old life that had been ripped from him in a flurry of monsters and magic and evil. Link felt like he was suffocating in the wake of it; he couldn’t fathom how Sheik felt.

“Kalyh drew this for me before we started our training,” Sheik told him quietly, a tremor in his voice Link couldn’t miss. He looked back at the drawing, clearly seeing an indignant, child-like Kalyh in his head. “My father said I should make you something so here it is. Consider this my last nice gesture. Try and keep up with me in training, Ra-Po. It was her terrible nickname for me… and it stuck to my dismay.”

Link could hear a slight smile at the last part of Sheik’s words and he couldn’t help but mirror it. It reminded him of Saria’s nicknames for him. Sheik picked up the blue stones, handing one to Link.

“Gota and I travelled to the sea when I was twelve. These stones cover the beach, made smooth by the water and formed from azurite deposits that glimmer in the sun. She told me to leave them or the spirits of the sea would become angry but I stole some anyway.”

The stone was heavy and cold in his palm, the surface almost like glass as it sparkled softly in the torchlight. Link had never seen the sea himself but he could imagine the expanse of water and the crash of waves over thousands of those stones. He could picture an even younger Sheikah running along the rocks, tossing them back into the waves with youthful abandon. Maybe Gota was exasperatedly tolerant, jogging after him and shouting half-hearted threats.
Sheik broke Link’s thoughts, leaving the table for one of two doorways across the room with an obvious caution, as though he didn’t know if he was prepared for what the next room held. As they walked in, torches lit on their own accord to welcome them and revealed a moderate-sized bed chamber. The blankets of fur laid messy and unmade, too-small clothes hanging haphazardly over a chair in the corner, and a dangerously tall stack of books teetered on the nightstand.

With a tired slowness, Sheik went to his bed and sat down, eyes completely lost in memory. He reached out to a small stone box next to the books and pulled from it a necklace.

The cord was black worn leather and hanging from it was a white, palm-sized oval of stone that all of Vrika seemed to be made from. The Sheikah eye – sans the tear drop that symbolized the genocide – was cut deeply into it, a startlingly red gem seated in the pupil. The pendant looked unspeakably old and important as the crimson faceted jewel blinked at them in firelight.

Sheik’s hands shook as he held it in his hands as though he were holding someone’s soul. Link sat down carefully next to him to look closer, enraptured by the way energy seemed to emanate from it; it almost looked alive.

“What is that?”

“It was my mother’s…passed down generations through our bloodline. It’s an amulet of protection. I didn’t wear it during my training, too afraid it would be damaged or lost. I wasn’t wearing it when we were attacked,” Sheik explained in a broken voice. “I knew it would be here, as though it was waiting for my return.”

And then, to Link’s surprise, Sheik passed it to him to examine more closely. It was arguably Sheik’s most prized possession, clearly the only reason he had even braved the emotional nightmare the room yielded, and he allowed Link to hold it with such ease.

He felt honored as its energy seemed to caress his hand, like it recognized him and offered him its warmth. It seemed hauntingly aware and sentient in his hold, a shiver of what felt like affection spreading from it.

Whatever it was, it was a wholly good thing – perhaps it would help Sheik find peace.

“It’s beautiful,” Link whispered. “This alone would be worth crossing the desert for.”

“Now that I’m here, yes, it is,” Sheik spoke, voice turning with bitter emotion. “But for so many years I worked to shield myself from what happened here. This place was my world, my future. I was ready to lead my people and fight for our survival. I loved this place so much…when Impa took me into hiding with the Princess, I was inconsolable. It took so many years to block out the pain…and now I’m submitted to it once more.”

“Blocking out the pain isn’t the same as dealing with it,” Link reminded him softly.

“Blocking out the pain was the quickest option,” he countered with a shake of his head, eyes closing as if to shut out his surroundings. “I could almost forget what happened here. I hid from it behind my duties to the throne.”

Link passed the amulet back to Sheik, who placed it around his neck and tucked it into his tunic. A heavy silence fell in the room as Link watched the slight tremble of Sheik’s fingers where they sat in his lap.
“There’s one more thing I need to do,” Sheik whispered after a while, breaking the sad spell in the air. “And I can’t bear it to go alone.”

The question lingered there under his words, silent but just as pleading as the one before. Again, Link could hardly believe Sheik thought he needed to ask – did he truly believe Link could ever find it in him to say no?

“I’m here, Sheik. I’m always here.”

Those glowing eyes looked unspeakably grateful, laced with emotion and affection that made Link’s heart stutter like he was a nervous child again. A rush of heat passed through him, the echo of their Congruence blooming in his mind despite the lack of contact. Link didn’t know if Sheik could feel it as well but before he could determine the answer that, the intense feeling passed and Sheik led them back out of the chambers, away from the memories of his youth.

Link had a good idea where they were heading next, his suspicions were confirmed when they reached the same archway and stairs that led to the pool. And part of him feared it. Sheik was doing excellent at controlling his emotions and magic. But would that composure hold in the next few minutes? What if Sheik lost his resolve once more and nearly killed him? Link wasn’t able to stop him the time before and it was dubious Link could stop him if it happened again. Could he trust Kalyh to not kill him if things grew out of hand? Was the closure worth the risk?

But he knew Sheik needed to do it. This would be his only chance at finally purging the poison in his mind. It was worth the risk.

They reached the pool, it’s surface casting glowing shapes on the rough black walls, and turned right, into the catacombs where the Sheikah found their eternal rest.

Torches leapt into life as they entered the white stone hallway, the plaques bearing Sheikah names and dates flashing in the wavering light. Smaller hallways branched off of the main passage, the intersections casting angular shadows every which way.

As the passage led them further, they seemed to travel through time; the names were etched in a form of Sheikah Link had never seen and with each handful of steps the characters seemed to evolve. While many crypts Link had experienced were wet and dark and terrifying, the Sheikah clearly respected their dead as much as the living. Signs of recent cleaning could be seen with pots of dirty water here and there, the grime brought on by time having been wiped vigorously away from the walls.

It took a few minutes, but as they went forward through the centuries and the Sheikah letters seemed to shift into something more recognizable, they had clearly reached the most recent area. All the coffins looked new comparatively to the ones preceding it and Sheik was shaking next to him as he reached out to brush his fingers over the plaques.

With each name he recognized the agony grew stronger in Sheik’s eyes and Link wanted to stop it. He wanted to douse the firelight around them and drag Sheik back through the darkness and away from the horrors before them. Although they had just spoke of Sheik’s repression, Link wanted to shield him from the pain and the death. He wanted to –

Sheik stopped abruptly, frozen in place and fingers still at the wall next to the plaque. Link wanted
to ask…but he recognized the markings from the ceiling. The engraving was laced with gold, as some of the names in the catacombs were. Link could only assume they were the names of those with pure blood.

But Sheik whispered, “Gota,” and Link realized that whoever had put her to rest had given her the plaque of a pureblood. Sorrow washed through him as Sheik almost seemed to break under the strain of it all.

It took him a few minutes to recover and move on. Sheik unglued himself from the spot and seemed to suddenly be pulled towards the coffins right next to Gota’s, their names also shimmering gold in the firelight.

“Kalyh buried her…next to my parents,” Sheik uttered, voice breaking on every other word.

Regardless of culture, the order of society always followed life into death – those of lower stature were never buried next to royalty. It was clearly how things stood in Sheikah society as well judging by the shock in his companion’s voice.

Sheik’s shoulders shook as he pressed his hands into the wall and he rested the crown of his head against the hard white stone. Link started to reach out to his companion, but the horribly familiar push of Nether energy met his chest.

No. It was happening again.

The sick Nether aura reached outward and filled the catacombs, the torches overhead beginning to dance chaotically as though a great wind had swept its way into the crypts.

“Sheik, stay with me,” Link said calmly despite the adrenaline he could feel creeping into his bloodstream. “You can control this.”

“I couldn’t…protect them,” Sheik groaned, straining against the wild magic threatening to overtake him. His nails were digging into the stone as Link slowly started to approach him, the motion creating an uncomfortable scraping sound. “I was supposed to lead them, yet I couldn’t protect them.”

“Ganon’s forces were too great for anyone to fight, let alone a child,” Link reasoned, struggling against the building energy. If Link could just reach him…

A burst of power knocked him backward against the adjacent wall with painful force. This wasn’t good. Link let out a grunt of pain as his skull knocked achingly against the stone but not enough to concuss him. He immediately worked himself forward again; the Congruence would be the only thing he had in his arsenal now.

“That’s not enough!” Sheik roared.

“It has to be, Sheik!” Link shouted back desperately. “You have to come to terms with this! Stop blocking the pain!”

“I’m surrounded by the pain of the dead! I’m drowning in it!” he snarled, pounding his fist into the sharp rock with a force that worried Link for his knuckles. “The death in the desert is no different than those fallen at the hand of Hyrule’s bloody history of greed and hatred! I feel the pain of every tribe!”
Link recognized the words from the Shadow Temple, the resting place of the Kakariko Sheikah tribe that the Royal Family converted into a mausoleum of torture and desecration. Sheik was no longer drawing on his grief for Vrika and his family but also for all Sheikah through the years of suffering and tragedy.

“Sheik, don’t lose yourself to this!” Link cried, struggling through each growing wave of agonized power. “You still have a kingdom to save! You have to help me do this!”

And then Sheik whirled around, slamming Link backward once more and summoning a moan through the hallways as though he were raising the dead. The strength of it killed half of the torches lighting the hallways, abandoning them to a half darkness – but the strange flow of Sheik’s energized form was bright enough to see.

His eyes were…not Sheik. He was someone else and Link wanted to be sick.

“Look what I’ve become! What kingdom will I save? I am a monster! I am a beast of the Nether now! If the Goddesses had any mercy for me before, it is nothing now in the face of what I am!”

His voice was everywhere and layered with other terrible voices as though every murdered Sheikah was joining him in rage for the past. It was a demonic chorus that separated Sheik’s identity even further from what stood there now.

“I don’t care what you are, Sheik!” Link yelled, voice pushing sharply to its limits. “I don’t care what you’ve become! Just come back to me! Please!”

“Just kill me!” Sheik roared, body folding over as he seemed to falter under his own miasma of power. He grappled at the wall behind him for support. “Before I betray us all! End it, Link!”

And those were the words to snap Link in two – in what world could Link ever kill the man that stood at the center of his entire life? He would sooner follow Sheik into death than pass that sort of judgement.

“No!” Link thundered in a rage that distorted his vision. With every bit of strength he still had, he rushed forward and struggled through wave after wave. He stretched his hands out, muscles aching and tearing with strain. “I WILL NOT! I WILL DIE BEFORE I KILL YOU!”

In one last desperate effort Link reached out and managed to grab Sheik’s cowl. He gripped the fabric and dragged himself into the vortex of hostile energy and held on. Everything about Sheik tried to repel him but Link endured. He wrapped his arms around the Sheikah’s shoulders and squeezed as if he could force the magic back inside and away.


Sheik gripped his shoulders and propelled him back at a blinding speed, slamming him into the wall and pinning him there in a piercing, unearthly glare. The power of it shook Link to his core and he endeavored to keep his grip as the Congruence flared between them like a firestorm.

It felt like two titans battled within them: the warmth of the Congruence and the terrible, inhuman power of Sheik’s Nether magic. It was akin to being electrocuted as Link grit his teeth and struggled to stay conscious. Everything shook between them and maybe the whole temple was shaking it but he couldn’t tell with his eyes so tangled in Sheik’s.
“I can’t…” Sheik cried weakly, now just a frail, single voice amidst the rush of sound. “Link…”

“Yes, you can,” Link urged, digging his fingers into Sheik’s shoulders, desperately willing their Congruence to overpower the Nether magic. “Come back and face this. I’m right here, Sheik.”

“I…” But the energy was weakening and, in a slow decline, Link was gaining his upper hand and pushing Congruence’s warmth outward through his fingertips. Sheik’s grip was loosening and his face was growing from fierce to broken in the eerie glow surrounding them.

“Come back,” Link whispered, tugging Sheik to him. “Please, come back.”

And, in a topple of severed magic, Sheik fell forward into his arms. With his face against Link’s neck, Sheik’s body went limp from the withdrawal. The glow was gone and they were plummeted into darkness as the last of the torches were dismissed. Link struggled to hold his own weight and Sheik’s combined; the outburst had drained him just as it had Sheik.

Before Link could fall and hurt them both, he slid heavily down the wall and brought Sheik with him, holding him close as they both trembled from exhaustion and fear.

Sheik’s fingers became ensnared with Link’s tunic and he sobbed.

Link had never heard Sheik cry. And something told him the man hadn’t cried since his youth. The sound he made now wasn’t a noise to pity or mock.

It was the sound of complete and utter loss, at the end of the world and at the bottom of swallowing darkness. It was unfathomable pain locked away for too many years, through too many hardships. It was a sound that struck Link through like a bolt of lightning and made him ache in every way he ever had.

There was nothing Link could do but hold him and force the flood of warmth through their contact. He crushed the Sheikah to his chest, working desperately to keep the Congruence between them flowing. He felt dampness at his neck and realized the cowl had been pushed away in the grapple. Hot breath pressed into his neck and the heavy heat of the body practically on top of his was an unexpected comfort.

Link had broken through Sheik’s walls and finally exposed what his companion had been running from. Part of him felt accomplished but most of him just felt horribly sad for the state he had pushed Sheik into.

Overtime the sobs died and there was nothing but a duet of heartbeats between them. Maybe there had been a proper time to let go and coax Sheik up to a better surface for resting, but the Sheikah was still limp in his arms. Link couldn’t bear to move and lose the delicious energy between them, their Congruence weaving through his limbs and up and down his spine.

Somewhere in his mind Link knew he was starting to become dependent on the feeling, unconsciously seeking out contact at every turn to just get a lingering taste of it. Maybe it was akin to the alcoholism he had seen in many he’d known but, at the very least, Congruence wouldn’t kill him so he supposed he could have a worse vice.

Eventually, Sheik’s breathing slowed to a rhythm Link recognized as sleep and he couldn’t help but feel relieved. Maybe the outbursts, while terrifying and would most assuredly leave him bruised
and sore, had actually healed the Sheikah in a way. His companion had finally allowed himself to break down after what Link could only assume was six or seven years of denial and repression.

And if Sheik was going to fall apart on anyone at least it had been Link and he had had his privacy in the dark.

The feeling between them pulsed gently like a heartbeat and Link felt his eyes grow heavy from the day’s fighting and anxiety. He had no idea what horrors the future held for them…but at least in that moment, he had Sheik safe and sleeping in his arms, all crises averted.

Link could live with that until morning.

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And so the gay intensifies.

I’ve gone back and forth so many times over whether this scene was necessary or not. Part of me feels like it’s essential character development. The other part of me feels like it was just an excuse to make things More Gay™. I don’t know – you guys decide.

Thank you for reading and reviewing and patting my head when I was sad (and I mean that genuinely).
Whatever and whenever morning was, it came to Link slowly and scented strongly of the incense that forever lingered on Sheik. It reminded him – along with the ever-flowing Congruence pulsing between them – that they had fallen asleep tangled with each other.

Perhaps it had been the exhaustion or maybe even the darkness they had been left in, but something had summoned sleep. It could have also been the comfort between them that allowed them rest but Link wasn’t going to approach that train of thought just yet. He could only find the humor in their positions now; falling asleep surrounded by skeletons definitely wasn’t on his list of potential adventures but Link supposed he now had a weird story for another time.

His back was wedged between the junction of floor and wall, numb in some places from hours of hard pressure. Sheik was tucked warmly against him, head folded into his neck and breath soft against his collar bone.

Despite his efforts to dispel the nagging thoughts in his mind, their position implied so many things. Link couldn’t deny, however, that part of him was thrilling at the intimacy of it. And then another part wanted to sneak off and hide from the inevitable conversation that would take place once Sheik found consciousness again.

Sheik’s left hand was still tangled up against Link’s ribs in the fabric of his tunic, right hand at Link’s chest, like he had unconsciously placed it there to ensure the heart below was still pumping away; Link found himself so painfully over-aware of every point of contact he almost wanted to pull away.

Having Sheik there, that close, wasn’t foreign like he thought it would be. And Link, for everything it was worth, did not want to move. At all. He wanted to lay there for an eternity, until the end of the war – even despite the wall and floor’s uncomfortable angles in his back – and bask in the high of Congruence. Link couldn’t even feel the soreness of his strained muscles or the omnipresent headache he seemed to have since arriving in their current climate.

But Sheik did wake eventually. In a slow confusion, he pried himself from Link but not all the way, as though recognizing the buzz of their connection and perhaps not wanting to leave it either. His warm hand stayed on Link’s arm as they both sat up in the complete darkness and a short silence passed until Sheik said, voice hoarse and raw, “Link…are you okay?”

And Link laughed in response. “I can’t believe you’re asking me if I’m okay.”

“I…” But he apparently didn’t know what to say, so Sheik trailed off and they sat there blind for a few minutes like a silent decision was being made. About what? Link didn’t know if he wanted to know. But a new tension was building between them and heat started to coil in his gut as the Congruence began to react and grow.

“Sheik,” Link said carefully, voice coming out more unsteady than he would've liked. “What’s… what is all of this?”
Link didn’t know how else to ask the question – actually, he didn’t know if it was even the right question. He was trapped in the strange purgatory between pretending to be oblivious and addressing the giant Goron in the room. Link didn’t want to face rejection because, despite all the signs, nothing about their situation was straight forward and he had long since learned his lesson about assuming things. But he also didn’t want to avoid everything like a child and neglect to come to terms with his feelings when the future was so uncertain.

So, maybe, his vague and open-ended question was the perfect one. He was giving Sheik an out. He was giving himself an out.

Too-bright flame bloomed into his vision, blinding him momentarily, as they both squinted in the sudden light Sheik conjured on his palm.

With the cowl gone once again, Link’s breath was caught in his lungs as he received the full force of the Sheikah’s powerful expression. And really it was no wonder Sheik persisted with the cowl; such a striking face had potential to show emotions, show weakness. The three triangular scars glowed red in the firelight and Link was immediately drawn to them, eyes tracing their patterns through the dark skin over Sheik’s chin.

And then his gaze wandered back up, to the full lips he needed to avoid lest his mind wander…but Sheik’s bottom lip was torn up from increased gnawing and the swollen sight of it sent a hot spike of surprising want in the pit of his stomach. Link wanted to reach forward and feel the ripped texture with his tongue, leave his own marks to cover the ones left by anxiety…

The Congruence was amplified three-fold by these thoughts and it nearly left him gasping. Sheik’s eyes flared and a feeling like magnetism grew between them, almost as though the Congruence was taking over and luring them together.

There was a look in Sheik’s eyes that seemed to be the unmasked expression Link had been summoning pieces of for a long time as hesitant fingers reached out slowly and brushed hair out of Link’s eye he hadn’t even noticed. Fingertips lit tiny fires over his skin and he fought to keep his eyes open as every tiny movement dragged him deeper into bliss.

Bond. That was all Link had gotten out of Sheik before the Bloodbacks attacked the House of Vala. Congruent or not, any moron could’ve told them they had a bond. They sparred together, travelled together, ate together, studied together…the only thing that hadn’t done was sleep –

Before the thought could even fully form, the connection flared to an apex and Link’s vision skewed wildly for a moment as a weight so smoldering and heavy threatened to overtake him. Link reached up and laced his fingers with Sheik’s, gripping tightly for support. Or for some tether to reality.

“Sheik,” he moaned softly. “What is Congruence?”

“I…I don’t know,” was Sheik’s reply, voice hardly even there at all as if he couldn’t breathe. “I’ve only read about it…and there isn’t much known on the topic.”

“Sheik, I…” But Link didn’t know what he was going to say. Instead he reached out and snagged his fingers on the cowl hanging abandoned around Sheik’s neck, dragging him forward and into Link’s space. And, in a way, Link almost didn’t feel like himself. But then, he did. He was in control but the Congruence consumed him in a way he’d never experienced, weakening every
inhibition he’d ever had.

There was nothing to compare it to and Link couldn’t shake the belief that it was something beyond just a bond. Like it was something profound. Something sacred.

Sheik’s face was now mere inches from his, sharing the same air and eyes locked together. The warm scent of Sheik filled his nose and did nothing in the realm of sober him up. Actually it made it worse as Sheik’s hand shook against his and-

“Ra!” came the distant shout of Kalyh. “Link! Are you down here?”

And then the pressure between them broke and they moved away, both gasping like they were fresh out of battle. But Link refused to let go of Sheik’s hand as footsteps started down the hallways of the catacombs. A different sort of fire filled Link up and he dragged the Sheikah back into his space once more.

“We are not going to ignore this, Sheik,” Link threatened. He couldn’t live with anymore avoidance, anymore questions. Perhaps he didn’t know what was truly going on between them or what it meant, but ignoring it was even worse. “I want answers.”

“Link?” Kalyh shouted again, clearly having heard his voice. Light was jumping into the hallways, her presence summoning flames once more.

Link let go and the loss of Congruence was enough to elicit a slight groan out of him, but he forced himself to his feet. Sheik followed suit and Link called, “We’re here, Kalyh!”

She joined them shortly, looking relieved and wary at once. Now the corridor was completely lit and her eyes flickered over to the coffins of Gota and Sheik’s parents, then back on them. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you both. We need to talk about the Portal.”

Sheik nodded and Link raised an eyebrow. The Portal?

Kalyh motioned for them to follow her back out, obviously uncomfortable in the dead catacombs; Link wanted to laugh considering he and Sheik had just slept in there. They trudged tiredly behind her, walking closer than they normally did in an unconscious sort of way until their hands bumped and the feelings shot through Link, turning him rigid.

“I assume you had planned on using the Portal to get us back to the castle?” Kalyh asked, glancing back and just barely missing a loaded gaze between the two of them.

Goddesses, he needed to get a grip and focus.

“That was my intention,” Sheik replied, voice still a little strained. This didn’t go unnoticed by Kalyh, who stopped and turned to study his face before Link could ask what the Portal even was.

“Are you alright?” Her gaze shifted to Link as well. “You both look exhausted. What happened last night?”

Link passed Sheik an uneasy look – she needed to know. Well…most of it, at least. “Just a little outburst,” was all he said.

A steely glare pressed into them and her voice came out terse. “You should’ve known better
coming down here. You’re out-of-control and the last thing you needed to see were those –“

“Kalyh,” Link interrupted, speaking over Sheik’s rebuttal as well, “actually, it was the first thing he needed to see. He needed to grieve.”

Silence fell between them and, for a tense moment, Link was worried he had stepped over the line speaking for Sheik like that. He kept his gaze to Kalyh, both of them waiting to see what came next.

And then, reluctantly, Sheik spoke. “Link is right. I never came to terms with what happened here. As dangerous as it might have been, it was necessary. I feel…more like myself now.”

“Then you’re one step ahead of me.” Kalyh sighed bitterly, turning away and leading them out of the catacombs. Whatever fight had been on the cusp of sparking, Sheik’s unexpected honesty had clearly diffused it.

The pool glimmered at them in torchlight and Link wanted desperately to just sink back into it’s healing waters but resisted as they skirted around the edge to the blank stone door behind it. It was dark gray and contrastingly smooth against the glittering black walls. There wasn’t a single mark on its arched surface but it was clearly something of importance as Sheik reached forward and ran his fingers gently over it.

“Um,” Link started, “anyone care to share the secret with me?”

Kalyh gave him a bemused look and pulled down her cowl, casting the door a wistful expression. “This is the Portal of Vrika. It was once the connection between our two tribes, in case of emergencies. It takes a great deal of power to activate. When the war started, my father placed a seal on it to keep Ganondorf from invading in the event he learned of its existence.”

“Which, of course, he did,” Sheik supplied, stepping back from it with a dark expression. “Ganondorf broke through. The seal wasn’t strong enough, even despite the power of Kalyh’s father and all the elders combined. The power of the Sheikah failed and the invasion began here.”

“Although the pool and the catacombs remained safe, it was the Portal that suffered,” Kalyh explained. “It’s now been tainted with dark magic that has festered for many years; it must be purified before we can use it. What’s more, its sister lies under a grave in Kakariko and there is no telling what still lingers in that chamber.”

“I cleared everything in the graveyard during the war,” Link countered.

“I wouldn’t trust the hope that nothing returned. Once Ganon fell, his minions fled back into Hyrule and beyond. I don’t doubt we will find them hiding back in the dark places of the world,” Sheik warned. “Especially now that strife is returning to the kingdom. The creatures that were once loyal to Ganondorf may choose to follow his grandfather.”

“Whatever may be waiting, I am confident we can handle it,” Link said, surprised to find he believed his words. Between just the three of them were years of rigorous training in combat and magic. They also held the power of the Order of Hexa and a band of Gerudo Warriors.

Yes, they could handle a few monsters wandering since the war. In fact, Link was finally beginning to feel confident that maybe they could take on the war yet to come.
"I agree, but it's only relevant if Ra can cleanse and open the Portal," Kalyh argued, pacing in a circle now like a wild cat. "The spells needed are complex and, despite my training in our youth and what I learned with the Order, I am not skilled enough to cast them. Only Ra can do this and it is imperative that he succeeds. Crossing the desert in such a large party with Nether beasts running amok would be foolish. We need this Portal to work."

What a weight to put on Sheik’s shoulders. Link cast an incredulous look, expecting to find a doubtful or even irritated expression. But what he found were resigned eyes, confident and calm.

Perhaps Sheik truly was finding himself again.

“I will open it,” he promised, placing his hands gently against the Portal. “It will take time, however. The door has been corrupted for so long and I need to learn, not only the spells to cleanse it, but the spells to open it again.”

They left the pool and the Portal, making their way back to the surface. Sheik headed off to find his spells and Link followed Kalyh into the armory to help her take inventory of their supplies. Link hated leaving Sheik to fight his own demons again…but there was a reassuring look in those red eyes as they parted.

I’ll be fine now, Link, Sheik had pushed into his head.

So Link would trust him.

“Some of my people are not convinced I am making the right decision,” Kalyh revealed quietly as they reached the armory and the door was shut to keep their words private. “Most of them have either never been to Hyrule or escaped and had no intention of returning.”

Link walked along the racks as she spoke, inspecting anything that wasn’t in serious disrepair. “But they’ll follow you, correct?”

“Of course they will,” Kalyh amended in a tired voice. “But the Order of Hexa is not a monarchy. They have no issue voicing their opinions with me. And they have no issue with you…in fact, I think you’re the only thing keeping them in line.”

“Me?” Link asked in surprise, turning to throw her an incredulous look.

She nodded. “You’ve proven yourself a skilled fighter. And you have proven you are everyone’s Hero, not just Hyrule’s. They would follow you before they would follow the Queen. They do not trust her and rightfully so, I think you’d agree. The last three generations of Hyrule Royalty have been responsible for almost every tragedy to befall the Sheikah people. They have their reservations concerning Sheik, as well. I have told them little of his condition; only that he was recently granted power he does not yet have control over. Still, they are wary.”

Link shook his head in disbelief. Jumping off a turret on a Nether bird was all it took to gain the Order’s support. He needed to remember that tactic in the future, pray he ever need it again.

“Well, as long as they will come to the castle, that’s my main concern. We need to keep the remainder of the Sheikah – and the words – safe.”
“Do you expect me to sit out when the war comes?” Kalyh suddenly demanded, throwing Link a hard glare from her study of a scimitar. She tossed it down – it was too warped and dull to attempt saving – and continued on to the next weapon. “Are you going to lock me in the dungeons to keep me safe?”

Link let out a groan; he should’ve known they’d run into this problem. “Kalyh, we’re not going to lock you in the dungeons. But we don’t even know what Foursky is capable of anymore, especially now that he has an arsenal of Vaspra-”

“Thanks to your Queen’s incompetence,” Kalyh added moodily, but Link ignored it.

“For all we know, he may have a way of reading minds by now,” he finished in frustration. “You know what happens if he gets those words. How many of your people have been marked, Kalyh?”

Her maroon eyes narrowed and misshapen mouth folding into a disapproving frown. While it was apparent Kalyh had already considered this – and probably a long time ago considering they had planned to stay in Vrika – it was also apparent she did not appreciate Link using it as an argument now. “At least half of them.”

“So, it’s not just Sheik and the Royal armies…it’s your people as well that are at risk if the words are forfeited,” Link told her. “So you understand why I’m not exactly thrilled about the idea of you on the battlefield?”

Kalyh’s looked down to the old bow she’d been holding, bowstring frayed at its center from thousands of nocks. Her mouth was tight and her eyes were hard, as though she were holding back words she was dying to speak.

“We need to keep the words from Foursky and battle him. If we can weaken him enough, we can combine your Vaspra with ours and seal him in the Nether forever. We can end this, but only if we are careful and strategic about what comes next.”

Kalyh looked up suddenly, eyes bright in realization. “You have Vaspra?”

Link nodded. “I managed to take some for ourselves when we collected it from the Nether for Evanna. I don’t know how much you have, but any more will help.”

Kalyh looked away in deep thought, brows furrowing as she appeared to be done speaking. Link could only hope his words had inspired her to opt out of the fight, no matter how skilled of a warrior she clearly was.

But then there was a thought he hadn’t considered that shot through his mind, holding his body still for just a moment: what if Kalyh could use Hexa on Foursky and Evanna? What if she could kill them? Link blurted these words out, bringing her back out of her reverie.

Kalyh sighed and shook her head impatiently. “That’s not how the words work. To perform Hexa, you must possess a fuel source greater than your target. That is the real reason why it became forbidden, aside from the obvious moral reasoning. If you, a person of average life-force, used Hexa on someone with equivalent life-force the cost would be your own life – both you and your target would die. In order to destroy Foursky and Evanna, I would need a fuel source equivalent to them…and they’ve absorbed enough Vaspra to become immortal. That’s why it won’t work.”
Disappointment filled him. Of course. That made perfect sense.

“Howver much they have absorbed, I would at least that in Vaspra to kill them, not to mention I
would die. And I’m sorry, but I’m not a martyr. I have a people to protect. I would need more even
more Vaspra to stay alive and that ore isn’t exactly just lying around.”

Link nodded. No, he would never ask Kalyh to die for Hyrule. He wouldn’t ask anyone to die for
Hyrule. Really, he was the only one qualified for that task and he wasn’t about to offer himself
either. He doubted, even combined, they had anywhere close to whatever quantity of Vaspra
Foursky and Evanna boasted.

It looked like their only option was the original plan – battle Foursky until he was weak enough
and seal him in the Nether. And how they were going to accomplish that, Link couldn’t imagine.

It was close to high noon by the time they had properly sorted through the weapons. Unfortunately
the pile of useable was dwarfed by the mound of junk – but it was a start. As they began the task
on sharpening blades Kalyh was pulled away by her second-in-command Link had remembered
meeting the previous night.

His name was Jalin and he was born in Termina. He was an older man, blonde hair graying at his
temples and little creases around his eyes. He still clearly had immense strength to earn him the
position of Second, however, his shoulders broad and eyes sharp as Jalin’s fiery gaze met with his
for an intense moment. Link had a feeling a lot of the opposition in the Order was coming from
Jalin although his expression wasn’t necessarily that of anger.

It was protective wariness and Link immediately respected the Sheikah although he couldn’t really
identify why.

With Kalyh occupied, Link took a break from their task and went to find Sheik. Evidently there
was a main library in the temple but Link wouldn’t know how to find it; maybe it was time he
insisted Sheik to teach him Sheikah.

He managed to retrace his steps and find his way – through much trial and error, of course – back
to Sheik’s old chambers as a place to start his search. To Link’s surprise, his companion was still in
his old library, bent over the table and scribbling on aged parchment with a dark brown, worn quill.

For a moment, the Sheikah seemed too engrossed in his writing to notice Link’s presence lingering
by the door. He took the opportunity to watch the lithe curve of Sheik’s back, the web of golden
stray hairs dangling in his eyes, the muscles along his shoulders rippling as he wrote…

Link really needed to get a grip.

“All luck?” Link asked hopefully, moving to the other side of the table and sitting heavily in the
chair Sheik had opted to ignore. Maybe Sheik liked standing but Link was too tired to stay on his
feet so he leaned back lazily and watched the Sheikah write.

Sheik glanced up, a warmth entering his eyes Link felt his stomach flip in response to, and nodded.
“I found the cleansing spells. I’ve almost collected all the steps for opening the Portal but I realized
something…we forgot to send word to Queen Zelda.”

“Oh no,” Link groaned, slapping a palm to his forehead. “We’re dead, Sheik. We’re dead. She’s
going to have us drawn and quartered.”
Sheik gave him an unimpressed look and shook his head. “Well, she definitely won’t be happy… but I’m just finishing up the message to her so worry not for your life. I’m hoping I can summon a messenger hawk from this distance.”

There was a distinct sound of a scribbled signature and the parchment was handed to him along with the quill. Link signed below and read it over. The code was tight and left out much detail but it was the best they could do. With Foursky’s spies still in the castle, they couldn’t afford to reveal anything. Link nodded in approval and passed it back.

He updated Sheik on his conversation with Kalyh as the message was rolled up and tied with a bit of twine. A frown bent Sheik’s eyebrows and he spun the roll of parchment between his fingers in thought.

“Kalyh could be incredibly useful in the battle, though,” Sheik countered thoughtfully. “Depending on how much Vaspra she has left, she could take out many of Foursky’s men.”

“But shouldn’t we use it for sealing Foursky and Evanna into the Nether instead? We aren’t completely sure how much Vaspra that will take,” Link hedged dubiously.

Sheik sighed. “Link, let's face it – it is very unlikely we have enough Vaspra.”

Link sighed because, well, yes he knew that. No one had said it yet but it had lingered in the back of his mind and only now did he acknowledge it.

“We could try stealing it from Foursky,” Link suggested mockingly. “Because sneaking up on Ganondorf’s immortal grandfather – who happens to have a stockpile of Vaspra – will be a breeze.”

The Sheikah across from him sat on the table as tiredly as Link felt and shook his head. “We’ll just have to trust the prophecy. Somehow…you overcome him.”

“I am not a fan of trusting the Goddesses as of late,” Link complained.

“There’s nothing for it,” was all Sheik said.

They sat still and silent for a moment, the quiet of the room almost foreboding. It was still rather dusty but Sheik had cleared many of the cobwebs and some books had obviously been shifted around in his search. For one long moment, Link considered bringing up the morning’s events. Because when would they have another chance to talk about it? Perhaps once they returned to the castle, but who knew what the emotional climate would be there once half-angry Sheikah and grieving Gerudo arrived?

“Though it’s not my intention to kick you out,” Sheik started, breaking the silence, “I do need to concentrate. And your presence inhibits that.”

Link realized what he was saying and tried his hardest not to blush. Link was distracting him. And it was undoubtedly related to the growing…thing between them. Never had he been so torn between embarrassment and smug happiness in his life. Link just nodded dumbly and stood to leave.

“But I did find something,” Sheik told him before he could exit. Link glanced back curiously and
found that it was Sheik’s turn to look almost embarrassed. The vulnerable and hesitant expression sent an odd thrill through him with just a hint of remembered Congruence. “When I went to the main library I found this book.”

An old red book, nearly falling to pieces, was pushed into his hands.

“What is this?” Link inquired, examining the half-eroded gold lettering on the cover. It was actually in Hylian but he could only make out the word *bonds*.

“The book I recall reading in my youth. Page sixty-seven…it’s about Congruence,” Sheik replied slowly, turning back to the table to keep his hands busy with restacking a few books for no apparent reason. It would’ve been endearing if Link’s heart hadn’t been sent into a frenzy, the ghost of Congruence yanking at him again.

Was he *truly* feeling it or was he just imagining it? He assumed the book would tell him. But…why wouldn’t Sheik just tell him?

“Haven’t you read it already?” Link went on, intending to imply that Sheik was an abnormally fast reader but the tension in his voice killed any sense of humor.

Sheik met his eyes and they were guarded once more, the warmth from earlier tucked behind careful walls. “No, I haven’t. I need to focus on the spells right now. I’m leaving this bit of research to you.”

Before Link could keep himself quiet, he blurted out, “Why?”

*It scares me,* was the startlingly clear voice in his head. Sheik turned his gaze away and flipped over a tome with purpose, leaving Link to stand there for a moment in confusion and surprise.

Scared him. Yeah, it sort of scared Link, too.

It was equal parts nice and scary. It was powerful enough to completely cloud their judgments. And maybe that was why Sheik didn’t want to read about it. Maybe Sheik was less acting on his own and more acting on the whims of the Congruence. What if he hadn’t voluntarily done *anything* that had happened that morning in the catacombs?

The idea made him sick.

He left Sheik to his somewhat forced study and wandered back through the maze of hallways, hoping he’d stumble on a quiet place to read the potential emotional explosive he was carrying. Anxiety tugged at Link’s stomach and he tried to keep his thoughts at bay until he could properly read the truth.

Link didn’t know what it was. There was no reason to assume. He needed to just read it.

After a lot of dead ends, Link managed to find the room Sheik had been in when all of the Congruence nonsense had started – how symbolic he would the book there. Link took refuge on the bed and flipped through the crumbling book with barely contained eagerness as he reached a chapter titled *Class Three, Perennial Bonds*. And of course page sixty-seven was stuck to page sixty-sixty and he nearly tore the whole page apart.

The text was written in a script of Hylian so old, Link had to squint and read at the pace of a ten-
year-old.

Congruence, derived from the old word congruō, is a rare cosmic phenomenon my colleagues and I only observed in four pairs over the course of two hundred year’s study. There is much evidence pointing to other instances of it, but none of said allegations were studied or proven. While much is still unknown about this particular bond, it is characterized by a very powerful, very concentrated energy exchange between the two subjects – undoubtedly the most powerful one ever observed. It is a connection that must be awoken (we contend that perhaps many people have the capacity for it but simply are ignorant of how to access it) and when it is, the power is binding and irreversible.

Over time, some subjects can share power by accessing each other’s abilities through physical contact. Given even more time, they are likely to develop a telepathic connection that can span continents. I have personally observed two cases of Congruence; one in a pair of twin sisters and one in two lovers. The bond seems to hold to no type of relationship or blood. It has thus appeared in siblings, strangers, friends, and lovers. One of the cases I studied did not wish for the connection and its intensity drove them mad…and to rather extreme solution. They attempted to sever their connection using magic – this created a compounded bond that resulted in agonizing, chronic pain for them both. I would not advise any subjects of Congruence attempting this provided what I have witnessed.

Its scientific name remains as Congruence among us scholars, both a mathematic symbol and the word for compatibility, harmony, and binding unity that spans any distance. But it also describes the bond to not only a surface level on our living plane but to a spiritual level as well. Many call it, in the common tongue, soulmates. The price of being in the bond of Congruence and the power and comfort it lends is its binding contract:

*If one subject of Congruence dies, the other dies as well.*

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So now you know what Congruent means and I’m curious to know what all of your thoughts are. Thank you as always to the frequent and loyal reviewers and readers, especially to those of you that have directly messaged me to see how I’m doing or just let me know that you like this story. Those sorts of things are a fanfiction writer’s dreams.

And now, let’s just see how long I can draw out this very gay sexual tension!

(/œ ヾ)/*:“ ◯
XXVII.

It was known throughout the Temple of Vala, at some point during the day, that Sheik had cleansed the Portal. The procedure had been very brief and much easier than actually activating the Portal would be. They would be embarking by nightfall and a sense of urgency lingered on the energy in the Temple. It caused a great stir of commotion in the more used areas, Order members and Gerudo working tireless to gather weapons and supplies to aid in the war.

All of this had happened in a span of three hours.

But Link wouldn’t know, really.

After reading the book he had thrown it out the window and went to the roof to get as far from the information as possible.

Link had already spent the few hours it took to come to terms with the reality of their bond staring blankly at the mountain, crossed-legged on the edge of the roof. And honestly, what else was there to expect with something so ancient and powerful? It seemed to be divine law that everything – no matter how innocent – had some sort of catch.

Their fates were tied together and Link couldn’t shake the feeling that it was something the Goddesses hadn’t planned on.


The writer called it a binding contract but Link was fairly sure common etiquette warranted at least one glance over something before literally signing one’s life away. How was he going to explain to Sheik that now one more thing hung on the line of their shared premonition? It would be awfully difficult to fulfill a prophecy if the Hero of Time was dead.

“Link?”

It wasn’t the person he wanted it to be but Link was surprisingly comforted to see Kalyh approaching him with her white hair pulled back and cowl down. If it had been anyone else he may have snapped at them to leave him be.

It was late afternoon and, although Vrika had long eclipsed the sun, it stained the landscape with an aura of gold. The color gave her features a heavenly glow as she approached his spot at the edge of the roof and Link suddenly remembered that she was beautiful.

“Hope you’re not thinking about jumping. Don’t leave us commoners to fight your battles, Hero,” Kalyh quipped, no malice in her eyes as she sat down beside him in a stance not unlike the curled-up position Sheik would take when comfortable.

Despite the gratification Link felt at being accepted by someone he now respected deeply, his stomach turned at her words; he knew what would happen if he did jump and it made him feel ill.
Link forced a laugh and shook his head. “No. I’m sorry I’m not down there helping. I needed some
time to myself before we go through the Portal.”

“I did not come up here to chastise you, Link,” she assured him quietly, propping her elbows on her
knees and staring out at the empty white city below them, heat waves rippling gently on the
rooftops.

“I just…I guess I just wanted to thank you,” Kalyh finally admitted. Her words sounded so heavy,
like she had had to heave them out of her mind. Whether it was her ego or just emotion that
impeded her words, Link was surprised to hear them nonetheless.

“For what?”

“For more things than I could’ve imagined,” she said with a surprised laugh. “You…kept Ra safe.
You brought him back from death. You brought him here. And, more than anything, you brought
purpose to us once more. You are a great man, Link.”

The sentiment gave him pause – Link realized that he couldn’t remember anyone calling him that.

Link was the Hero of Time. He was never called a man; only a boy. The title seemed strange
because it implied age, experience…Link couldn’t identify with any of those things. All he could
feel was the burden of immaturity, the emptiness of the years he had lost that would’ve brought
him the wisdom of a man.

But then the word also felt right – had he not earned himself that title? After all he had endured,
after the kingdom he had saved, wasn’t he a man just as much as he was a hero? That was perhaps
the only thing Kalyh had said that he could agree with.

“I brought war,” Link deadpanned, looking away from her wide red eyes and to the dead city.

“Sheik kept me safe through the war and since then. I am the reason for his death in the first place
and I followed him out here because I aggressively insisted on coming with him.”

“Sheik told me about things that have happened, more than what you were willing to share with
me,” Kalyh countered with a shake of her head Link caught in his peripheral. “You have saved him
countless times in countless ways I do not even think you know of. The way he talks about you…
his true allegiance has only ever lied with you, I think, royalty be damned. I would be jealous if I
were a different woman.”

Link shot her a disbelieving look.

Kalyh shrugged. “It really doesn’t take a scholar to figure out what is going on, Link.”

He let out a long sigh – he was half-inclined to play stupid and ask what she meant. And he also
didn’t think he wanted her advice. But Goddesses help him he needed it and, of all people to ask,
he was going to breach that sensitive topic with Sheik’s ex-lover as they sat in their long-destroyed
history.

“Kalyh, I don’t know what’s going on. And it’s really not even the time to address it…but it’s not
exactly easy to ignore,” Link admitted in frustration. A wave of strange relief flooded him
following his words, the cage around his long-kept feelings finally opened just a crack for the first
time.

“It will never be the time,” Kalyh reasoned. “That was the same fodder I told myself six years ago
when I loved Ra.”

Now she had his attention and he gave her an expectant look. It earned him a short laugh and a twisted smile. “We spent all our time together. We trained, ate, and even slept together. We were young and idealistic and too proud to talk about our feelings. However, we were together in every way, emotionally and physically. We would never have a conversation about it, but it was also never a question that we would spend the rest of our lives together.”

A myriad of emotions attacked Link at this information but he shoved it all down for later examination.

“Despite the uncertain future that was before us, I never managed to tell him what I felt for him. I think he lacked the capacity for it as well. Sheikah warriors are trained to be sound and stoic in every way; it was a persona you could not just turn off. There was no room for romance, no role-model to show us what love meant. But I knew how I felt and I never got over myself to express it because I thought we had the rest of our lives to talk about it. And then…then it was too late. Now our time passed and I have to live with all things I didn’t say because it wasn’t the time.”

The words cut deep into him, the story reminding him too much of what might happen between he and Sheik if the silence continued.

“Do you still love him?” Link asked seriously, knowing he was stepping well over countless boundaries but needing to know.

“Of course I love him,” Kalyh answered, voice drunk with remorse once more. “We grew up together. We were all each other had. It’s a kind of love that doesn’t ever fully leave you. But I was in love with Ra. Not Sheik. And not because of what the Nether did to him – because we’re strangers now. My priorities have changed, as have his. Now…now it’s good to see him. It’s good to see him alive and with someone who will complete him.”

Link followed her gaze to the mountain, a hulking dark mass above them. He hadn’t had a chance to truly appreciate its magnificence. Death Mountain was impressive; Vrika was unreal. It almost felt alive as it loomed over them, like a vigilant and powerful god.

Maybe, one day, if they all survived what was to come, he and Sheik would return there and travel to its peak. Maybe they would brave the rainforest creeping around the mountain and visit the sea. Maybe they would follow the mountains from Vrika to Death Mountain. Maybe they would disappear into Termina like prophecy insisted.

“I wish you could see the way he looks at you when your back is turned,” Kalyh said quietly, slowly climbing to her feet and fixing him with a hard look. “He used to look at me like that. Don’t waste the time you have, Link.”

And then she left him to stare at the mountain and remember how to breathe again.

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Link donned on his Royal Guardsman attire once more, glad to have the familiar cloth and armor back despite the sweat it instantly summoned. He joined many of the Order in the armory to help with anything he could.

The sound of whetstone against iron rang throughout the circular room, the cadence of accented
voicing added to the ambience. He found himself leaned against a wall with a pile of short swords when Jalin joined him.

The Sheikah sat against the wall, two swords and a dagger under his arm, and offered Link a new whetstone considering the sad, eroded state of his own.

Link took it gratefully and offered his thanks. A few minutes of rhythmic scraping and listening to the conversations of those nearby sent Link into a blank sort of headspace where he was finally free of his thoughts. And then his new companion broke him out of it.

“I asked Kalyh, but I must ask you as well...are we to expect any issue with our presence within your castle?” His voice was very low, his tone so serious it stopped Link’s movements.

“No, Jalin,” he assured him. “Queen Zelda is nothing like the Kings before her. She is welcoming to any ally, regardless of the past. She is well aware of who you all are and will make arrangements accordingly. But I must warn you that our castle is compromised to a certain degree.”

Jalin nodded with a grim expression. He pulled down his cowl, clearly a show of trust and Link gladly took it as one. His sharp jaw held evidence of graying stubble and the triangles on his chin were faded and dull. “Kalyh told us to hold our tongues while there.”

“Just be sure you thoroughly check where ever you decide to speak freely,” Link suggested, tossing a newly sharpened sword aside to pick up the next.

Suddenly, Jalin reached out and grasped Link’s shoulder, pulling him closer amidst the noisy crowd of Order members around them. “Should anything go wrong, Link, I want you to know that the allegiance of the Order will still stay with you. Whatever the future brings, we are all on the same side. Please don’t repeat these words to anyone else.”

And then, Jalin let go with a bow of his head and left Link to sit in shock. He watched the Sheikah go, weaving through his comrades like a wisp of smoke and disappearing through the doorway.

What in the name of the Goddesses was that?

More people asked for his help so he didn’t have time to dwell on it. As the light started to die from the windows, Sheik came looking for him as he helped Lanaia and two of her sisters sort through stacks of rations. Link’s heart sputtered at the sight of his companion but he forced away the tirade of thoughts that threatened to scatter his focus.

Hold it together. Hold it together.

“It is time for me to activate the Portal,” he said quietly, casting his eyes around the room as everyone seemed to notice him. Looking uncomfortable, Sheik nodded for Link to follow him.

They didn’t speak in the hallways until they reached the empty corridor before the stairs and Sheik paused, looking more unsure than Link would’ve liked.

He couldn’t have stopped himself even if he had actually put forth the effort – Link reached out to grip Sheik’s shoulder and the Congruence bloomed between them immediately. It filled Link up and he visibly saw Sheik react, the tension leaving his shoulders and jaw. He recalled what the book had said about sharing power so he focused on directing all the positivity he could towards Sheik.
“Link,” he started, eyes like the molten depths of Death Mountain. The expression twisted Link’s insides to desperately tight knots. “I want to tell you…what I was going to say before I died.”

Link’s breath caught in his throat and heart shuddered in his chest. The reaction jittered through their connection and Link suddenly felt incredibly exposed.

You were my...

No. He didn’t want to know.

He wanted Sheik to shut up, go down the stairs, save the day, stay alive.

Link wasn’t ready to hear the words because he still didn’t know if they would live up to the pressure that had been building beneath them for weeks. But then he had to know – what if they didn’t make it through the Portal? What if something terrible happened and they both died, things still unspoken like Kalyh had revealed earlier.

Now wasn’t the time.

It will never be the time, Kalyh’s voice reminded him.

And she was right. Link needed to contend with the voices and the words he had survived the Nether with.

You were my…

“I don’t know what’s going to happen down there. Maybe nothing. Maybe just some monsters. Maybe something lethal,” Sheik said slowly, hand reaching up to pull Link’s from its station on the Sheikah’s shoulder and lace their fingers together, the energy between them doubling in response. “But I at least want to say it now, before we face all these unknowns. I don’t want to die again, half of my sentence unfinished.”

The idea sent tangible pain through Link’s body and he squeezed the hand in his and tried to convey every version of that won’t happen he could.

“You were mine,” he said gently. “You are mine. You always were. But if you, somehow, did not know that after all we’ve been through…now you do.”

Sheik’s hand squeezed Link’s as dizzying warmth and power radiated through his body, stronger than even the awakening of their Congruence. Link almost lost his balance to the weight of it, breath leaving him at the mixture of words and emotions and confusion.

Then Sheik pulled away, eyes deep with an affection Link could hardly handle being on the receiving end of. He turned and went down the stairs, leaving Link to find his composure again.

And it took a few minutes.

Link pressed his back against the cool, stone wall, listening to the murmur of voices slowly floating closer and only thinking how much of an imbecile he was.

All of his answers had been laid before him for the past three years. He had spent so much time
evading what he was feeling, what was going on between them but it had grown nonetheless.

And Link had to laugh because, yes, he had known. All along, in fact. Whether it was a kind word or a reassuring glance or a firm hand on his shoulder, Link had always known that in a way he couldn’t even begin to describe.

_You were mine._

Their Congruence wasn’t just some _coincidence._

There was a reason they had gravitated towards one another like magnets after the first day they met. There was a reason they fought tooth and nail and prophecy to stay together. There was a reason only Sheik could calm the tempest of Link’s mind. There was a reason only Link could help Sheik grieve and fight the monster inside of him.

They were Congruent.

They were bound.

They were soulmates.

The reality of it resounded through him like a rumble of thunder or a final tumbler clicking into place and it was almost as though his vision had cleared out of a haze he had never noticed. The Congruence sparked in his head and he felt a tug at the base of his skull, like a string was tied there and the person at the other end was getting impatient.

_Comme on, Link._

And for one surreal moment, Link was somewhere else, lost in a swell of true happiness he couldn’t recall the last time he felt. He held onto the words in his head and the reality that their thoughts and feelings were aligned and identical.

Maybe Link didn’t truly understand its full nature just yet but he had finally allowed himself to acknowledge and accept it. And he finally knew that Sheik felt the same things.

A chorus of footsteps sobered him up as Order members turned the corner, ready to descend the stairs and offer backup. He took that as his cue to focus, descending the steps two at a time.

Sheik was already situated in front of the door, two hands against the stone surface and a tension in his shoulders Link didn’t like. Kalyh, who had assumedly been waiting impatiently for them, stood nearby with her sword already drawn and cowl up like she was ready for an army of monsters to come barreling through the door – and considering their track record Link couldn’t blame her.

He took his place next to her as the Order and Gerudo readied themselves at the foot of the stairs, ready to leap into action if needed.

Now it was all up to Sheik.

For the first few minutes nothing happened that anyone could really see. Sheik, clearly, was doing _something_ judging by the tightening muscles in his shoulders and the repeated Sheikah words. The spells sounded so very different then all of the spoken Sheikah Link had listened to for the past week. And it wasn’t just that it sounded ancient – there was something sharp and caustic about the
consonants, the vowels ringing like bells in the chamber.

It reminded Link of what Hexa had sounded like the first time he had heard it used.

Then, in an explosion of sound and electric red, ancient markings threaded through the door like lightning, bringing the entire thing to life. They all jumped at the suddenness and Kalyh swore in Sheikah. “How in the name of Din was he able to open the first seal so quickly?”

It almost looked like Sheik’s hands were on fire, light spilling off him in waves of Nether energy. Link felt his throat close up in fear that perhaps Sheik would lose control again and turn on them all.

But there was control in the way he used it, the currents of power moving with purpose as they rotated in and out of the door at a steady rhythm. It didn’t take long for another eruption of light to blind them all momentarily, a consistent hum filling their ears that sounded more dangerous than Link would’ve liked.

Sheik’s whole body shook now – not in fear but in a struggle to contain the reaction he was triggering. Link felt an overwhelming tumble of fear and awe, worried for his companion’s condition and incredulous to how anyone that didn’t possess powers like Sheik could have possibly performed such a procedure.

With a ground-shaking shudder, the door split in half with a painful crack, and slid apart to reveal a reflective, shimmering surface like a mirror, but it seemed to ripple slightly as those it was part silk fabric. It reflected the entire chamber and Link could see the shining clone of the pool and Sheik’s staggered form on its surface.

Before he even realized he was moving, Link was next to his companion, steadying him with a firm grasp. Sheik’s skin and clothes were smoking from unseen fire and Link winced at the heat that met his palms. The expression of pain on the Sheikah’s face sent him into a frenzy of worry.

“Sheik,” Link whispered, “are you okay?”

Sheik allowed himself to lean heavily into Link’s half embrace and, after a moment of deep breaths, he nodded and opened his eyes. They were bloodshot now, but acutely aware and present.

“This power is so painful,” he breathed, words only audible to Link. Through their contact, some of that bite tagged on the end of their Congruence and Link cringed at it. It was a sharp ache between his eyes, deep into his skull, and he knew Sheik felt it far more intensely than that.

“You should go to pool,” Link suggested.

Sheik shook his head, standing upright and balanced. The pain was pushed away to a dull throb and us Kalyh joined them in front of the Portal.

They all stood in silence as the surface shivered at invisible wind and nothing came forth through the Portal. A few minutes passed and, although no one seemed to relax, the rest of the onlookers convened before it as well.

“I think the three of us should scout ahead and see what lies beyond this…before we bring in a large amount of people. It will only lead to confusion,” Link suggested quietly.
“Four,” Jalin butted in, stepping next to Kalyh.

“Jalin,” Kalyh started but Link shook his head.

“Four is fine.” Link didn’t know why, but since his conversation with the man and the respect he felt for a reason he couldn’t identify, he thought it better having him accompany them. “Let’s just get this over with. We need to return to the castle.”

Despite the gut-wrenching feeling that told him otherwise, Link went through first before anyone could stop him. Because he was at the center of prophecy so, in a way, it protected him.

Well, at least he *hoped* it did.

Walking through the Portal was like stepping through a sheet of ice and into a void, like he didn’t exist for a moment. Link pushed through to the other side with a great, involuntary shudder and blinked in the dim light available to his eyes.

The Portal opened up out of a previously blank wall in a chamber he had once found under the Shadow Temple and the grave of the King. His presence had summoned fire to the one torch in the room and a musky, sour smell invaded his nose. Markings covered the wall in ancient Hylian and various bones littered the stone floor. He knew, beyond the doorway directly in front of him, that monsters had once lurked there during the war.

And, judging by the twisted feeling in his chest, Link knew something still lay ahead.

Sheik came through next, then Kalyh, then Jalin. They stayed silent, sharing troubled looks as Link gestured forward. Everyone felt it, he was sure. The dark entity beyond the door seemed to swell in power, responding to their presence.

*It feels familiar, Link,* was pushed into his head.

He cast Sheik a questioning look in the flickering torchlight.

*Focus,* he insisted. *It feels like…*

But Link didn’t get a chance to agree; a deep roar filled the chamber and the ground shook beneath their feet. Something massive was moving behind the doorway, the chamber they stood in only putting twenty feet between them and whatever lay ahead.

Link knew what Sheik had been implying – behind that door was a Nether beast. And if there was an opinion to trust in the business of all things Nether, it was Sheik’s.

There was the loud boom of impact and pieces of ceiling broke away and smashed to the old stone floor. With every sound it made, the size and power of the beast became more and more clear in Link’s mind. Clearly, it was trying to collapse the wall between them, too large to get through the door.

“Anyone want to offer up an idea of what this is before it gets through the wall?” Kalyh shouted over the boom of another impact. The marked walls shuddered around them and Link started to worry the beast might collapse the entire underground.

“It’s a beast of the Nether!” Sheik shouted over the crunch of surrendering stone.
“Little worms in the hole!” the creature roared, cutting off anything else Sheik was going to say. “Come out and give me your bones!”

“We have to kill it, whatever it is,” Kalyh insisted. “If it gets through the Portal…both of you know more about these things than we –”

An enormous section of wall, abandoned its post and slammed to the floor with an concussive force that almost knocked the party off their feet. It was then, in the dim light, they could see what they were facing.

The creature was at least eight men tall, huge and lumbering with angry red skin and claws like scalping knives. Its face was just a mouth, large and gaping with teeth like needles. There were no eyes to be seen until the dust settled – three enormous white eyes glinted from inside its mouth.

Oh, how Link wished they could’ve skipped meeting all of the creatures they had read about.

“This is a Mrith!” Link shouted as the creature grappled with more stone and ripped it nosily from the wall. “Bone-eating troll!”

“You wouldn’t happen to know how to kill it, would you?” Kalyh snapped back as the four of them drew back in a tight group.

“We’ve never seen one,” Sheik said, tugging Link back impulsively, as though he wasn’t as far away from the monster as they all could be. “And there wasn’t much in the records about them.”

“My recommendation is we attack it now. We can use what’s left of the wall as cover if we need it,” Link suggested, anticipation of battle setting him on edge.

Kalyh started with, “I don’t think –”

“He’s right,” Sheik interrupted, sounding very much like he didn’t want Link to be right. “If we don’t start attacking the Mrith is going to cave us in.”

“Kalyh and Sheik, slip past it to the other side of that chamber. Jalin and I will keep it distracted while you both attack from behind. I think we need to damage its eyes…which are in a great spot, I’m sure you’ve noticed,” Link ordered, struggling to be heard over another roar and more falling stone. There wasn’t going to be much wall left very soon if they didn’t hurry.

“I’ll climb up its back and take out the eyes,” Kalyh confirmed, sheathing her sword and opting instead for two daggers Link presumed she would use to “climb” with. And it made the most sense considering she was the lightest and most likely the most nimble of their group.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Kalyh and Sheik, in a tandem show of agility, sprinted to the collapsing wall and vaulted over to the other side. The Mrith didn’t even see them – with a shared nod, he and Jalin surged forward with their loudest battle cries, catching the creature’s attention and wrath.

“Give me bones!” it snarled, a large hand coming down over the wall and barely missing Jalin’s shoulder as they slipped through the doorway to slash at the beast’s legs. The Mrith screamed an awful and deafening sound, swatting at them and catching Jalin’s leg this time. He was thrown
against the frame of the entryway with a yell and the tip of the beast’s talon sliced from the side of Link’s neck down to his pauldron.

Despite the sharp sting of pain, he hacked again at the creature’s leg as more detail appeared to his adjusting eyes. The Mrith was wearing what looked like armor made of tree bark layered on just its groin, shoulders, and arms. The angry red skin made it hard to see if they were even maiming the monster but splashes of blood on ancient stone floor at his feet alluded to the damage he was earning.

Link leapt out of the path of another swat and pulled Jalin to his feet as he limped from what was clearly a break. They both nearly lost their heads as Link helped the Sheikah back into the previous chamber and hopefully out the way of falling debris. Another roar reverberated through the chamber as he sprinted back to the fight to find the Mrith flailing in confusion as Kalyh scaled up its back one dagger at a time.

Taking his opportunity, Link swung his sword deeply into the beast’s kneecap and earned a quick retaliation that sent him flying backward to collide with the wall. For once, Link avoided slamming his head as well and scrambled forward again between the Mrith’s enormous legs, moving just in time to avoid a brilliant jet of flame from Sheik that scorched the monster’s left calf. The putrid smell of burning flesh filled the air, the fire lighting up the last of Kalyh’s journey to its head.

Link counted himself lucky that he had never stumbled across a Mrith during his time in the Nether – with the four (well, three) of them it was definitely manageable but alone he would’ve been doomed.

Sheik cut off the flame, hands still smoking as he drew his sword once more and almost cut the Mrith’s left arm off. An even louder bellow rang painfully through the chamber as Kalyh seemed to finally meet her mark and plunged her dagger into the top of its skull.

It gave one more roar before it was clear the Mrith was going to fall. It wobbled and groaned like a wounded animal, large, mutilated arms swinging in the air around it as Kalyh bailed and rolled to the ground not far from them. And then, with one last moan, it fell forward into the crumbling wall, bringing the rest of it down with it in an explosion of rocks and dust.

“I opted to not stick my hand in its mouth. I hope you understand,” Kalyh told them after the noise settled, wiping her daggers at her knee and sheathing them on her back.

“You’re allowed creative freedom,” Link offered. “At least it’s dead.”

“Where is Jalin?” Kalyh demanded suddenly, looking around in worry.

They moved quickly, climbing over chunks of wall and the arm and leg of the now dead Mrith. Jalin was on the far side of the chamber wrapping his knee.

“Next time warn me when you are going to drop a bone-eating Nether troll on me?” he complained as Kalyh sighed in relief and went to his side to help.

“You two should scout ahead, just in case,” Kalyh said over her shoulder. “I’ll get Jalin to the pool and send everyone else through.”

Link nodded and sheathed the Moon Blade, throwing the Mrith another disgusted look. “I wonder how it even found its way in here.”
“Anything can pass through the pedestal,” Sheik sighed. “I hope the castle is still safe.”

They moved on through the chamber to the warping pedestal, nothing to impede their pace. When they were tossed up through the hole and onto damp grass, nothing but scant moonlight illuminated the gravestones. The air smelt clean and the graveyard felt calm. There were no Nether beasts and Link breathed a sigh of relief despite the half-moon above them to mark the approaching full.

Link had never been so glad to be back in the heart of Hyrule; Death Mountain towered above them but was now comically dwarfed in his mind by the mountain they had just left behind.

“And here I thought you had finally managed to get out of a fight unscathed,” Sheik said in an exasperated tone.

Link shifted his eyes from the mountain to see Sheik pulling off his pauldron to examine the long gash along the crook of his neck and shoulder. He was cast a disapproving look when Link just shrugged, the movement purposely disrupting his companion’s inspection.

“Everyone knows how perfect you are, Sheik,” Link quipped, settling his arm so Sheik could have his way. “You don’t need to rub it in by pointing out my flaws.”

The Sheikah just let out a dramatic sigh and pressed a firm hand to the wound, whispering a quick healing spell that created a domino effect of jittery Congruence between them. Link’s eyes fell closed against his will and, for just a moment, it was just the two of them isolated from the entire world and wrapped in reassuring warmth.

Kalyh emerged from the warp pedestal, Jalin right behind her, and the moment was broken.

Pair by pair, the Order joined them with wide and cautious eyes. Despite the fact they were all trained warriors, Link still felt a sense of protectiveness over them like they were refugees…and really, they still were. The Order of Hexa had no true home. He hoped Hyrule could maybe offer that to them after the war.

He also hoped tensions didn’t explode once they arrived at the castle.

“I suggest we use our passage to Zelda’s study,” Link said quietly, pulling Sheik from the group of Order members and Gerudo redistributing their equipment in different packs for the trek. “I am still concerned about security and I think it’s better that we keep this group away from the rest of the castle.”

Sheik nodded, shooting a glance to Kalyh who busy speaking with Jalin, eyes darting around her people with the surprising protectiveness of a mother. “She is not going to like being hidden in the castle.”

“She knows what is at stake,” Link interjected. “We need to keep them hidden. Foursky knows about Kalyh. If it reaches him that the words are in the castle…”

Sheik nodded again, this time begrudgingly. “You’re right. We will have to house them in the south wing. We need to move the few people living there now and block off the area.”

“I’ll travel ahead and prepare.”
Objection passed through Sheik’s eyes and Link saw it coming from a mile away.

“Link –”

“We need to get them seamlessly into the castle and they still need a guide. This is the only way. Don’t argue with me, Sheik,” Link cut in, giving him a stern look.

“I don’t like the idea of you going through the field alone. We don’t know what is out there since the Nether was opened,” he argued anyway.

“Give me three hour’s head start. We can have them in the castle by dawn. Whatever is out there can’t be worse than what I dealt with in the Nether,” Link insisted. “You forget I spent days there alone.”

A darkness passed Sheik’s gaze, replaced by a deep worry that made Link want to stay only to wipe it off his face. “Link…”

“Stop arguing with me when you know I’m right.”

“Will you at least take Jalin with you?” Sheik pleaded.

“Fine. I will take Jalin. Happy?”

“No,” Sheik sighed, reaching out and touching his arm lightly. Congruence flared lightly at the touch and Link fought to keep his eyes open. “Please don’t get yourself killed.”

“You too.” Link wanted to cringe as he thought about what would happen if he did.

The moment ended as Kalyh joined them with a very distinct now what? on her face. They informed her of the plan and, after more arguments from Kalyh that sounded like Sheik’s objections, it was decided that Link would have his way and that he and Jalin would start for the castle.

They set off through the graveyard, Link glancing back just once to find Sheik watching them go and he tried to kill the sudden anxiety that barreled through his mind at being separated.

Link still hadn’t told him the truth about Congruent and Sheik still hadn’t asked. Sheik had more-or-less admitted his feelings but Link still hadn’t given a response to their brief moment on the stairs.

Leaving so much unsaid scared him. Leaving Sheik scared him.

Kakariko was still and dark as they wove through the buildings. Despite the normal, peaceful feeling that sounded them, there were also signs of battle among the village. Broken arrows, scorched walls, damaged fences…it was clear there had been numerous attacks. As they reached the pass to the fields, there were temporary shacks set up for Royal troops, obviously sent to defend the village.

The field was empty and quiet, a heavy summer mist blanketing the grass.

“It feels like the calm before the storm,” Jalin said, moving in a quiet way that reminded him of
Sheik; always alert, always focused, always ready for battle.

As they crossed the Zora River, the castle glowed far in the distance, tucked against the mountains and a good eight hours walk from them. It looked so peaceful from where they were; Link hoped that was the case when they arrived.

“We should stay on alert,” Link suggested, drawing his sword and leaning it against his shoulder. Jalin followed suit and they fell into a wary quiet while they walked.

It gave Link plenty of time to think.

You were mine.

You are mine. You always were. But if you, somehow, did not know that after all we’ve been through...now you do.

Sheik had revealed feelings he had been harboring for...Link didn’t even know when it had started. But Link knew, although he hadn’t realized it until now, he had been feeling that way since they became comrades in the war. And now with all the information in front of him Link wanted to punch himself in the face for wasting all of that time.

He and Sheik had naturally gravitated to one another, had devoted all of their time to the other, yet when the chance presented itself after the war they had both been too hesitant to say a word about what it all meant. War, by its nature, deterred emotional investments and they had both been so near death so many times – to focus on anything more than staying alive was a challenge.

So, what did they do now? Was Link supposed to do something given what he now knew? Should he have said something before he left? Did Sheik know how hopeless Link was for him? Did he realize that Link couldn’t, emotionally and now physically, live without him?

He wanted to panic.

Feeling just like he did when Malon confessed to him, Link found himself stranded and out of his depth. A magically binding contract didn’t teach him how to deal with romance and he couldn’t even begin to unravel himself to ask someone else for advice. Link had missed so many vital years – he felt like a tiny Hylian dressed as a Kokiri again and this wasn’t a monster five times his size to rid the world of. This was somehow almost worse. He didn’t even know where to begin.

And there wasn’t enough time for him to figure it all out.

Link had to think about the war now. The prophecy. The future.

What was their strategy now, with all the information they had gained? He couldn’t fit everything together in his mind. The castle was compromised and Link started to wonder if, maybe, the Order had been better in the desert. But the castle still had an army defending it and, praying that the words stayed only in Kalyh’s head, that army would continue defending it.

Link was too tired to figure it all out.

So he focused on the immediate future; he pushed everything else out of his mind. They needed to make thirty-four people not exist. He needed to help Zelda plan and budget a war. He would finally fulfill his role as General and, while he wasn’t afraid to command an army, he was commanding an
“Do you know how much Vaspra Kalyh has?” Link asked after a while, only an hour or so from the passage through the castle wall.

Jalin shook his head. “There was once a point that we all had some of it to aid our magic when Foursky’s armies would attack but since the amount has dwindled and Kalyh being the only user of the words…”

“Why has she taught no one else?”

“It is the way of the Order for only one to know the words. It is what keeps them safe,” Jalin explained. “When my brother chose her as successor, he barely had a chance to teach them to her before he died. That is how closely we guard them; until our last breath.”

“Kafei was your brother?” Link asked in surprise. “Were you not to be his successor?”

“Kafei saw something in her he did not see in me. I spent much time being bitter over it, but I serve the Order. My brother made his decision for a reason so I must accept it and serve her. Truth be told, I am glad to not have such a burden. The words…do things to people,” Jalin explained carefully, like he was skirting something sensitive.

“What do they do?” Link pressed.

“The power of them…I watched them change my brother. They changed Kalyh, too. They have the power to corrupt,” Jalin said, voice going tight.

“Are you trying to say Kalyh is being corrupted by the words?” He thought back to Jalin’s words in the armory, trying to piece them together with what he was learning now. Did Jalin think something would happen to Kalyh considering the coming war? “Why did you give me that warning in Vrika? Tell me what you’re not saying.”

“Kalyh changed a few months ago,” Jalin said. “We had been living in the valleys south of the desert, gaining intelligence on Foursky – he was becoming weaker and weaker without Vaspra and we were coming close to defeating him finally. One day, Kalyh came back from a scout and told us we were going to Vrika, that Foursky planned to invade Hyrule and that we would defeat him there instead of Termina. We were to wait in Vrika and for what…none of us really knew.”

Link’s head snapped over to him, furrowing his brows. “Why was she so resistant to the idea of helping us if she planned to fight regardless?”

Jalin gave him a dark look. “She was vetting you both, testing your allegiances. We can no longer trust anyone at face value. When we first arrived in Vrika, Kalyh and I traveled alone to the library to destroy the text containing the procedure to learn the words. And then you and Sheik arrived and Kalyh…I had never seen her like that. She ordered me to follow you both, only saying that she had something to attend to. I do not know where she went, but when she returned we were told to remain in Vrika until you both arrived to open the Portal. She knew you would seek out the words and travel to Vrika, especially once she learned Sheik was alive and could guide you.”

Link took a moment to digest this information. He couldn’t shake the annoyance that Kalyh had, in some ways, played them the entire time they had been there. But had Jalin said those words in the armory back in Vrika because he was becoming unsure of her intentions? So what was Link
supposed to think now? Her hatred for Foursky and Evanna was true, he didn’t doubt, but what was her personal agenda? But what if her decisions became more...self-serving?

Almost as though he could sense Link’s misgivings, Jalin added, “I have told you these things not because I do not trust our leader, but because I simply do not know everything that is to come. Kalyh, like Kafei, keeps secrets and it is very likely they are dangerous secrets to have. She has said the less people who know, the safer everyone is. I have never seen her so committed so I do not doubt her and neither should you. My warning back in Vrika...Kalyh is at the center of this war, just as you and Sheik are. I need to know the Order will be safe should she fall.”

The words settled between them as the castle stretched above, the passage only another half hour’s walk. Link turned the words over in his head, wondering what Kalyh could be hiding.

Jalin trusted her; did Link?

They crept through the dark, moving fast to evade the sentries and pressing against the wall until they reached the passage. It was as they moved down the damp walkway that Link suddenly remembered the message written on the wall in Sheikah. Panic flushed through his mind – he could not let Jalin or any of the Order members see it. Link doubted they would be as understanding as Sheik was.

Before reaching the words, he positioned himself to block them, scraping his gauntlet over the message as much as he could. When they moved past it he gave one quick glance backward and saw he had done well to destroy what was left of the message and the eye.

Well, there was one crisis averted.

They reached the closet, a warm light coming from the study despite the nearing dawn; had Zelda left a candle lit? But as they edged out of the closet and into the main room, Link found Zelda nodding off at her desk over a mess of parchment, quill still loosely sitting in her hand.

The sight warmed him up and, despite Jalin’s presence, he couldn’t help but loudly say, “Zelda! We’re back!”

And she, in an unsurprising turn of events, didn’t seem to appreciate it as much as he did.

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I can’t even count how many times I planned to split this chapter up and then decided not to. I ultimately decided that I needed to finish things up at the castle, not the field, to keep the momentum through more exposition. I hope it didn’t drag too terribly.

Also, here is some gay. I hope you liked it.

A thousands thank you’s to all the sweet, supportive, amazing people who have been reading and reviewing and saying such nice things. It has made a very trying week much better.

I didn’t say anything about it last chapter because I knew I’d go on for a century about it so I’ll just say one thing now: I literally cried over Breath of the Wild and it is everything I ever wanted ever.
XXVIII.

It was somewhere between waking up all the guests in the south wing (who were not happy, for anyone who cared to know) to move to the west wing and waiting tiredly in Zelda’s study that she finally apologized for giving Link a black eye. After accommodations had been made and rooms made empty for the arriving Sheikah, Zelda properly greeted Jalin despite being in just a white nightdress and purple cloak. But the Queen really never cared about appearances and Jalin looked one part surprised and one part satisfied with how unlike royalty she was.

As they sat in the quiet of her dim study, she finally hugged Link and let out a sigh of relief it felt like she’d been holding in since they left for the desert.

“I am so glad you are okay,” she said quietly, after he had filled her in on most of the specifics he could with Jalin sitting right there. Link determined he would keep the new information he had gained about Kalyh to himself for the time being; although Jalin hadn’t explicitly told him not to share the story, it was implied somehow during their conversation in the field.

Soft hands held Link’s face, drawing his thoughts away from Kalyh as Zelda finished healing his bruise with a gentle expression.

“You will be happy to know you’ve missed little excitement…well, aside from the terrible Nether monsters descending upon Hyrule.”

“I was worried they would attack the castle,” Link said with a grim nod.

“It’s hard to plan for a war when something is being burned by acid or set on fire by giant, rotting wolves,” she conceded with a bemused expression. “I was able to decipher the message and my premonition was, unfortunately, the same...the full moon is only two weeks away, Link.”

“I was hoping we were wrong,” he mumbled, rubbing at his face and feeling terribly exhausted.

“The Goddesses are adamant we know about this one event…I do not know, however, if they intend for us to change it or prepare for it.”

The consideration made Link’s blood run cold; was Zelda actually considering the possibility that the premonition had to pass? He couldn’t accept that. While Link knew she was always methodical about interpreting premonitions, prepared for all possibilities and outcomes, he felt a spike of anger that she wasn’t as obstinate about it not happening as he was.

Before Link could argue with her, noise came from the closet and Sheik emerged half-covered in blood. Horror gripped Link as he leapt to his feet and met the Sheikah halfway out of the closet before gripping his shoulders and demanding what had happened.

“I am fine, Link,” Sheik assured him, eyes smiling a bit in relief as the Congruence shivering between them. And upon closer investigation Link noticed the blood looked thicker and smelled like rot.“Baltas. Had to wrestle a few. They seem to really like me.”
There was sound approaching from farther back in the closet and Sheik took the moment to whisper, “I’m glad you erased the message – I had forgotten about it. If they had seen it…”

Link gave a nod to Sheik’s grim look of understanding.

Kalyh then appeared beside them, her hand glued to the hilt of her sword, looking around much like a wild animal. She spotted Jalin with a bit of relief but immediately went still as Zelda approached them.

“Welcome back to Hyrule, Kalyh,” she said calmly in, thankfully, a voice that was not completely Queen-like but formal enough. “It is an honor to meet you and a honor to have you and your people here.”

Kalyh gave her a wide-eyed stare as Zelda gave a low, respectful bow, as though she was convinced she was hallucinating. Watching the Sheikah look so bewildered almost made Link laugh as she seemed to determine if she was going to be offended or accepting.

There was no way Kalyh was going to be polite or return the gesture. This was Kalyh. This was the woman who held fast to the grudges of her people, to the long hatred towards the Royal Family.

But then she did.

“Thank you for allowing us refuge here, Queen Zelda,” Kalyh replied after stretch of uncertain silence, bowing back just enough to be considered decent.

The rest of the Order filled the closet and Link couldn’t help but find the entire thing very silly. The last of the Sheikah race was standing in the closet of Zelda’s study and that was the point he began to realize just how exhausted he really was. Also, his hand was still on Sheik’s arm.

Sleep. Link needed sleep.

Everything following that was the part of being under Zelda’s command that Link had a hard time tolerating. He needed to help coordinate room assignments and food and water and two completely separate rooms for their gear and supplies – having Sheikah armor and weapons suddenly appear in the castle’s armory would raise a lot of questions. It wasn’t until dawn that everyone managed to get settled in and quiet.

And Link didn’t know what to do with himself after that.

He wasn’t injured save a few minor scrapes but his body ached to the degree that even sitting was too much. He bathed, found clean clothes, devoured food, drank an obscene amount of water…but when Link went to his bed, he could only lay down for five minutes before he was back up.

It was too bright, even despite the drapes blocking the sun from his eyes. Maids and other loud-voiced people bustled down the halls outside his room and it all felt just too ridiculous.

Didn’t they know what was coming? How could they carry on their lives with all the terrible things that had been happening? Weren’t they having nightmares or constantly at the cusp of anxiety attacks over the horrors and…?

No. They weren’t. They had no idea what had happened in the past month. They didn’t know what
was coming. They didn’t have to think about the things that had happened because, to them, *nothing* had happened. There were no nightmares or meltdowns for them if left to the mercy of their own thoughts for too long.

Link couldn’t imagine the bliss of such ignorance.

A few more minutes of fruitless effort to sleep and he shuffled to the library because he had no idea where to find a place any quieter. It really shouldn’t have surprised him to find Sheik was already there with his nose in a book.

Red eyes appraised him from the couch and, if Link had not been so impossibly tired, maybe he would’ve cared more about the affection that was now permanently affixed to that gaze. Well, he *did* care. But he also wanted quiet and Sheik being there was definitely an enormous bonus.

“Link, you should –”

But Link held up a hand to quiet him and tiredly crossed the room to the window. He shut it and pulled the drapes closed, earning a sigh from Sheik as most of the light was taken from the room. Unable to even offer an apology, Link slumped onto the other end of the couch and leaned back with a tired sigh. He had finally found silence.

Well, almost.

“Some people need light to read,” Sheik commented.

“Some people need quiet to sleep,” Link replied. The Congruence was slow and warm between them, luring him closer to unconsciousness.

Here they were, back on the couch in the library where everything had started in the first place. Now that they had returned and were (mostly) safe, true exhaustion set in and Link finally felt the tension he’d been carrying for a month unravel just a little.

“You could order the maids out your particular hallway,” Sheik offered after the distinct sound of a book snapping shut.

“I don’t like throwing my weight around like you do.”

“What else is weight for?”

Link snorted. It could be a month ago. It could be a normal day before Evanna and Foursky and Vaspra and the Nether. Link could have been up all night doing something stupid and taken refuge in the library to block out the loud castle. It was just him taking over the couch, disturbing Sheik’s reading, and poking fun.

“Are you going to let me sleep or not?” Link groaned, pretending to be annoyed but really loving every little nudge. Even without touching, Congruence was tangible and comforting.

“Well, I suppose so, considering you are kicking me out,” Sheik said with a hint of amusement. Weight started to leave the couch and without thinking, Link reached out and grabbed the Sheikah’s arm.

“Don’t leave,” was all he could manage as their bond flared at contact. His brain was too sleep-
addled to feel embarrassed or apologize. Because now Link knew how Sheik felt and clinging a bit on
the eve of war wasn’t necessarily out-of-line anymore. Because Link had known, somewhere in
his slow mind, that Sheik would be in the library with the same thought as him: get away from all
these normal people with their normal lives.

Link, in some ways, had counted on it. Because, no matter which way he spun it, he knew he
would only find sleep that morning if Sheik was beside him.

“Just…stay?” For a moment Link felt like it was post-war all over again and he needed someone to
keep him tethered to reality. But then he knew he had every right to the request; war was coming
and they had to eventually contend with everything between. But right now he wasn’t asking for
anything more, anything less – just a living, breathing Sheikah beside him.

Sheik’s eyes were deep red and full of warm emotion and Link could feel all sorts of things that
weren’t being said leak through their connection. There was an openness there that Link hadn’t had
a chance to fully appreciate.

Link knew – if they survived the war in one piece – there was no way he could walk away from
what he was staring at. Only on pain of death, which had more meanings than just that one.

“Of course,” was all Sheik said, sitting back down.

And for a very tired and very distressed moment, Link felt like he should say something. He didn’t
know what – and honestly what words could possibly surmise and equate to everything that had
happened between them? Just like his walk through the field with Jalin, Link didn’t know what to
do or say or think. He just knew they cared about each other and they were bonded. Permanently.

Sheik still hadn’t really asked him what the book had said and Link didn’t know if he wanted to tell
him. Because he didn’t want the truth about Congruence to change what they were, to cast yet
another shadow of doom over an already gray future.

Bonded.

Soulmates.

Congruent.

If one subject of Congruence dies, the other dies as well.

Link felt as though if he said the words out loud, they would break the silence of the room, break
the calm, break him. He wanted to check out for a few hours, be just as blissfully unaware as the
maids and butlers.

So Link bit his tongue and reached down to lace their fingers together, the energy it caused
shooting down his arm and clouding his mind in a delicious way. Long, warm fingers twined
around his without hesitation. Link closed his eyes to the caress of Congruence and the sense of
comfort and security he only seemed to find anymore with Sheik.

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Link was woken up a little after noon by the last person he wanted to see: Duchess Morsa.
“The Queen requested your presence in the map room, Guardsman,” she said in a terrible sing-song voice that could’ve woken him from death. She was perched next to him on the couch far, too close for his liking as he jumped back into the waking world. “You shouldn’t sleep so late into the day! When did you go to bed? And why are you sleeping in the library?”

It took every fiber in his being to not snap at her; Link had no time for her questions and no patience to play escort.

“Uh, long night,” he mumbled back, struggling to his feet and checking for his weapons, which were no longer on his person. “Where are my…?”

Morsa grinned like he had said something funny and pointed to the table by the now open window. “You don’t even know where you put your own equipment? How much did you drink, Guardsman?”

Link bit back the groan of irritation her comment brought on. Maybe it was time to start to visiting that habit now that he was back in the castle and stuck with her. Link had been so wiped he hadn’t even woken up when Sheik must have rid him of the uncomfortable gear at some point during the morning. And he worked incredibly hard to keep the ideas that summoned out of his head while in her presence.

“How was the desert?” Morsa pressed, now lounged on the couch as though he were there to entertain her.

“Hot,” was all Link said, trying to get his equipment back on as fast as he could so he could excuse himself from the room.

Morsa giggled at him. “I wish I could’ve seen it. My father won’t let me go to the desert. He doesn’t trust the Gerudo.”

A flash of sadness passed through him as he realized that it was entirely possible no one knew about the massacre of the Gerudo. Zelda was probably aware – she kept good intelligence in even the worst of times – but he doubted the information would be shared with the rest of the castle just yet. And the inherit racism too many Hylians held towards the Gerudo would leave the tragedy without the respect it deserved.

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“Trust me,” Link assured her. “You don’t want to see the desert.”

He bowed quickly, excusing himself before Morsa could demand an escort, and made his way to the map room. Dealing with the Duchess was more aggravating than he could imagine now with the war only two weeks away. And she was far too nosy; he would need to warn Zelda that the girl would inevitably try to find out why the south wing was blocked off to everyone but the three of them.

As he made his way through the winding corridors he knew so well, Link could finally sense what he assumed Sheik had felt all along – there was something there in the castle that wasn’t entirely Hylian. It shifted around, too foggy to pin down to one area. It made him uneasy as he crossed the silent and dark throne room to the door beyond it.

Zelda, Sheik, and Kalyh were already inside, eyes flickering to him as he shut the heavy door behind him.
“The Hero has awakened,” Zelda teased softly. But Link could see the terrible stress forming lines on her forehead. Her hair was pulled back and out of her face which was bare and tired-looking. He wondered if Zelda had slept at all. Even despite the rest he had gotten, Link felt slow and exhausted as he took his seat on her other side, across from Sheik and Kalyh. Stacks of parchment and maps and inventories were scattered around the table in a mess that stressed Link out just looking at it.

“You look like you barely slept, Link.”

He waved her off, rubbing his face to wake himself up more, and taking the cup of coffee Zelda offered him. Link took the moment to study the paperwork that was in front of him – it was an entire registry on every garrison of the Royal army, updated just that morning.

This was his army.

Link pushed away the image of his premonition with a shake of his head.

“I assume they’ve gotten you up to speed on everything?” Link asked Zelda, moving the papers to the side; he’d deal with that much later.

Zelda nodded. “And we have reached some agreements about the Order’s life for the next two weeks. We will use the old enclosed arena so they can get out and train. We will have to be very careful about getting people to and from that location. I want a complete lock down on the Order’s presence here. If anyone finds out I will have to wipe their memory – I normally avoid such things but we can’t risk anymore leaks of information.”

“Of course.”

“We’re still discussing what involvement Kalyh should have in the war,” Zelda continued. “And we seem relatively divided on that subject.”

It wouldn’t take a genius to figure that Zelda and Sheik didn’t want her there and Kalyh was demanding to be involved. Link wondered how far Zelda would push her authority considering Kalyh would have to abide by the laws of Hyrule now that her people were given asylum at the castle.

“Your armies will leave the castle undefended,” Kalyh chimed in, her voice just barely controlled. “If I stay here it leaves Foursky the perfect opportunity to capture me.”

“Capture you?” Link couldn’t help but ask with a smirk. “I’d love to see him attempt that.”

Kalyh gave a snort of laughter but smiled darkly. “Unfortunately, up against that much Vaspra…it would not be much of a fight. It would be like one against an army.”

Of course, she was right. Right about all of it, in fact. Link voiced this and earned a frown from both Queen and Sheikah. But he knew they saw the logic, too. The castle would be vulnerable. They knew nothing about Foursky’s army so there would be no telling if he would send a small group to break its walls while they were away on the battlefield.

Neatly changing the subject, however, Zelda said, “Kalyh estimates his army to be at five thousand as of six months ago. We have to assume it has grown since then…but this is the only number we have to work with. As of now, we have seven thousand. I am considering enacting a draft so that number may increase.”
“Against Vaspra, though…it might as well be one thousand,” Link countered. “This could end up being a slaughter. Perhaps we shouldn’t send everyone out at once.”

Zelda nodded. “I have considered that as well. We will speak with the cabinet and decide.”

“There is also a chance that he may try and barter with us for the words,” Sheik spoke up. Link glanced over at his companion, suddenly realizing his unconscious avoidance. The moment they made eye contact, the Congruence pressed back into his mind and distracted him for a full second.

“Yes, but let me make this clear as day: we are not bartering our allies,” Zelda said in a hard voice. Kalyh blinked in surprise at this, clearly not expecting such protection from someone Link was sure she still considered somewhat an enemy. “In fact, I would prefer no barters even though bloodshed is not high on my list either. We need some sort of advantage.”

“Could always stop by the Nether again and pick up some more Vaspra,” Link suggested humorlessly.

Sheik threw Link an unamused look and said, “Speaking of the Nether…have there been any reports of Void Walkers about?”

Zelda shook her head, interest obviously piqued by the inquiry. “Nothing. I tried doing some research on them as well but there is no record of them ever being seen in Hyrule. I wonder if they are not able to cross over. What do you think?” she asked Link. “You are the only one who has had direct contact with one, other than Sheik.”

Link furrowed his brows thoughtfully. “The one I spoke with only said the Goddesses banished them to the Nether because the recycling process was so destructive that it didn’t belong in the living world. Perhaps the Void Walkers are banned from returning through a tear. The other creatures there were made that way by the Void Walkers so that is probably why we’re only seeing Vog and the like.”

Zelda seemed satisfied enough with this. “Well, aside from those things and the budget and training – which Link and I will go over later – we’re only left with one thing to discuss: how much Vaspra do we have and how much will it take to seal the Nether with Foursky and Evanna in it?”

A quiet fell over the table and Link frowned. Kalyh shifted uneasily next to Sheik and he wondered if Kalyh was going to forfeit her Vaspra.

He seriously doubted it.

“We have four pounds,” Zelda continued, glancing at a stray piece of parchment beneath her. “And six ounces.”

“Will that be enough?” Link pressed.

“Will it?” Zelda redirected the question to Kalyh whose face was hard and stressed. “You’re the only one at this table who has used it, Kalyh.”

“I’m not sure,” she muttered, staring at the table in concentration. “Using Hexa on a human life takes a handful of Vaspra, sometimes more if they are powerful magic users. I’ve used it with large area spells like explosions and remote capture. Those sorts of spells take hardly any at all. I could guess and say four pounds would be enough…but I’m honestly not sure. Either way, we have to
“Find the hole first.”

“Wait, how do you know?” Link asked in surprise.

“Foursky knows everything there is to know about the Nether. I read it in one of his accounts of the place. The tear in the Nether is a physical hole. It is much different than the passage you and Ra went through – that one is held open by the magic of Death Mountain and acts as a one-way door. When someone returns, it opens a tear. When Foursky returned from the Nether he created a hole in Termina. He used Vaspra to collect the Nether creatures and shove them back in, sealing it. But he did not notate how much Vaspra it took,” she explained.

“So, someone returning from the Nether causes the tear…We have to find the hole,” Link surmised. “How do we do that? Follow the sounds of Bloodbacks and Vog?”

“That is not the problem,” Zelda assured him. “We know where the hole is.”

“Where?” they all seemed to ask in unison.

“Lon Lon Ranch.”

Before Link could go storming off to Lon Lon Ranch, Zelda assured him that the entire living population of the farm had been safely relocated to Kakariko. The Ranch was completely blocked off by barricades, and a terrible and powerful aura surrounding it kept any curious thrill-seeker from getting near it. The Nether monsters also were a great deterrent. Despite the armed perimeter Zelda had set up around it, some monsters still managed to make it through.

The meeting ended there; the new Captain of the first garrison pulled Zelda away for a discrepancy in the armory. And there really hadn’t been much left to say. They knew where the hole was, they wouldn’t know exactly how much Vaspra they needed, and it was still a bit undecided if Kalyh would be joining them on the battlefield. Link was sure he would be called again for another meeting to discuss the budget and training for their troops, which he wasn’t excited about.

Goddesses, he had to get seven thousand men ready for war. And he knew they would enact a draft to all villages and towns of Hyrule. The more men they could get, the better.

They scattered after that. Link headed for the active training grounds to observe the first garrison; he and Zelda hadn’t had a chance to discuss what their statements to any of the men would be but at least going out there would make him feel a little less overwhelmed by the impending battle.

And, somehow, that was where he lost himself for the rest of the day, doing something he hadn’t gotten to do since he was inducted as High Royal Guardsman: train his men.

In spar after spar, he found a mindless rhythm that calmed him. Form after form, he stopped thinking about all the horrors that cluttered his head and only focused on the clang of iron. The men of the first garrison were understandably the best, most seasoned of fighters. Many of them had long-served the Royal Family since the King’s rule and they kept him on his toes.

And then he visited the next few garrisons, wandering from training ground to training ground, allowing himself to be pulled into whatever the Captains were working on with little fight.

Link could pretend he was just the General, checking in on his troops and assessing their skill. And the faces of the soldiers weren’t a blur to him like he thought they would be. With each one, he
memorized the story attached. He took account of their jokes and their laughs, the power of their swings and the twist of each muscle. He learned which ones had children and which ones had just left home.

Some had graying beards and gave him uncertain looks – there were many older Hylians that had mixed feelings on the Hero of Time being their General at only age twenty. Others were just as young as – if not younger than – Link and looked at him with a high respect he didn’t know what to do with. It was a strangely mixed response but the challenge of gaining respect with all of them was enough to keep him occupied for the next seven days, in fact.

In between drills with the garrisons and long, stuffy meetings with Zelda and her cabinet, Link was practically running to spar with the men. Four days after their return to the castle, Zelda finally made the public statement of possible war to the people. She finally revealed what had happened to the Gerudo and announced a memorial to be held for them at the banquet before the march to war.

In a graceful way Link would never understand, Zelda had managed to word everything delicately enough to keep most civilians calm.

The garrisons, however, were given the brunt of the inevitability of a battle with skilled magic users and the potential that they may be possessed by a spell. The men all took it with hard, confident faces, clearly standing by the oaths they took the day they became soldiers:

Do not desert the Crown no matter the danger.

Pride swelled in Link’s chest when many of them said something along the lines of, “I’d love to see that tyrant try!” when he stressed the part about Hexam.

Link’s time with the troops kept him on a constant rotation of sleep, breakfast, training, lunch, training, dinner, sleep, and then repeat. He saw Zelda, Sheik, and Kalyh in the morning, but after that they separated.

Sheik would go with Kalyh to the enclosed arena almost a mile from the castle and pointedly out of the way, assisting with their own sort of training. According to Sheik, while the Order was incredibly skilled in subterfuge, they knew nothing of open warfare and needed as much training as the Royal armies did. Link saw Zelda in their meetings but other than that his attention was mostly focused on his duties as General.

Even in his exhausted state at the end of every day, it was hard to sleep; sleep only yielded more images he couldn’t bear. As much as Link wanted to barricade himself in the library and sleep, he tried to find rest in his bare room. Because running to the library made him feel like a child. Link knew that was where Sheik was and, in the past week, any contact he had had with the Sheikah clouded his mind.

The tension between them was nearly tangible and enough to catch the attention of Zelda on the eighth morning after Sheik had left with Kalyh for the day.

“So, what is going on with you and Sheik?” she asked, halfway between the parchment to her right and throwing Link a glance to her left. Her eyes were crystal clear and keen, making Link want to shift uncomfortably; it was very hard to lie to her even on his best days.

Link shook his head, knowing he was about to lie miserably. “Nothing. Why?”
“Well,” Zelda told him with a knowing sound to her voice as she pushed away the document and gave him her full attention, “it’s odd you say that. Especially considering the very noticeable connection you both acquired since arriving from Vrika, not to mention the fact that both of your auras now look identical.”

Lying to Zelda was impossible. Especially when one considered she could see their auras were the same, a side-effect of Congruence he hadn’t even been aware of – and it didn’t even surprise him at this point. There was no way Link could explain that away and he wasn’t even sure why he wanted to.

Congruence felt so personal. Link didn’t know if he wanted anyone to know about it.

“It’s complicated,” was the answer he decided on, knowing it was complete horse shit and Zelda would inform him of that.

“Which is the fodder you would throw anyone else asking the question. But I am not anyone else and, as your superior, I am asking you a direct question,” Zelda recited carefully, her authoritative Queen-voice making Link want to let out a groan. More and more she was using this card on him to wheedle out information. Why did he even try?

Begrudgingly, he explained most of what had happened and then, finally, what he had learned about Congruence. Zelda seemed at least familiar with the subject…but clearly unfamiliar with the death clause. Her eyes went wide, eyebrows shooting up, and the quill she had been spinning between her fingers went still.

“That can’t be right,” she whispered.

“I wish it wasn’t,” Link sighed, having already accepted what Zelda was now struggling to believe.

“Can you please bring me this book? Now?” Zelda said, a tension to her voice Link didn’t like.

Uh oh.

“Um,” he muttered, “I sort of threw it out the window in Vrika.”

She gave him a disbelieving look and pressed her palm to her forehead. “Link. You’re ridiculous. Have I ever told you how ridiculous you are?”

“Many times,” Link replied.

“We need to make sure there’s nothing else about Congruence in there. You need to go back through the Portal and get it,” Zelda insisted with a frown. “There’s nothing about Congruence in the prophecy and if the premonition really comes to pass…”

“I know,” Link groaned. “I didn’t think about that dumb book. But I read the whole chapter…I didn’t see anything else about it.”

“But if it was a book about magical bonds, it may have some advice on how to sever them or…I don’t know, Link. But we can’t risk not knowing.”

The moment she mentioned severing it, everything in his body jolted. Sever the Congruence? The chapter clearly stated that wasn’t an option. And why in the name of the Goddesses would he want
to? Congruence was like a drug to him. It was a connection with Sheik he wouldn’t want to let go of, even if prophecy depended on it.

But Link knew she was right. He had been so foolish to throw the book like that. With everything that had been going on it had never crossed his mind to go back and get it before they returned to Hyrule. Luckily he wouldn’t have to cross entire desert to get it…but he would have to return to Vrika and face the possibility of Nether creatures attacking him.

Link agreed to go back, departing for Kakariko before noon.

“You’ll take Sheik of course,” Zelda commented.

Link had been deciding on that since their conversation and his decision was motivated by fear more than he had expected.

He didn’t want Sheik to leave the castle, to travel back to Vrika, to be anywhere near danger. Because darkness was closing in fast and every day Link felt more and more fearful of losing him. The thought of Sheik leaving the protection of the castle twisted his stomach painfully, gave him an anxiety he didn’t know how to quell.

“Actually…no,” Link replied, feeling out of place even saying it.

She gave him a befuddled look. “You and Sheik rarely go anywhere without each other. What’s going on?”

Link shook his head dismissively and opted for a half-truth. “Nothing, Zelda. It’s just better logistically. He needs to stay with Kalyh and help her train the Order. We’re sidetracked enough because of my idiocy. It will just be a quick two-day trip. It’s not like I’m crossing the desert again.”

“You know he will follow you,” she reasoned.

“That’s why you’re not going to tell him. Cover for me,” Link insisted.

Zelda gave a very tired groan. “Link, trying to keep something from Sheik is like trying to hold water in my hands for a day. He will find out and he will get angry, not just with you, but with me as well.”

Link gave her an incredulous look. “You’re the Queen of Hyrule, Zelda. And you’re worried about the wrath of your bodyguard?”

She held up a finger. “The wrath of a super-powered Sheikah, actually.”

Link rubbed at his face, his lack of sleep ebbing at his patience. “Just try your best. Can you do that for me? I’ll do what I can to be back before he even knows I left.”

Her blue eyes gave him a long, exasperated glare. They sat in the silence of her dining hall for a long minute, then she sighed and nodded. “I am not covering you when he asks why I kept it from him. I am going to tell him that you begged me. That is all on you, Link.”

Link waved an impatient hand as he got up from the table. “Yeah, yeah, I know. By that point I’ll probably already be in Vrika. Just don’t let him come after me.”
Zelda gave a bark of laughter. “Like I’ve ever been able to stop either of you from leaving.”

But there was nothing else for it. Link just had to trust that Sheik would be too preoccupied with training the Order with Kalyh to notice Link’s absence. And it wasn’t like they had crossed paths much in the past week anyway. They saw each other at dinner and breakfast but during the day they were in completely different places. And, unconsciously, Link had almost found himself avoiding Sheik.

The Congruence clouded his head. It made him want to say and do things he didn’t know if he was ready for. They had an army to raise and both of them couldn’t just leave the castle now with everything spiraling towards war.

Link remembered all too well what had happened in the beginning when they both left the castle sans Guardsman and Bodyguard like morons. It had been a risk going to the desert and a miracle they returned to find everything still intact.

He wouldn’t risk that again.

Link shook his head to clear his thoughts and excused himself to pack his gear for the next two days. Everyone in the castle had become an even more annoying flurry of activity as even the maids began to help with the preparation of war. They sat in a line in the armory, quickly polishing swords and shields, checking for imperfections to note to the blacksmiths.

A sense of urgency tied his stomach in knots; Link was leaving on the eve of war. No matter what he assured himself of, he couldn’t shake his anxiety. What if something happened while he was gone? What if something happened to Sheik and he wasn’t there to help?

But they needed that book. They needed to fully understand Congruence. They needed to add this variable into their growing equation for war.

Epona had long since returned to the stables, knowing well to abandon her wait in the fields with Kronos. The appearance of Nether creatures had probably scared them back as well. She nickered irritably at him as he knotted her cinch in a motion quicker than he meant to. Kronos stomped in the stall next to her and Link kept expecting to see Sheik any moment, ready to saddle up and accompany him.

It was the first time in nearly three years Link was leaving the castle without Sheik.

He left at noon, Zelda stopping by between meetings to kiss him on the cheek and give him a tight hug.

“Don’t be stupid, okay?” she asked in a soft voice.

“Oh, Zelda, I’m never stupid.”

Her elbow met his side and he couldn’t help but smile. Well, at least this wasn’t any different. Zelda always had her habit of teasing him before he left for any journey. It was a comfortable goodbye they had built over the years to dispel the worry and he felt a little less sick because of it.

He left the castle walls, then Castle Town Market, and then started his trek east towards Death Mountain.
I meant to address this like two chapters back, but I forgot. A few of you asked about the Congruence and why Link didn’t die when Sheik died. Most of you answered your own question because you guys are very smart but just to give complete clarification, here’s how that works:

Congruence, as that book stated, is awoken through various methods. The bond doesn’t actually form until then – the potential is there but the whole death clause doesn’t apply. When Link and Sheik had their little gay healing sesh the Congruence activated and the death clause went into effect.

I’m losing my mind because a few of you did fanart for this fic and a) all of you artists are so talented and used such beautiful colors and conveyed the exact emotion I was envisioning and b) I am just blown away that Congruent was special enough to you to make art for it. So, there are not enough “thank you’s” to express my appreciation and love.

You can see this art on the Congruent tag on my Tumblr (url is Sincosma), as well as nonsense I spit out through the process of editing.

Thank you to all the readers and reviewers – y'all are my favorite people. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. (◕‿◕✿)
Chapter 29

XXIX.

Traveling without Sheik reminded Link painfully of his time alone in the Nether. Although the day was bright with clear skies, nothing to suggest a war lay ahead, the sense of unease the empty space beside him gave was enough to keep him at a brisk pace.

The sooner he got the book, the sooner he would be back to help with preparation.

Link really needed to shake the feeling that he couldn’t leave the kingdom for even two days. Zelda and Sheik were perfectly capable, their armies robust and mighty enough to offer tremendous protection.

But still, much like being the martyr Sheik had accused him of, Link felt like Hyrule’s safety rested only on his shoulders. Like he was the only one who could protect it. But Hyrule had always survived in between the Hero’s reincarnations; it would survive two days without him.

It was by mid-afternoon that Link was finally able to shake the strangeness of traveling alone. He still wasn’t content but he could finally lose himself to the soft cadence of Epona’s hoof beats and the sounds of daytime. It put him at ease to still see birds and game running amok – perhaps the Nether creatures weren’t as prevalent as he had imagined.

For a half hour or so, Link saw a horse-drawn cart at the bridge across Zora River. He assumed it to be a trader, probably taking a rest on the bridge before continuing on their way…but as he approached, he began to realize it was something else entirely.

The figure slumped against wheel was all-too recognizable.

“Malon!” Link shouted, as soon as he saw the flash of red hair in the sunlight. Only a few hundred yards away, he pushed Epona into a gallop that almost scared away the other horse.

Link leapt off and ran the rest of the way to her, seeing a shock of blood on her pale face and white tunic. A blood-covered sword lie next to her, still loosely in her grasp. Malon’s pack lay open beside her, contents spilled out and fingerprinted with blood as it was obvious she had rummaged through it for potion. An empty bottle was next to her hip, evidence that she had already drank potion.

He reached her, pulling off his gloves and kneeling down to check her pulse and press a palm to her forehead. Sweat was at her brow, skin cold despite the heat, but she made a small noise to reassure him she was alive and healing. “Malon, talk to me. What happened?”

“Link,” she mumbled, cracking her eyes open to stare at him blearily and then closing them again from the brightness.

“Malon, stay awake,” he demanded. His gaze fell to her tunic, a terrible slash going from her left shoulder across to her abdomen. Such a wound would be fatal if left untreated, but Malon had reacted quickly.
The skin was stitching back together slowly and her breaths were slow and measured. The haze of the potion in tandem with the beating sunlight was probably the culprit for her disorientation but Link still felt nervousness bite at his stomach. Whatever had attacked tore her tunic open so he snatched the thin traveling cloak from his saddle bag to drape over her out of respect.

“Link, what are you doing here?” Malon asked, voice lethargic but aware.

“I’m heading to the graveyard,” he replied. “What attacked you?”

She gestured her head to the right and said, “Those things. They were so quiet. Just as I killed the second one, a third rushed in and managed to wound me.”

Link followed her gaze and saw the forms of three dead Baltas down the bridge. Malon, while no trained soldier, had always insisted on sparring with Link whenever she could. Fighting off wolves and thieves had become her speciality over the years, especially as her father grew older. It was clear the Baltas had been easy work for her but even Link had been outnumbered three to one.

Which should’ve embarrassed him, but all he could feel was pride for her abilities. But while Malon was more than capable, his heart still clenched at the idea of her being alone and wounded out in the fields. Sometimes he still saw her as that little girl he met in Castle Town Market.

“I was on delivery from one of the outer markets. I never expected to see those things out in broad daylight. I think they’re getting stronger, Link,” Malon told him, pulling the cloak closer and managing to sit up straighter. “What are these monsters? Why are we going to war?”

“It’s…very complicated,” Link told her, knowing she wouldn’t like the answer but lacking the strength or will to explain it all. “These are Baltas from the Nether and things are only going to get worse in the next week or so. You and Talon should go into the mountains for a little while until it’s over.”

Her blue eyes were wide and alert now, a sour look passing over her face. “What about the other people? Are there evacuation plans for all of Kakariko or the other towns?”

And that right there was the reason Link had always respected Malon. Fear was not her first emotion in the face of impending war – instead, she wanted fairness.

“The Queen and I are still discussing that with the cabinet,” he admitted. “Evacuation plans are being drafted but nothing is confirmed yet.”

“Then we’ll stay and help protect people if need be,” Malon told him resolutely.

Link just nodded, still crouched beside her as he watched the color come back to her face. If not for the bloodied clothing, he could just imagine she was tired from a long journey. “Let me follow you back to Kakariko. I’m headed there anyway,” he offered.

Malon nodded and took the hand he offered. Her balance was questionable so he stayed close, knowing better than to help her without being asked. The last time he assumed, Link earned a very solid punch to the shoulder. A memory of her yelling at him for going easy on her in a spar brought back memories of the conversation they had had in her barn, so very long ago. Back then, things had been so different…back then he had entertained the possibility of returning her feelings in some capacity.
Now Link had no room for it. He probably hadn’t had the room in the first place – his tie to Sheik, in addition to their eventual Congruence, would likely have never allowed it. And even though Link knew it wasn’t his fault, he felt sad and guilty anyway.

Even when Malon was settled on the seat, she still looked too unwell to travel by herself. It was enough to convince him to tie Epona behind the cart and take a seat next to Malon. He took the reins and she leaned back against the seat, clearly too exhausted to try and insist she didn’t need his help, as was her tendency.

“I’m sorry about your farm, Malon,” Link offered as he steered the cart over the bridge, noting with satisfaction as he pointedly ran over what was left of the slain Balta.

She shook her head, lavender lids sliding shut against the fading sunlight. “Don’t be, Link. We’ll get it back. Everything will work out. It always does.” Malon paused for a moment, whether from fatigue or thought Link wasn’t sure, and then said, “The Nether…I’ve never heard of it. I would imagine if those creatures came from there, then it’s an awful place.”

“Believe me, it is.”

“Wait,” Malon suddenly demanded, sitting a little straighter and opening her eyes, “have you been there?”

Link nodded, unable to look at the horror on her face. The Nether was too terrible to be described in a mere expression and he wasn’t about to explain that to her. “Sheik and I went there many weeks ago.”

“Why?”

“I promise I’ll explain it to you one day. The story is too long for this trip.” Link would never tell her.

Malon nodded. She trusted he would tell her because after the war, Link had explained everything to her. She was his friend and she had the heart of a lion; if anyone in Hyrule could handle the truth, it was Malon.

But Link wouldn’t tell her because, if they survived what was to come, he never wanted to speak of it again.

They fell silent after that, the mountain pass to Kakariko still far ahead as darkness spilled across the field. The moon rose behind them and it was uncomfortably close to full, but at least it shed some light on their path. Inevitably, Malon fell asleep with her head heavy against his shoulder and hands gripping around his elbow. Her warmth comforted him as the pass towered above them. Link directed her horse to the road branching off from the stone stairway and found a sense of relief as the walls enclosed them in a tight embrace.

“You seem different, Link,” Malon whispered in the dark, nudging him out of his thoughts.

“I do?”

“I don’t know what it is,” she went on, “but there’s something about you that reminds me of how you were after the war. Like you’ve…been through something devastating.”
There was a question somewhere in there and he would allow her at least an honest answer. “I have.”

The hands at his arm tightened again and tension entered her voice. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Link promised, covering her hands with one of his. “I have a kingdom to save, as I always do. I was made for this, after all.”

Malon shook her head. “It’s not fair, Link. You shouldn’t have this weight on you. You were finally healing from the first war and now…”

Her words touched deeper than Link expected them to and he was once again faced with the unfairness of it all. Yes, Link had almost felt normal again before everything fell apart for the second time. And despite how much he had wished the conflict with Evanna had been just a small incident, it ended up being another enormous prophecy with the kingdom yet again hanging in the balance.

Destiny be damned, Link was growing so sick of being at the beck and call of the Goddesses and their terrible prophecies.

“I’m the Hero, Malon. It’s my duty,” was all Link said. He wouldn’t divulge to her the true depth of his malcontent. Besides, it was easier to just reassure her; Link didn’t want his friend worrying herself sick on his account.

Although, he knew she would anyway.

“Well, regardless of what your title is, you’re not alone. Please remember that, Link. The kingdom will stand behind you. I will stand behind you. If there’s anything I can do to help –”

“You can help me by staying out of trouble,” Link interrupted, giving her a soft nudge. “I don’t want to find you half-dead over Zora River, okay?”

Malon let out a sigh and quipped, “I would’ve been fine and you know it. You’re just being fussy. I’ll make you dinner when we get back.”

“How about I take you up on that on my way back? You need to rest,” Link insisted, the lights of Kakariko drawing nearer through the twists and turns of the mountain pass.

“Then let me give you some bread. I just baked a batch before leaving this morning.” Malon, stubborn as ever. She would make an excellent mother if she decided to marry and grow a family.

Link agreed, grinning despite himself. When they reached the gates of Kakariko, the guards gave him sharp salutes, clearly surprised to see him there at all. He was concerned they would stop him and ask about the war announcement that had no doubt already reached them, but they allowed Link through without any pause. Link supposed it made sense, however – Link was their General.

Malon directed him to the boarding house they were staying in, chatting – albeit tiredly – about how giving the landlord was, letting her use the kitchen when she pleased and the big fluffy cat that roamed about from room to room.

Link knew she was telling him those things to distract him and he wished he could’ve articulated to Malon how appreciated it was.
Talon was waiting worriedly by the barn when they arrived, apparently relieved to see both Malon back safely and Link’s presence with her. Surely Malon had been late returning and her father had paced by the stables all evening. His eyes caught sight of the blood-stained tunic, however, and he panicked all over again. It took several minutes to convince him that she would be fine as he held her close and fussed more like a mother than a father. Talon thanked Link endlessly, making repeated offers of dinner and wine and money.

Link refused each one, only allowing Malon to fetch the fresh bread she had promised.

“Here’s a potion – I’m learning how to make them from the local Alchemist. Let me know if it’s strong or not,” Malon insisted when she returned, looking more steady on her feet than hours ago and in a dark blue tunic devoid of blood stains. “Thank you for helping me, Link.”

Even when Link refused once more, it was practically forced upon him so he surrendered. The bread smelled deliciously doughy and having extra potion would surely come in handy, if not in Vrika, but in the week to come. Malon hugged him tightly, balancing on her tiptoes to reach his neck.

“Please be safe, Link. Take care of yourself,” she whispered, voice full of emotion that made Link want to try his hardest and obey her wishes. Malon let go and made herself nervously busy returning his borrowed cloak to Epona’s saddle, running her hand over the horse’s gray mane to avoid looking at him.

Talon gave him a firm handshake, two more offers for food or money, and then Link was on his way once more to the Portal. Back on Epona, the night was turning cool in a prelude to autumn. They had maybe one more week left of true summer heat and then…

And then the war.

Link couldn’t even think of autumn. It seemed impossible to reach with the battle blocking their passage to it. The narrow path to the graveyard closed back in on him and he felt exhausted, too ready to reach Vrika and rest for the night. Sleeping alone in the temple would be daunting, but Link would need daylight to find the book and as he reached the graveyard, the moon had already set.

Epona snorted and set about some nighttime grazing as Link left her by Dampé’s old hut. The graveyard was empty and still and Link was grateful to find it still devoid of beasts; he had to assume the presence of Impa as Sage was keeping it clear.

Link warped down into the chamber where the Portal lie, hoping a Mrith hadn’t replaced the one they had slain…and he was met with a stench so terrible he nearly retched. The putrid smell suffocated him and, for a moment, Link almost wished the Mrith had magically come back to life. Its remains laid amongst the rubble of battle, blanketed in buzzing flies and well into decomposition. Link wished he knew some sort of spell to make the thing disappear.

He quickly skirted around it, covering his face and holding his breath as he hurried for the Portal. It glimmered in the firelight his presence summoned and Link stopped before it for a moment, surprised by his reflection.

Dark circles hung heavy under his blue eyes in a too-familiar way. The frown on his face was deep and dark, like the expression that had stared back at him in Lake Hylia after clearing the Water
Temple. It was disturbing to see himself looking like that again. He was exhausted and stressed and it was so obvious to his eyes that he felt subconscious of it.

Link looked like a war was coming, like he was more stress than he was flesh and blood. Link looked like a soldier, his pauldrons and the buckles of his gear shining dully in the yellow light, the rich blues and golds of his uniform more somber hues in the dank, rotting chamber.

He looked like the Hero, even without the greens of those before him.

He looked like someone else.

It made scared him.

Link passed through the Portal, the numbing cold welcoming against his skin. The other side yielded just what he thought it would; an empty black chamber and the glittering lights cast from fairy pool. Not a sound met his ears and the spice of Sheikah incense filled his nose, reminding of what had happened just seven shorts days ago.

Being back felt strange. Being back without Sheik felt even stranger – Link felt nothing in the Temple above him.

He was alone in the dead city.

He heaved himself up the stairs, reaching the top where Sheik had finally admitted his feelings. In that moment, Link missed him, a feeling that resonated deeply and made him ache in an unfamiliar way. He wished Sheik was there with him to help fill the emptiness of the giant temple. He wished Sheik was the omnipresent warmth beside him. He craved the hum of their bond that was a gentle white noise beneath his thoughts. He wanted the quiet companionship that was always the calming remedy to his anxiety.

But Link had insisted on going alone and there was also a relief that filled him knowing Sheik was safe in the castle.

For a long moment, Link wasn’t sure where he was going to sleep; should he find the room he had first woken up in? Should he find the one Sheik had been in, where their Congruence had all began? Would he really even be able to find rest in those empty rooms?

Or maybe he could sleep in Sheik’s old room.

It felt horribly sentimental, but the moment it crossed his mind, Link couldn’t shake it. To be surrounded by even the memory of Sheik comforted him.

Godesses, he really was hopeless.

But his mind was made up and Link followed the now familiar path to Sheik’s old quarters, surprised by how recognizable the Sheikah markings were even despite his ignorance to them still.

The room didn’t feel as abandoned as it did over a week ago; the warmth of Sheik brought it alive again after a day of research. True to his nature, Sheik had put away all of his books and cleaned up the desk as though cleanliness mattered in a place that was akin to a graveyard. The trinkets of his youth still remained, however, as though Sheik couldn’t bring himself to move them despite the pain they likely brought. The glittering blue stones from the sea were gathered together in the
center and Link couldn’t help but finger his fingers over their smooth, glass-like surface. He tried again imagine the day Sheik had barely described.

The sea. Gota. A young, over-zealous Sheik too excited by the majesty of the great ocean.

Link didn’t know where it came from, but the thought formed in his mind like a slowly growing flame; warm, flickering, and yawning into the world.

*When this is all over, I’ll take Sheik back to the sea.*

Before Link could deliberate it any further, he reached out and took the stones, placing them carefully in a rag in his pack. Maybe it was sentimental and maybe Sheik wouldn’t even see the meaning in it…

But Link wanted to take Sheik back to the sea to return the stones.

To put Gota’s memory to rest.

Link tried not to analyze everything too deeply as he moved onward to Sheik’s bed and fell back onto it. It felt so bizarre to be in a place so personal to a man he sometimes still felt like he didn’t really know. But a bone-deep exhaustion dragged him down, paralyzing him from thinking about it any further or even moving into a more comfortable position than the one he had landed in.

Link lost himself to the portrait in his mind of the sea, vast and blue and infinite. Wind, salt, birds, and all of the things he had seen in paintings. He dreamt of standing at the edge of such a powerful force beside Sheik, sparkling blue stones beneath their feet and the freedom of a future.

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Thank you for all the overwhelming support and excitement when I post – I love all of you. And geez, the fan art, you guys. All of you are so talented it blows my mind.

Here’s some link spam, for those who are interested. Follow me on Tumblr under the URL Sincosma, Instagram under amandalynnsings, and snapchat under ohamandalynn. Feel free to boop me. （^ω^）
Chapter 30

XXX.

When morning came, Link felt better rested than he had in the last month. The distinct sensation of being somewhere he didn’t expect blossomed in his mind but Link felt too warm and comfortable to find concern. He cracked his eyes open to just a small rectangle of light reaching through the tiniest of slits near the ceiling, the golden light set into pure white stone like a gem.

Oh. That’s right. This was Sheik’s old room. Vrika. The book.

With much effort, Link pulled himself up from the bed and stretched, joints cracking loudly in protest. Well, at least he had slept – and soundly at that. The desert heat and the humidity from the rainforest pressed in around him and the familiarity of it was almost comforting.

This was Sheik’s climate.

He missed Sheik.

Link shook his head and pulled his discarded gear back on.

Focus. He needed to focus and get what he came for. He could be back in the castle by nightfall if he hurried. Maybe Sheik hadn’t even noticed Link’s absence. Maybe he could slip back in like he had never gone and he and Zelda would be spared the Sheikah’s wrath.

The good rest Link had managed to find had him moving faster and feeling lighter as he worked his way out of the temple, gnawing on some jerky to quiet his stomach.

Link had thrown the book out the window of a room on the second floor however he wasn’t sure where that window would be from the outside of the House of Vala. He would have to search the area it had most likely fallen to and hope that nothing had become of it.

The sun was blinding and the heat tenfold outside the temple. The familiar sight of Vrika blocked out half the sky and was illuminated by the rising sun. The city glowed a bright ivory and, despite what had happened there, it was truly one of the most beautiful places Link had ever seen.

For a moment, Link could almost comprehend just a small piece of the pain the Sheikah felt for its loss; for something so beautiful to be taken from the world…

Link decided to follow the line of stones along the side of the temple; looking at the windows yielded nothing when they all appeared nearly identical. He searched through the little scrub plants that had grown wild after years of neglect, avoiding the thorns and scorpions that tried to hinder his process.

And then, there it was.

Nearly ripped in half from its fall, the old red book was tented on the dusty stone ground; how a storm hadn’t come to destroy it in the past week was a miracle. Well, at least this particular trip would be easy despite everything else.
Only it wasn’t.

“How interesting,” said a distinctly feminine voice from a few paces behind him. Recognition jolted through his body and he dropped the book, whirling around and drawing the Moon Blade with a piercing ring.

Of course.

Evanna stood before him in a long red gown, arms crossed, and red mouth stretched into a wide, calculating smile. Link’s fingers tightened convulsively on the hilt of his sword as an all-too familiar energy reached him, even more powerful now that his senses had improved.

In many ways, Link wasn’t surprised to see her there. Foursky wanted to words – she wanted the words. Their intelligence had probably led them to Vrika. Thankfully, she was too late.

“How interesting to find you out here, Hero of Time,” she finished, managing to look inquisitive as though she honestly didn’t expect for them to meet. But she didn’t spare any effort in the condescension of his old title. Link tried not to bristle at the mocking tone but a fury he didn’t expect was growing in his chest.

“You’ve broken your word. You said you would leave Hyrule, Queen,” Link snarled, rage quaking through him like a thunderstorm. Seeing the face of the monster that marked Sheik…

“This,” Evanna countered, gesturing around her, “is not in the jurisdiction of Hyrule. I came here to tie up some loose ends…and instead I found you. And with a book written by an old friend of mine, no less. You have come an awfully long way for just a book. You should return to your castle.”

“What loose ends?” he barked, raising his sword even closer to her thin form and ignoring her useless banter. He couldn’t trust that she wouldn’t attack him with her seemingly limitless magic. And now with the Vaspra, she could probably kill him with ease.

“The Order of Hexa. They are criminals who, as I have told you before, must stand trial for their crimes to our kingdom,” she explained blankly, the smile leaving her face too quickly for Link’s liking. She let her arms fall to her side and Link’s gaze followed them warily. “I thought they might still be here but it seems I only just missed them.”

“I arrived here last night and found it empty. No one is here. So leave,” Link ordered.

“So hostile,” Evanna purred with a smirk that didn’t touch her eyes; they were black and deep and angry underneath her carefully crafted amusement. This wasn’t going to end well. “Go back to your castle, Link.”

It was the second time she had told him to return to the castle – but why? The way Evanna said it was nothing like a threat. It was almost as though he had strayed outside of her plans. Perhaps his decision to come to Vrika had disrupted something important.

Link needed more information.

“I want you and your people out of Hyrule,” Link pressed, pushing the Moon Blade ever closer to her. “You’ve caused us trouble enough.”
“I must stay and look for the Order. I was commanded so by Foursky,” she shot back, advancing forward as well. Her oppressive aura pushed against Link and made him feel clouded as she attempted to breach his mind, like the evening of the banquet when they first met. “Get out of my way. Leave.”

“Why do you want me to leave so badly?” Link pressed, heart hammering away at what might happen if he didn’t back down. “I know what’s coming Evanna. I know what you’ve done. You marked Sheik like cattle and I won’t let you get what you want from him. You could just kill me now but you’re just telling me to –”

“You think you know what is coming?” she screamed, in a flash of energy summoning an enormous black sword, veins of glowing blue Vaspra bleeding through its blade like water. Her eyes burned like hot coals and her mouth was stretched into a terrible, unnatural sneer. Evanna held the blade to his throat, locking them together at the end of blades, daring each other to make the first move.

“I can bring this country to its knees in just one breath! You have no idea what is coming! It is bigger than you, bigger than your army, bigger than Hyrule, even bigger than me! So play your little part, Hero, and do as you are told!”

Her voice was toxic, each syllable more poisonous than the next. The words were a warning so potent, Link wasn’t truly sure of what she was trying to say anymore. But Evanna was furious and dangerous and trembling with thundering energy so he would save his musing for later.

If he survived, that is.

For one dizzy moment, Link was entirely sure that the battle would start. And he would die. How could he stand against a blade laced with Vaspra? She was more powerful than him in every possible way and, although he battled many things many times his size and power, nothing could compare to the raw and unimaginable energy of Vaspra. He knew that now more than ever.

“You should step away from Link before you start a fight you will be unable to finish, Evanna,” shouted a loud voice from behind the woman in question.

Oh no.

Sheik.

Of course it was Sheik.

Evanna pivoted at lightning speed, suddenly at the mercy of two swords as they now stood in an obtuse angle, locked in a mismatched stand-off. And of which Link knew he was the weakest but stood at the ready anyway.

Sheik looked – and rightfully so – absolutely infuriated. It was much like the rage Link had seen on his face when Nameth had died. It looked deadly and Link was just relieved he wasn’t on the receiving end of it.

Yet.

“There would not have to be a fight if both of you had stayed where you belong. This fight would be nothing compared to what is soon to come,” Evanna spat, looking more and more like a wild cat than a woman. Her sword was now fixed on Sheik but a hand stayed outstretched to Link just in
“Save your intimidation for someone who actually fears you,” Sheik snarled, his voice low and aggressive in a way Link had never heard it. “Tell me, Evanna – why do you feel weaker than before?”

Shock betrayed her face and relief flooded Link; he couldn’t tell the difference in power. Link’s senses had been so dull before his time in the Nether so he had nothing to compare it to. But Sheik did and he had clearly hit a tender subject as Evanna struggled to regain her control. The sword shuddered in her grip and she took one small step back.

“Leave,” Sheik commanded, voice even louder than before. In a distortion of sound, a layer of angry flames coated his sword and Link had to do a double-take.

*When had he learned to do that?*

“Leave now. We will see you on the battle field, you monster.”

Evanna looked as though she were about to explode. Link braced himself for an attack…but it never came. Her glare was hostile and burning into Sheik, silence filling the courtyard as a rumble of coming storms sounded behind the mountain. The moment was dreadfully long and adrenaline pumped painfully through his body as Evanna seemed to decide her next and maybe even final move.

But then she grinned, as though she accepted his challenge, as though she knew something they didn’t. Evanna bared her teeth in the sunlight and growled, “What a fine soldier you are going to make, Sheik, *last of the Sheikah.***

In a burst of light, quicker than Link could conceive, Evanna was gone.

They stood frozen for a moment, too shocked by her exit and too horrified by what she had implied. The way Evanna had said *last of the Sheikah* sent chills down his spine. Link knew what she was threatening and it made his blood run cold and the premonition flash back into his mind, the reminder completely involuntary now.

Evanna’s excuse had been weak at best – she claimed to be looking for the Order but was far more insistent about them returning to the castle…

What was her motive? What were they missing?

Link turned his attention to Sheik, unsure of what he was even going to say. The man in question shoved his sword straight into the hard sand beneath his feet, flame dying instantly, and advanced on Link without hesitation.

Before he could track such quick movements – oh Goddesses, why was he *always* one step behind? – Link was shoved backward, nearly stumbling over the scrub plants beneath his feet. If it had been anyone else Link would’ve dodged the charge and broken away…but those fierce red eyes paralyzed him and he allowed his back to collide with the heated wall behind him.

Because he was tired of fighting with Sheik. And also, he definitely deserved to be slammed against a wall.
Link let the Moon Blade slip out of his grip and it clattered loudly to the ground; there would be no fighting whatever fury awaited him. Sheik’s response to his “reckless” behavior was always to attack and Link didn’t intend on playing the game this time.

Sheik was in his space looking somehow more furious and it took every amount of focus Link had to meet such a powerful gaze. Heat, more than the climate could ever offer, erupted between them as the Congruence snapped awake and exploded in Link’s forehead. Sheik reached up and ripped down his cowl, revealing the true rage etched into his face. And like a moron Link stayed against the wall just staring, unsure of what was to come.

“What in the nine hells is wrong with you?!” Sheik bellowed, shoving his arm against Link’s chest, pining him hard enough to take away his breath. “Did you think I would not notice you running off to play martyr again? Do you think this is a game, Link?”

Oh. Well, now Link was angry too. He pushed the Sheikah off him – albeit with more extra force than normal – letting out a frustrated growl.

“Martyr? I’m not playing a game and I’m no martyr!” Link bit back. “I came back here for that stupid book about Congruence! Zelda ordered me to retrieve it, so don’t go throwing around accusations –”

“I don’t care why you’re here, Link!” Sheik snapped, mouth turned into somehow an even deeper scowl, words stringing together like he had to heave them out. “I care that you went alone!”

Without me. The last words rang in Link’s head, so intense and emotional it was clear the only way Sheik could’ve possibly conveyed them was only through thoughts. It hit Link like a blow to the skull and, for a moment, his anger died like a flame to rain and he stood there staring blankly.

“I went alone because I’m sick of you being in danger,” Link said after a moment, his voice so quiet compared to the arguments the courtyard had seen thus far. The sky growled again to punctuate his words and, if anything, his statement seemed to incense Sheik even further.

“Yes, because it is perfectly fine for you to put yourself in danger!” he shouted, voice laced with sarcasm and a venom that didn’t go deep enough to truly poison. Because underneath the words was hurt, ringing as clear as the sunlight they were sweating in.

Link couldn’t allow himself to feel guilty…but he couldn’t exactly feel justified anymore, either. Once more Sheik was in his space, crowding Link against the wall and their Congruence flared like a vicious flame in his mind. Waves of it crossed into Link’s head and he realized that some of his anger was originating through his connection with Sheik.

But he still had plenty of his own anger.

“Don’t treat me like a child,” Link warned, the tone low in his throat. “I’m just doing what the damn Goddesses want from me. I’m always in danger and that will never change.”

“You’re completely missing my point!” Sheik yelled, so close Link could feel his breath.

“Then I’m tired of dancing around this Sheik! Why don’t you, for once, actually say what you mean?” Link planted his hands against Sheik’s chest, less to push him away and more to create yet another pathway for the Congruence racing through them both. His voice shook with rage as, a question he hadn’t even known was festering inside him spilled from his mouth and filled the
space between them.

Link had hit a nerve and he watched Sheik falter for a moment, the breath in his lungs static in anticipation. And then Sheik looked so infuriated Link waited for the punch that would probably knock him out for a few hours.

Except…well, that never came.

Instead he earned strong hands gripping his jaw and a mouthful of rough lips.

And if Link thought the Congruence had been intense before…well, that was just a tiny blip compared to the tsunami of power that came down like a vice and threatened to drag him into some oblivion.

An overheated body pressed against his and every nerve in his body was set alight. Link reached forward, grabbing whatever he could of the Sheikah and dragged him desperately closer. Because he was convinced that any moment he was going to either explode or pass out.

Full lips dragged over his and Congruence erupted like staggered explosions, one bombastic wave after another. Link’s fingers tangled blindly with worn fabric and the overpowering smell of incense on Sheik was a strange, pleasant sort of suffocation. Link tugged their bodies closer together, the pressure between them eliciting a deep, ragged groan from Sheik that filled his mouth and his mind.

There was no way he could handle this.

Link was going to pass out like an idiot. He couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, could barely…

Teeth scraped over his bottom lip and that one little movement ignited something that kept him conscious and trapped indefinitely in a whirlwind of power. Link was suddenly yanked from the lethargic command of Congruence, pivoting to pin Sheik hard against the wall before the thought was even summoned.

Link’s fingers threaded roughly back through thick, damp hair and he ran his teeth and tongue over long-bitten lips, finally fulfilling the stray thought that had been plaguing his mind for possibly weeks. Fingers dug into his back and Link groaned without restraint as more boiling heat filled him up and possessed his mind.

Lightning crashed over their heads, the sound so deafening they jumped slightly apart in shock.

The sky was darker than it had been before everything started and the fire in Sheik’s expression was almost like hypnosis. There would be no moving away; not with the vice-like grip Sheik had on him. And Link couldn’t possibly think of a different location that would be better than his current one so they just stared at each other for a moment like any movement, any words would break the spell.

Sheik was the first to move – he reached up to cradle Link’s jaw in what was such a gentle gesture it stole his breath for a moment. Sheik kissed him again, infinitely softer and sweeter than Link was capable of handling, and pulled away to murmur, “That’s what I mean.”

Lightning struck the spire well above them, pulling them back into reality with earsplitting sound as the sky turned a dangerous dark gray. The storm had moved in quick and, if it was anything like
what they had seen from a distance when they crossed the desert, they were in for a very rough
time if they stayed outside.

“We need to get inside,” Sheik said, giving the sky a wary look.

Link ducked down to snatch the forgotten and half-destroyed book from the ground as rain began
to fall in thick loud drops. They hurried back in, just as the downpour arrived and the echo of it was
an eerie roar in the hallway.

Sheik led the way and Link wasn’t sure yet where they were going. The Sheikah’s pace was slow
and tired and Link wondered when he had last slept – he couldn’t imagine it had been any time
recently considering the training regimen they had all been lost in. He wanted to reach out and
touch Sheik’s shoulder, order him to bed…but he was too tense to do anything other than follow.

They had just kissed. A very heated, intense, and mind-shattering kiss. Actually, two kisses. The
thought of it all but scattered his thoughts and made him feel warm and cumbersome. He didn’t
know what to make of it. Because he had been reminding himself like a mantra that it wasn’t the
time.

But Sheik started it. In fact, Sheik always started it. He would’ve been angry about that ten minutes
prior, but now it just made him want to laugh.

Sheik nearly tripped over his own feet and any nervousness Link had was washed away with
concern.

“You need to sleep,” Link ordered as Sheik’s balanced swayed and he touched the wall for
support. “When have you last slept?”

“I don’t remember,” he replied with a shake of his head, pausing at a junction of hallways to hold
the wall.

Link let out a sigh.

So, Sheik had stormed through the Portal to get on Link’s case about running off alone, yet he
couldn’t even get proper sleep. Maybe both of them were just morons and that’s why they fit so
well together.

Link took the Sheikah’s hand and led him towards the old chambers as a crack of electricity rang
like an explosion through the hollow temple. For a moment it seemed like he might resist but Link
tugged until his companion complied. Sheik wasn’t going to travel well if he couldn’t even walk
straight; Link would make him sleep for a few hours and then they’d move on.

The room felt damp from the downpour outside and drips of water rolled down the walls and into
pans on the floor Link hadn’t taken notice of. It only made sense they would collect whatever fresh
water they could manage. Sheik sank heavily onto his old bed, looking more exhausted than Link
had ever seen him. Maybe Link would have him sleep for longer than a few hours.

Link began to leave – maybe he could occupy himself with a book until Sheik was rested – but a
hand shot out and caught his gauntlet, reminding him of the day in the library when their roles had
been reversed. He couldn’t help but smile at the memory of it.

Sheik hadn’t opened his eyes but there was a slight smile on his still exposed mouth.
“Stay,” he ordered. His voice was hoarse and he tugged lightly on Link’s arm.

“Pushy,” Link commented, unbuckling his sword and laying down next to him. The storm was moving fairly quick, the roar of rain and occasional rumble a soothing white noise. He stared at the alabaster ceiling and listened to Sheik’s breathing as he tucked his arms behind his head. Although he tried not to be a bundle of nerves…there was a tangible tension between them.

Link almost didn’t believe it when Sheik moved closer and pressed his face to Link’s chest, letting out a long sigh. It sent his heart into a terrible frenzy and the Congruence reacted in kind, the combination creating a deep, possessive emotion within him that was altogether foreign.

“Please don’t do that again,” Sheik mumbled in slow, connected words. “You are going to shorten my lifespan. Stop trying to do everything alone. You don’t have to anymore.”

“I…I know,” Link breathed, closing his eyes to focus on the warmth making his limbs heavy.

Relief. It was mostly relief. And then a deep affection he’d been carrying for too long to age. It pulsed through him freely as they touched and Link couldn’t stop himself from reaching down and threading his fingers back through Sheik’s hair, a fascination he didn’t know he had until he felt its texture.

Link hadn’t known things would be like this. In the spare moments he had tried to imagine what they would be without all the walls and careful avoidance…and it wasn’t this. It wasn’t open affection and a deep, resonating feeling of contentment and safety. How could Link have predicted something he had never come close to experiencing?

It was very new…but then it wasn’t. This was just how they had always been only now they weren’t dancing around the topic anymore. The façade had been dismantled and it’s not the time seemed so ridiculous now.

So they lay there and listened to the storm, hovering at the brink of war, finally to some sort of apex Link hadn’t known they’d been heading for.

“Link,” Sheik began, “how long have you felt this way?”

The inquiry shoved Link off his axis for a minute, heart protesting to the stress. How long? Link didn’t even know anymore. All he knew was they were morons for wasting so much time.

“I don’t remember the moment it started,” he responded, voice just above a whisper. “It’s just…always been there. What about you?”

Sheik shifted a little and propped a chin on his hand so he could study Link with dark, tired eyes. Link immediately felt bad – he was obviously keeping his companion from sleep – but Sheik didn’t seem bothered. In fact his eyes turned soft as he regarded Link for a long moment and said, “My answer is the same as yours. I did not understand it until we became friends after the war and I realized I…couldn’t leave your side.”

Warmth and something like happiness spread through his chest and Link wanted to laugh; they had both felt the same the entire time. And here they were three years later finally acting on it.

“Considering how inept at emotions we both know I am, it didn’t become obvious to me until…the Nether. Why didn’t you say anything sooner?”
“The war put you through enough, Link. I was not going to lay all of that on you while you were still healing,” Sheik explained. “And then after time…it just seemed easier to leave it alone. I made myself content with how we were. I did not know if you even felt the same.”

Sheik paused for a moment, gaze dropping away from Link’s eyes in thought.

“When you told me why you stayed,” Sheik murmured, “it caught me off guard. I did not know Zelda had made you that offer and to hear you had declined it because of me…I almost told you how I felt then but…”

Link couldn’t help but wince at the memory – no matter the distance he put between himself and his time in the Nether, it still lingered in his mind like a hidden thorn he occasionally scraped against.

He could still taste the agony on his tongue, the ache in his mind as he lost his grasp on reality, the mindless digging as he fought desperately to find something to resurrect Sheik with. And then the voice in his head, the phantom of Sheik keeping him moving forward…

How could Sheik have not known? How could Link have not known? It had been so obvious for so long.

“I know you still blame yourself for what happened there,” Sheik reminded him, managing to look stern. “There is no reason to. You did everything you could. I have seen you broken so many times over the horrors you have been forced into – do not be broken over this as well.”

The words gripped roughly at Link’s throat and he had to look away for a moment, staring intently at the ceiling once more. Sheik would always see through his pretenses and press on the one nerve that he desperately wanted concealed. But he felt warm fingers run over his knuckles and he sighed because if anyone was going to see the vulnerable parts of him, it was Sheik. Their Congruence was a slow, warm volley between them, carrying back and forth an affection that filled the emptiness Link hadn’t even known was there.

He reached down and took Sheik’s free hand, thrilled by the ease of their contact and the new territory he had earned. The wraps along his palms and fingers were wound so tightly, always hiding skin like Sheik’s cowl. The desire to remove one more boundary between them came on stronger than he anticipated. Link unraveled the thin cloth, pleased when Sheik didn’t pull away; in fact he held perfectly still and shifted his fingers to allow Link to pull them all free.

He had little doubt he was taking a lot of liberties. While Link was still so ignorant to much of Sheikah traditions, something suggested that revealing Sheik’s hands and face was a profound demonstration of trust. Like Sheik was offering himself. He shuddered slightly when their fingers laced together, completely free of the cloth between them.

Everything in his life had become, in some way, related to Sheik. Half his decisions, without even realizing it, were either for or because of Sheik. And Link thought about the war and the premonition and it made his chest ache.

“I can’t lose you to Hexam,” Link said, voice coming out hoarse. “I can’t keep losing you.”

Sheik shifted immediately, kissing him softly and squeezing his hand. The gesture came so easily, the emotion it elicited still so intense that Link immediately pulled him closer by the loose cowl
around his neck.

No. He couldn’t let this go. He couldn’t lose *this* now that he had it. If the premonition scared him before, he was *terrified* now. And not for his own life – because if Sheik was killed Link would be following him in death anyway – but because he couldn’t bear to see this man be possessed, for those beautiful red eyes to turn such a cold blue.

He couldn’t let Foursky have Sheik.

Sheik was *his*.

The thought influenced the energy between them and the possessive nature made Link pull him even closer, biting lightly at the lips against his. He lost the fingers wrapped in his but he felt them again on him temple, cradling his face. Sheik opened his mouth to run his tongue against Link’s lip and the sensation sent a tide of chills over his skin.

And then it all stopped as Sheik pulled away, still so close they shared the same air. Dark red eyes melted into his and Sheik looked so tired despite the intensity of his expression.

“I can’t lose you, either,” he breathed, running fingertips along Link’s jaw.

And with that, a sense of finality fell over Link’s mind.

They were Congruent.

They were lovers.

They could not live without each other, in every sense of the meaning.

Link reached up and pulled Sheik back down to him, pressing his face into a warm neck. Because Link didn’t know what else to do but hold him and feel that solid weight against his chest.

And they stayed like that for a long time. Eventually Sheik fell asleep, the familiar cadence of his breath a relief to Link. He lay still and let his mind wander as the storm outside seemed to move towards the desert to torture the sand.

Link thought of all his days traveling with Sheik, all the moments he had pushed away thoughts that had now been made a reality. Link thought of the Nether and the agony of loss. Link thought of the Congruence still resonating between them, laced with the truth of their shared mortality.

The word bounced around in his head but he wasn’t ready for it.

Later.

He would let it sink in later. He had *this* and *this* was plenty.

It was dusk when Sheik woke, having long shifted with his cheek to Link’s collarbone. Even despite the nagging reminder of the people awaiting them in Hyrule, they laid there for moments longer than planned. They clung to the calm they had created and Link let his hand tangle with Sheik’s once more.

War was coming and *this* would be a luxury. When they went back, would they have to put this
“We need to go,” Sheik said softly, running his thumb along the calluses on Link’s sword hand. “Zelda does not know I am gone.”

“How did you know I left?” he asked, voice rough from disuse.

“I sensed you leaving Hyrule when you crossed through the Portal. The Congruence was stretched in an odd way so I could only assume that was where you had went,” he explained. “I actually did not know why you left…why did Zelda want the book?”

Link moved to sit up, Sheik moving as well so Link could snatch the book from the stack of others on the nightstand and hand it to him. “Maybe you should just read it.”

Sheik pushed his hair out of his eyes – looking disheveled in a way that sent a spike of heat through Link’s gut – and took the book curiously. And with nothing else to do, Link just watched as Sheik’s fingers threaded carefully through the damaged pages and eyes skimmed the words quickly. He felt a stressed anticipation for what his companion’s reaction might be as Sheik’s eyes did laps over the old text until…they widened and he knew Sheik now understood the seriousness of their situation. And then he lifted his shocked gaze.

“Link…” Sheik started, but couldn’t seem to translate his thoughts to spoken language.

“This is why we have to protect these words, Sheik. Now it’s the prophecy that’s at stake, too.”

But Sheik stared down at the book again, like it was something completely alien to him, written in a language he had never read. Link couldn’t blame him; he remembered having a similar reaction after learning about the truth of Congruence. Hopefully Sheik didn’t intend on throwing the book like he did, however – that poor thing had been through enough.

When Sheik still couldn’t seem to escape his shock Link reached out and touched his jaw. It was instinctual and gained Sheik’s attention again, dragging him out of what Link could only assume were very dark thoughts.

“We need to go,” Link stressed.

“We need the Master Sword,” Sheik replied.

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Pictured above: two small idiot children finally talk about their feelwings.

You’re welcome.

Readers, reviewers, artists: THANK.
Tumblr is sincosma. Tell me how much you love/hate me.
XXXI.

They traveled with a quickness that reminded Link of an urgency the last war boasted. Never had Link wished they had the Ocarina of Time more than during the terrible six hour travel across the field. Although traveling horseback cut off two hours, the castle looming in the distance gave Link a constant swell of anxiety.

The war would likely begin in five days.

Their premonition could come true in five days.

They weren’t ready. He wasn’t ready. How could anyone be ready?

Neither of them spoke much during the journey. There was nothing to say but they shared calming glances and Link took solace in the Congruence from the occasionally brush of their legs when the horses walked too close.

Although the Sages had forbidden the use of the Ocarina of Time since the first war and ordered Zelda to lock it away…Link hoped there could be an exception. And surely there would be. It was prophecy. That should be reason enough to allow him access to the sword once more.

They reached the castle well into nightfall. Zelda was wide awake, of course, bent over her desk with a collection of parchment so scattered, the surface of the desk couldn’t be seen. The moment they walked in she was on her feet and hugging them both.

“I am so glad you both are safe,” she whispered, her head rested between their shoulders for a long moment. “With the war so close…”

When Zelda pulled away, her hands were open and waiting for the book, which Link handed to her dutifully. Without a word she flipped it open and started pulling through pages with a concentration Link wasn’t sure he could break. And he hated to interrupt her research but they needed determine if the Master Sword was a viable option.

“Zelda,” Link started warily, catching her attention again. “We need the Ocarina.”

Her tired crystal eyes snapped back up to him. “Yes…I have been thinking about that too. I was thinking the sword…well, it might be able to destroy the marks at the very least.”

Link hadn’t considered it and the proposition sent a rippled of hope and excitement through his stomach. The Master Sword was evil’s bane. It was the most powerful sword in the world. If anything could break the seal it would be the Master Sword. Perhaps that’s what the Goddesses had been trying to tell them through the warning of premonition.

Zelda set down the book and opened a drawer, pulling out the familiar blue instrument. But she looked hesitant as she held it in her palms as though it was a living thing. “The Sages…don’t approve. They say nothing in the prophecy states the sword would be used.”
“That shouldn’t matter. I’m the Hero of Time, whether I want to be or not, so I’m the only person worthy to wield the sword and save the damn country again. Or so the prophecy claims.”

Zelda shook her head, closing her eyes while her brows furrowed into a straight, hard line; she looked so exhausted, as though dredging the information out of her mind was a chore. “The Sages believe it is possible the Goddesses will not let you have the sword back.”

Link shook his head. “Then how can I possibly defeat Foursky?”

“You have wielded the sword once as this incarnation…they may not allow you to wield it twice. Surely they must believe you can defeat him without the sword.”

Anger buzzed through his mind. What were the Goddesses playing at? After everything they had forced him through…there were no records of any Hero before him being forced into two prophecies during one lifetime. The events so far were already an anomaly.

So what was Link supposed to do? Fight Foursky with a damn Deku Stick? He might as well be considering the Moon Blade, while powerful and finely-crafted, was no Master Sword.

“We still have to try,” Sheik broke the silence, touching his shoulder lightly. Link tried his hardest to ensure his anger didn’t pass through their Congruence but it clearly did anyway considering the frown on the Sheikah’s face.

“Of course,” Zelda sighed, a tight grimace on her mouth. The Ocarina was placed in Link’s hands and the tremor of magic it still held wormed its way through his fingers.

“Zelda…you need to sleep,” Link told her quietly, taking her hand and squeezing it gently; she felt so cold. “Please go sleep. Take a sleeping draught.”

“I must review the exodus order one more time before I present it to the cabinet.” Zelda rubbed at her eyes and leaned back in her chair. “I will rest once I’m done.”

The Queen sent them away before Link could argue anymore; years of friendship told him she would vet it another three times before resting only a few hours. He didn’t doubt tomorrow would deepen the dark circles hanging under her eyes.

“I don’t know what we’ll do if the Goddesses refuse to open the Door of Time,” Link muttered as they left the quiet castle and made their way down the hill to Castle Town. The night was clear and surprisingly cool, the splatter of stars overhead out-shined by the waxing moon nearing its zenith.

Link once found comfort in its silver light – now it only offered dread.

“We will do what we have always done: figure it out as we go,” Sheik assured him, touching his arm lightly.

Link could only nod and sigh in an attempt to find solace in the statement. Yes, they would figure it out as they went. They were pretty good at that. The warm companionship of Sheik at his side helped. Having this new relationship helped. He could only hold on to it and endeavor to trust the Goddesses’ intentions.

They had a reason for everything so far, right?
Link hadn’t been to the Temple since the war. Tucked away to the east of Castle Town, it was a towering, ancient vigil pressed tightly against the foothills between them and Death Mountain. The sight of the Temple bothered him now. Going back and forth between childhood and adulthood had made it an unpleasant place; changing like that had always been painful for him.

They stepped through the great doorway and inside to the chilly air that always permeated through the Temple. The Spiritual Stones glittered on the other side of the marble chamber and their footsteps volleyed back and forth against the hard, stone walls.

“Do you remember the song?” Sheik asked.

“I couldn’t forget it, even if I tried.”

The songs had long since haunted his dreams, each melody Sheik taught him just another piece to the soundtrack of horror the war had summoned. Some weren’t so bad though – Bolero of Fire and Sun’s Song were the only two that had managed to avoid his nightmares.

“Promise me you will not punch the Door of Time if it does not open,” Sheik pleaded, giving him an exasperated glance.

“My anger problem isn’t that bad, Sheik.”

Link was thrown a wholly unconvinced look at that.

The Door of Time loomed before them, still very alive with magic. The Ocarina in his hand seemed to shiver in response to the proximity. Standing there again in front of the door, Link recalled the last time he had opened it Ganondorf had stormed into the Sacred Realm and stole a piece of the Triforce. A very large part of him didn’t want to open it again, and not only because of that memory – he didn’t want to see the sword. Link didn’t want to even see the pedestal. He didn’t want to feel that blade against his back again.

But it was their only hope.

Link brought the Ocarina to his lips and played the Song of Time, the somber, mellow timbre tugging his mind away to damp chambers or burning temples and old gray stones that disappeared in the song’s wake. The Temple of Time rang around him as a loud crack of sound seemed to come from somewhere other than the Door in front of them. It ripped him away from the memories that had flashed painfully through his mind and he glanced around but there was suddenly nothing to see.

All around him was white, the entire Temple torn from existence to maroon him in nothing. A shock of awareness struck him like lightning, rooting his feet to nothing, and filling his head with uncomfortable electricity.

Link was there but he also wasn’t. The experience was disturbing and hopelessly abstract. He wasn’t in a real place. This wasn’t real. But he could feel his body and see his own hands. It was as though he was dreaming…but not.

Link called out to Sheik but the name echoed uselessly into gibberish around him. He tried to see anything in the white void, but it was endless and offered nothing to spatially orient himself.

*You may not wield the Master Sword.*
The voices were massive in a chorus of three, androgynous and haunting. The sound shook his entire body and filled his consciousness so completely it lingered there like a caress.

“But I must!” Link cried, feeling a deep sense of panic and unease. His voice reverberated around him into unintelligible noise but he fought through the confusing mess to be heard.

The unnatural sensation of being before a vast and unfathomable presence profoundly threatened his notion of reality. Link felt as though he was surrounded by giants so enormous he couldn’t see them no matter how much he tried to find a better vantage point…but there was nothing before him – just white. How was that even possible?

Link had never been in the true presence of the Goddesses until now and he wasn’t sure he would ever want to repeat the experience.

*You may not.*

“How will I defeat Foursky, then? How will I save Sheik? How will I fulfill this prophecy?” Link shouted, anger spewing through each word. Because how could they do this to him? How could they keep the only thing that would save Hyrule away from him?

*You may not yield the Master Sword.*

“Then what am I supposed to do?” he said with a venom he couldn’t control. “Why are you doing this to me again? Why won’t you help me?

*We have always helped you, Link.*

His composure fell apart at their unison words, Link’s mind raging in a fashion that carried him away composure.

“LIES!” he roared. “You’ve taken everything from me! You’ve taken my childhood, my sanity, and the people I love!”

*You were given the opportunity to regain all of that yet you chose to remain in a broken world, twisted by the toil of war. Your choice is your own. You cannot blame us for this.*

“Have I no free will? Have I no choice in my future? Am I just your slave? I found the one thing in the world I wanted and chose to stay so I wouldn’t lose it – and yet you punish me for it!

*It is not a punishment. Everyone has a path, Link. Yours must be with us once more to correct reality. You cannot change this. To despair over it will only bring further pain.*

“Then why won’t you help me now? Why must reality to corrected?” Link demanded, feeling more desperate than he had ever felt in his life. How could they lack so much compassion? How could they expect so much and return nothing?

*We have always helped you, Link. There is intention behind everything we have created and caused.*

“You’ve always helped me? Prove it by saving Sheik! Help me save him!” Link pleaded, reaching pointlessly in front of him to things he couldn’t see. He wanted to pull, tug, *take*. Please, help. Just
help.

Sheik has a role to play. He may not deviate from it.

“Then why show me the premonition?!” he snarled. “Why torture us with a future we cannot change?!”

The premonition is set in the stone of time. It may not be altered. You must prepare for what happens after the vision. That is why we showed all of you what is to pass. It is the beginning of a battle that must occur to return balance to the timeline you disrupted.

Link wanted to hit something, attack something, find something tangible to exert force on. Because most of his problems were solved in combat. But what could he possibly do to change what they were suggesting? It was no different than a beetle trying to move the castle.

After everything he had sacrificed for them, would they truly do nothing to avoid Sheik’s future?

“How can you just let this happen?! I don’t care what your plans are – just leave Sheik out of this! Tell me what am I supposed to do! I will do anything to just keep Sheik safe! Let me do that!”

You must wait. You must wait until the sky falls. Only then may we help you.

The sky falls? What did that mean?

The False God will be awakened with the dreadful heart of the cursed. He will gain power greater than has ever been seen. Only then may we help you.

What does that mean?! Don’t speak in riddles! What is the dreadful heart? What’s coming?!

We will meet again, Link.

And then he was swallowed by darkness.

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“Link!”

He cracked open his eyes and groaned involuntarily. His body ached from impact when he was pulled away to…where ever he went, unsure of how much time had passed. His ears were ringing and his vision was unfocused. The high, black ceiling of the Temple of Time yawned above him until worried red eyes blocked his view and hands helped him from the cold marble floor.

“Link, are you okay?” Sheik demanded, keeping his hands on Link’s shoulders to steady him.

Compared to the horrible white of that abyss, the Temple was incredibly dim and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. Anger was still pulsating through his head and he knew Sheik could sense it.

The Goddesses.

“I was in the presence…of the Goddesses. They spoke to me,” Link told him, his jaw clenching. The shock in Sheik’s face would’ve been comical at any other time, but his rage was too burning, too dangerous. “They will not allow me to wield the sword.”
“Then how are we to prevent the premonition?” Sheik insisted incredulously.

“We…don’t,” he growled, nails biting hard into his palms. “They’re just going to let it happen.”

Sheik fell silent, fingers tight on Link’s shoulders as though he was trying to hold them both together.

But Link couldn’t stand there any longer, the fury boiling inside his chest like the crater of Death Mountain. He broke their contact to spin around and punch the Door of Time so hard his fist cracked the ancient stone. The familiar sensation of broken bones shot up his arm but he felt nothing but the rush of adrenaline.

He couldn’t stay there in that horrible Temple, a place so dear to the Goddesses that would betray him.

Without another word, Link stormed out. His mind was a raging storm and he couldn’t think farther than get out, even if he tried. Sheik may have said his name, but Link couldn’t hear beyond the ringing still in his ears. He burst into the cool night air, wanting to scream but unable to unclench his jaw.

Link had no idea where he was going, his legs propelling him forward in a mindless rhythm. He was heading back towards the castle and maybe that was good. But then maybe it wasn’t. Link was fairly sure if anyone tried to stop him he would likely kill them. His grip on control was gone and he might as well have been simply a passenger to his body.

How could the Goddesses do this to him? It wasn’t even about how they had tortured him anymore; it was about the fate of Hyrule. How many horrors would they force their people through? How far would they allow the bloodshed to go? How much tragedy would it take to “balance the timeline”, whatever that meant?

Link couldn’t be their champion anymore. He couldn’t be their soldier. He couldn’t be their slave. He felt so powerless, so insignificant, so small. There was nothing he could do to stop what was coming and he would be truly, utterly on his own when they reached the final battle.

Damn the Goddesses.

He found himself on a training ground somehow, the same one Link and Sheik had argued on about traveling to the Nether. In the moonlight Link could see the wooden dummies used for target practice and, without a word, drew the Moon Blade and attacked them. Because Link had to vent the anger somehow or he would burn up. And at least there was something inanimate to take the brunt of his rage rather than a living person.

The fervor of attack was a mindless, sometimes meditative thing. Perhaps the reason Link had never focused on magic was for its quiet nature. Magic could yield unimaginable and violent powers, but the beginning of every spell was calm concentration. As a swordsman, his concentration was completely different. It was focused and hostile and entirely physical. As each blow sounded into the night air, his mind slipped further and further into vacant rage. The only thing that resonated through his head was a mantra of Betrayal.

Because Link felt the Goddesses had abandoned him. They burdened him in every way and left him alone in the aftermath, like the start of his life in the woods where The Great Deku Tree took
Like the Heroes before him, Link had lain his life down for his country. He had done his time. He had given every part of himself to the cause. And if he were to be dragged down again into solitary prophecy, so be it. But now the Goddesses would stand by and allow the last thing he had to be taken.

And he couldn’t bear it.

How could Link possibly save everyone when the Goddesses wouldn’t even help him?

There was a bright clash of iron and he was startled out of his mindless tirade. In the milky light in the training grounds, Sheik stood before him, blocking his next swing to only the post that was left of the dummy. Debris was scattered around from his attack and there was emotion in Sheik’s eyes that pushed Link’s fury back down before it spewed out once more.

Sheik deftly knocked the sword out of Link’s hand to land a few paces away. Only then was he aware of how exhausted he was and how hard he was sweating. It had been so long since Link’s anger had consumed him like that. It reminded him of the times after the war, when the flashes of monsters and dungeons would take him over and torture him into a rage.

But this had been much scarier.

More than his post-war trauma, he was reminded of his time in the Nether after Sheik had died. It reminded him of digging holes with furious abandon and screaming in the agony of loss.

“Stop,” Sheik ordered, voice hard and absolute as he drove his own sword upright into the hard dirt of the training ground. He stepped forward and held Link’s face in his hands. With the rage was still lingering under Link’s skin, he wanted to step back before he did something stupid. Sheik wouldn’t allow it, however, as a hand grasped at the collar of his tunic and held him in place roughly. “Stop, Link.”

A calm flow of energy that wasn’t his pushed through their connection and dissolved the anger like cold water to wildfire. Congruence wove slowly through his chest, slowing his pulse as he began to resurface from the haze. There was a very hard seriousness in Sheik’s face, but it was accompanied by a warm tenderness that made Link abandon his attempt to move away. He set his hands over Sheik’s, closed his eyes, and tried to ground himself.

Right. Calm. Focus.

No matter the apathetic ways of the Goddesses…it didn’t change that something horrible was coming for them in just days. He needed to get a grip.

You must prepare for what happens after the vision. That is why we showed all of you what is to pass.

Link had to prepare. He didn’t have time to be hacking at target dummies like an angry child, lost to the anger of divine injustice. Letting out a long sigh, he rubbed at his face with his good hand. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Sheik told him gently. “Let me see your hand.”
Link offered it up obediently, feeling a little silly for breaking it. Who knew how many times Sheik had healed his knuckles as they were perpetually meeting immoveable objects. Either he was punching a monster with too hard of skin or armor, or he was punching hard surfaces out of frustration.

Okay, maybe he *did* have a tiny bit of an anger problem he would eventually need to address…

Sheik untied Link’s gauntlet and slid the glove off carefully, the shift sending a bite of pain up his arm. In his mindless rage he hadn’t noticed the ache even while gripping the hilt of his sword. Now it made him bite his tongue to keep a yelp from fighting its way out of his mouth.

*Link* was the moron that punched the wall; he wasn’t going to allow himself to whine about it now. The line of knuckles were swollen, purple, and crooked, several bones clearly shattered and dislocated. Looking at the damage made him feel even more idiotic so he looked away when Sheik gave him an irritated look.

“Link, *please* stop punching walls,” Sheik stressed. “I am going to die at a young age with how often you do things like this.”

“It’s just a broken hand. Nag me about something more serious than this,” Link complained, feeling the familiar tingling of Sheik’s magic and the uncomfortable shift and crack of mending bones. He tried not to wince when a sharp twinge shot up his arm and into his shoulder.

“Okay, how about jumping off a tower and tackling a Bloodback to the ground? Shall I nag you about that?” Sheik shot back, raising a blonde eyebrow in challenge.

“I would be worried if you ever stopped,” Link assured him in defeat.

Sheik just let out a long sigh and threaded his long fingers around Link’s. His maroon eyes fell to their joined hands and a dark look passed his face, the Congruence between them a soft hum.

“Our fates have always been tied together, even before the Congruence was awakened. I think I always knew that somehow. I just want you to be okay, to be safe. That is all I have ever wanted, Link.”

The words startled him, their bond answering in kind. Something about it left Link suddenly feeling profoundly vulnerable and terrified at what had become the truth depth of their relationship. Perhaps he had imagined such admissions would end after their moment of calm in Vrika. But he was grateful they hadn’t and found a sense of security in that fact.

Suddenly, the loneliness he had felt rotting in his mind amongst the anger melted away and, for the first time, he felt whole.

Truly whole.

Link recanted his experience with the Goddesses as they made their way back to the castle. He knew he would need to inform Zelda of what had transpired and return the Ocarina before the Sages had a meltdown. Link attempted to prepare his explanation to Zelda for why he had basically screamed at the Goddesses…but he came up short. Sheik didn’t really seem to be that disapproving about Link’s conduct during his audience with the creators of Hyrule…But Zelda would be a different story.
“I wish I could figure out they meant by the sky falling,” Link wondered as they trudged back through the night.

“The Goddesses have always been a little gratuitous with their verbiage, but they are relatively literal. I would assume we will know it when we see it,” Sheik offered.

“They know I could stop what’s coming if I have that damn sword...so why do they want it to play out?”

“Perhaps to lure Foursky into his full power? Considering what the Goddesses were alluding to, it seems like controlling everyone is...not his endgame,” Sheik said slowly, as though he were figuring it out as he spoke. “Perhaps the Goddesses need everything to play out to place Foursky in the perfect spot for defeat.”

“Then why couldn’t they just explain that?” Link complained.

“It could be that our awareness of certain things would alter the coming events, but that is only a guess”

“All of your guesses have been right so far, Sheik.”

Link’s words earned a shrug and they fell silent, lost in their own thoughts. Sheik made a very good point and while Link had long-since thought there was something bigger coming than just possessing the words, he hadn’t really explored the concept that their ignorance was actually an advantage.

What would they have to allow to destroy Foursky? What did Foursky want and how could it make him vulnerable?

Ganondorf had wanted the Triforce. Did Foursky want the same thing? That was unlikely considering it hadn’t been mentioned at all. Foursky and Evanna didn’t even seem to be aware of it, their only interests thus far being Vaspra and the words. Even the prophecy itself seemed to ignore its existence.

Zelda wasn’t in her study when they returned, the room dark and long cold. Link could only hope she had finally gone to bed as he returned the Ocarina to the drawer. Perhaps it was best to wait until morning to share their revelations and incite Zelda’s wrath; it was well past midnight and Link could feel a fuzzy exhaustion creeping into his mind.

When they reached the corridor to their rooms, Link realized he had forgotten to share one very strange part of his conversation with the Goddesses.

“They said something about balancing the timeline and correcting reality. They said I was given the opportunity to regain everything I lost in the war – my friends, my childhood…but I made the choice to stay, to decline Zelda’s offer to return me to my youth. I have to assume all of this is happening because my decision to stay created the imbalance.” Link chest felt tight as he finally admitted what had been stirring deep in his mind since his audience with their creators.

Sheik stopped short at this, giving Link an intense look. “No, Link, I do not believe that. This is not your fault. The Hero is reincarnated to fight evil; if you had returned to your youth, the war against Ganondorf would have never happened which leads me to believe you would’ve had yet another battle to face.”
Link hadn’t considered that but then it was hard to imagine a timeline that no longer existed. His opportunity had come and passed with their brief possession of the Triforce.

“Do not let your guilt bring regret,” Sheik said quietly.

The notion of regret gave Link worry. Without thinking, he reached out and pulled the Sheikah closer to him, fingers firm on Sheik’s elbows.

“I don’t regret my decision. I never will. It's the best decision I ever made. I would never take it back,” Link said, voice made low and rough by exhaustion and emotion.

Sheik’s eyes turned molten in response to the wave of Congruence that swelled between them, his fingers reaching up to brush through Link’s hair with a softness still so new.

“I know.” His voice was like velvet, the conviction in the response a real feeling floating between them.

Of course Sheik knew that. There weren’t any uncertainties between them anymore – only clarity and affection.

Sheik touched his shoulder lightly before ordering Link to bed, pulling away reluctantly. They went their separate ways, the ghost of Congruence nipping down his spine for a moment. It kept Link wide awake for a few minutes as he lay stiffly in his bed. He wished he could be back in Sheik’s bed in Vrika. Actually, he wished he was in Sheik’s bed in Hyrule.

Link wanted to laugh at himself because, in another time, Sheik would’ve teased him for thinking such mushy things. But Link had to honestly force himself to lay there and not go to Sheik who was probably camped out in the library now that he had gotten adequate rest in Vrika.

It wasn’t that he thought Sheik would mind – probably quite the opposite – but he still felt somewhat disoriented by the shift between them. Although Link found much comfort in their newfound intimacy, it was overwhelming in a way that kept him from getting up to join Sheik. He knew he needed rest to be of any use tomorrow.

Link couldn’t quite recall how long he laid there before his mind faded into dreams.

_The stars were plummeting to the earth, the fog of clustered stars shrouding them like storm clouds. The silver moon careened down towards them, the night sky raining down like inky rain to stain the grass around them._

_You must prepare for what happens after the vision. That is why we showed all of you what is to pass._

_Perhaps the Goddesses need everything to play out to place Foursky in the perfect spot for defeat._

_Three days._

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I’m uploading this from a moving car to New Orleans on my dying phone, running off 4 hours of sleep. You could call me dedicated but it’s really just an example of how mental I am. Also I love
you all. Also The Gays™ are very important.

So, probably the highlight of my weekend was discovering that two beautiful people that read Congruent cosplayed said Gays™ and, let me tell you, they perfectly captured exactly what was in my head. Search for Sasurialian and Creativelea2 on Instagram and the URLs Sasurialian and Creativelea on Tumblr. You can also go to my tumblr (URL is Sincosma) and go to the “Congruent” tag to find a bunch of the photos they uploaded there.

Leah and Kassidy, I thank you for the bottom of my heart. You’re both incredibly talented and I love you both!

And thank you to everyone that’s been reviewing, favoriting, kudo-ing, and making artwork for this story! I will never stop being overwhelmed and humbled by your support.
XXXII.

Breakfast was a three hour affair.

It went from being the first meal of the day to a debate that plowed through the first four meetings scheduled for that morning. Link, Sheik, and Zelda leaned with heavy elbows against the table trying to logic through what the Goddesses could’ve meant and how to proceed. Zelda, of course, had been furious when Link admitted to his behavior towards the Goddesses.

“I cannot believe you, the champion of the Goddesses, would stand before our creators and be so disrespect—”

“Zelda, I believe I have legitimate reasons to be unhappy with them right now,” Link interrupted, shooting her a tired glare.

“Why can’t you just trust them? They clearly have a plan for all of this. If there is some sort of error in the timeline, it needs to be rectified. Trust their judgment,” she snapped, her patience wearing too thin before her coffee could take full effect.

“I don’t have the same faith in them as you, Zelda. Not after what they’ve put me through,” Link bit right back. “I apologize in advance for my indignation, but you really haven’t had to endure the horrors I have, Zelda. You’re a reincarnation of a Goddess. I’m the reincarnation of a sacrifice to Hyrule. If I choose to think lowly of them I have every right to that opinion.”

And that efficiently shut her up because, of course, he was right although it wasn’t his intention to be rude. Zelda had lost her parents – something Link could relate to – and been forced into hiding for almost the entire war. But she had been safe with Impa and Sheik while Link was trying to simultaneously be seven years older than he was and also save a kingdom.

Of course Zelda knew he was right and their respect for one another went far deeper than rank; she never said another word about it for the rest of the meeting and Link was grateful.

“Regardless of what the Goddesses have planned, I’m still in the camp that we fight and do everything within our power to keep the words out of Foursky’s hands. They were not explicit about our actions moving forward so I believe we should act as we normally would,” Link determined, breaking the stiff silence fell over the room. “We still need to decide what we’re going to do with Kalyh. Is she to stay here or go to battle with us?”

“I believe she will be a liability,” Zelda suggested. “I propose she be placed somewhere safe while we fight. I still think that is our most viable option.”

“And I strongly disagree,” Sheik countered, surprising Link. He had assumed the Sheikah was still on Zelda’s side of the subject.

“Why?” the Queen asked incredulously, clearly just as confused.

“The reality is this: there is nowhere other than the Sacred Realm that we can place her with
guaranteed safety. Kalyh, over the past few days we have been training, has revealed more details about Foursky and the method in which he operates. Combined with our new information from the Goddesses, I think if he does not see Kalyh in our party he will abandon the battle to find her. This action could alter the Goddesses’ plans.”

A tense quiet settled over the table as the possibility was considered.

“But I do not recall seeing Kalyh in the premonition,” Zelda offered after a few more moments of thought. “All I see is Fousky, Evanna, the three of us, and the Royal Armies. There was no other specific person.”

“Are we going to risk damaging the timeline further because of that? The Goddesses showed us the premonition because…it must happen that way. Foursky must obtain the words.”

The idea sent waves of dread through Link’s chest. Was Sheik really going to accept his fate like that?

“No, Sheik,” Link argued, struggling to keep the fear out of his voice. “I don’t care about the timeline. We can’t play into this.”

“I know,” Sheik replied, casting Link a gentle, sad look. “But I fear an unknown if we do not play into it. What if the alternative is worse? At least we know this future.”

“That doesn’t make it any better!” he insisted.

“Hold on, Link.” Zelda spoke up, intervening on what could easily escalate into a heated shouting match. “There is something I have been wondering – according to the premonition Foursky obtains Hexam and uses it to control Sheik to kill you, Link. Why is that? Is Foursky aware of the prophecy stating you are impervious to the words…or is because Foursky only has Hexam and not Hexa?”

Link went stiff, feeling suddenly off axis again.

“How would he…?”

“Think about it,” Zelda went on, her words growing in volume as the epiphany grew in her mind. “The bodies on the field in the premonition…they were slain, clearly cleaved through by swords. From my research of Hexa, I have learned it leaves no mark – the victim simply drops dead!”

None of them knew what to do with what Zelda had suggested. They all sat in dumbfounded silence as though the passing minutes would bring them closer to solution.

But they didn’t.

A servant knocked incessantly on the door until Zelda beckoned them in with an air of irritation.

“I apologize, my Queen, but the cabinet are demanding you join them – it’s urgent.”

“Urgent,” Zelda repeated, voice tight like a sharp wire. A moment of static appeared to sit in Zelda’s mind before she let out a deep sigh. “Of course. Tell them I am en route.”

The servant hurried away in a flurry and Zelda grumbled under her breath, “Urgent my ass.”
Link had never heard her sound quite so crass, but he had to admit the situation was worth it. There wasn’t much they could debate anymore – they all had plenty to think about. Sheik was forced to return to the training field with Kalyh, unwilling to leave them unattended for much longer. Link wasn’t sure if Sheik would discuss what the Goddesses had said with Kalyh but he would have to trust his companion’s judgement.

Jalin’s words floated back through his head for a moment: *I have told you these things not because I do not trust our leader, but because I simply do not know everything that is to come. Kalyh, like Kafei, keeps secrets and it is very likely they are dangerous secrets to have. She has said the less people know, the safer everyone is.*

They were surrounded by a plot too unstable to predict anymore. Trapped somewhere between the safety of ignorance and the agony of foresight.

Link’s day was a blur of what it had been for almost two weeks now: signing lots of parchment, going through storerooms with the Lieutenant General and Major General, overseeing training exercise after training exercise, and continuously going over the budget with Zelda and her cabinet. He felt like a frantic Cucco running around the castle all day to jump in and out of Zelda’s meetings and hurrying from training ground to training ground. Some of the men had even started teasing him about zipping around like a hummingbird.

Even after two years of his employment to the Throne, Link was still fairly unfamiliar with the intricacies of military jargon and proceedings. Some people were snarky about it; others were forgiving and helped him out when something went over his head. Because it wasn’t that he was incapable. He was the Hero, after all. Those same people who shot him a look when he had to ask what was presumably a dumb question in their opinion still showed him respect when he gave them a direct order.

It was close to sundown when the exodus order was finally enacted. While Link had been partially involved in its paperwork, he and Sheik were no more informed of its plan than the civilians gathered below the balcony.

The evacuation was not entirely mandatory – there was no time to police the people of Hyrule and shove them out – but the Queen’s words were not delicate when she described vaguely the horrors to come. She implored them to cooperate and the fear alive in the eyes of her people was evidence that the tragedy of the last war was still very fresh in their minds.

The choice to evacuate to Vrika was obvious; although Evanna had found its location, it was the fastest route to take the people of Hyrule very far away. Part of the fifth garrison was assigned to accompany the journey, only twenty or so to remain stationed in Vrika for protection. Those who could not reach the castle for the main evacuation were granted permission to cross borders into the neighboring kingdoms as temporary refugees.

The people of Hyrule that chose to leave departed that night, trekking across Hyrule Field in a mass of hundreds of people. There was no time to waste despite how Zelda wished to have enacted the exodus sooner, to have given her people more time to pack up their lives.

Although Link had been prepared to aid in the process, he still found himself overwhelmed as the evacuation pushed them all well past midnight. Link hardly had a moment to stand still as he helped families load up carts and merge into the lines for Kakariko. People squabbled over supplies and family heirlooms, none quite sure what – if any – destruction would ensue. While it was never anything close to a riot, there was a very heavy sense of anxiety and tension in the air as the voices
of children rang out to their parents over and over, asking incessantly where they were going.

It reminded Link too strongly of the war.

*At least they’re getting out, though,* he continued to tell himself through the night. *They will be safe.*

Much of the royalty left, leaving for neighboring kingdoms instead. Most of the cabinet, to Link’s great surprise, stayed. Perhaps Link hadn’t given them enough credit – although he hadn’t *meant* to think they were all fluff and no talk, even four ladies of the court stayed as well. Clearly he had misjudged the resolve of those raised in a privileged life.

Link was genuinely surprised to learn the Duchess Morsa was one of the ladies that chose to remain.

He had rarely seen her since that morning she woke him up in the library but in the midst of the evacuation Link caught sight of her. Morsa hurried past in *trousers* helping a group of people load boxes onto carts. Her bright blonde hair was scooped back in a bun and there was a determination in her green eyes that Link hadn’t seen before. Despite how annoying she was and her father’s place in the cabinet...he had to respect her for pitching in and staying; Morsa could have easily requested her father send her back home to her mother.

By the time a majority of the city was evacuated, dawn was only a few hours away and Link felt great pride at just how quickly they managed to move everyone. Castle Town was eerily quiet as he and Sheik saw the last family off, stopping just short of the drawbridge. With the evacuation complete, the bridge would be raised and the castle sealed until their march to war. A knot of worry stayed firmly in Link’s stomach as the sky lifted from black to indigo, the prelude to sunrise.

Far across the rolling fields, Link could see signs of more people evacuating, tiny lights moving on the horizon. The mass of Castle Town citizens was a great glimmering snake slithering its way for Kakariko; the image was surreal.

It was happening. The war was happening.

“Just a month ago...I was complaining about that awful outfit I had to wear for my ceremony,” Link muttered as he and Sheik lingered on the bridge, the moat bubbling beneath them while a hot spike of air rushed by like summer’s final hurrah.

Link wanted nothing more than to sleep for another seven years but he knew rest would be scarce until the battle. Only a month ago he could sleep soundly through the night. How could things have changed so quickly?

“Oh, but you looked so happy in it. I thought you loved it,” Sheik teased tiredly.

“I’d give anything to be back in it right now, standing in that ceremony again,” he said roughly, turning his back on the field and heading for the gatehouse. Sheik moved to follow him.

“Why?”

“Because Evanna had been standing in the front row. If only I had known,” Link sighed. “Perhaps I could’ve ended this before it all started.”
“You know it would not have changed anything. And it would not have worked out well for you had you acted on it,” Sheik reminded him. “Not to mention she is immortal.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

They raised the bridge and made their way back to the castle, the smokey scent of doused fireplaces thick in the air.

“You need to sleep, Link,” Sheik commented. “You look exhausted. Did you sleep at all last night?”

Link shrugged – he didn’t even know the answer when all his days seemed to blend together.

“I can make you a sleeping draught if you would like.”

And as much as Link didn’t want to put Sheik to any trouble, he was so tired. He knew what was going to happen, too: he was going to lie in his bed and stare at the ceiling for hours. He’d play the day over and over in his head. When Link’s body would slip into unconsciousness he would only wake up again to terrible visions so he agreed.

The castle was silent, the hallways stacked with supplies that had been dredged from every storeroom they had. Zelda had gone to bed a few hours prior after the insistence of Link and Sheik, nearly threatening her with force if she didn’t go. The marble corridors were empty, maids and butlers long gone for Vrika; very little of the staff remained, too frightened by Zelda’s words to find their courage.

Pink muted light was shying in through windows and following them down the hall – no matter how many times Link had done it, staying awake until sunrise would always be disorienting.

“Tonight is the banquet…the night after that is the war,” Link said hoarsely.

Sheik just nodded as they reached the Sheikah’s room and was beckoned in. Link was ordered to sit on the bed, the familiar Sheikah incense filling his nose like it had in Vrika. The room felt just as stale too; Sheik hadn’t been sleeping at all so by all rights it probably hadn’t been used very much in a couple weeks. It was still just as bare as Link’s, save the desk and scales and beakers. And that was where Sheik went to work as Link had an internal, sluggish panic about where he sat.

A blush started to creep up his neck – here he was in Sheik’s bed. Again.

Despite the drain of his exhaustion, a hot spike of what he recognized as desire pressed through his abdomen. Link watched him, his eyes following the lines of Sheik’s lithe body he had never watched with such concentration. Because, while Sheik had long-abandoned that tight body suit, his clothes were still close fitting and Link was getting completely lost in the downward curve of a long, flexible spine and how it dipped and then…

“I wanted to apologize for my words in our meeting with Zelda,” Sheik said, eyes still fixed on the smoking beaker before him. “I hope you know I fear this premonition just as much as you do.”

Link was sobered up by the words, feeling his face fold in sadness. “Of course I know that, Sheik.”

“I worry that if we do not abide by the Goddesses’ prophecy…that some sort of punishment might incur.” Sheik glanced over at him, eyes bright with a pain Link didn’t expect.
“What do you mean?”

“Amidst this entire plot, I feel that our Congruence was not planned for,” he explained with careful words. “As though somehow the Goddesses had not foreseen it or…perhaps our connection is a symptom of this error in the timeline.”

Link didn’t like where this was heading.

“If you had returned to the past, seven years before Ganondorf’s arrival to the castle, you would have stayed with the Kokiri. We would have never met, never awakened our Congruence. Vrika would not have been attacked, I would have grown to lead my people, Kalyh and I…”

It wasn’t jealousy, but a horrible dark pain jabbed through Link’s stomach at the thought of their separated lives, their ignorance to each other, what had grown between them never to happen.

The thought of such a reality hurt him too deeply.

A weight settled next to him and Sheik said quietly, “I am so grateful that you stayed, Link. I have no remorse for ruining our creators’ plans.”

Link wasn’t sure what to say, his tired head lost in a cloud of “what if’s”, an angst sitting solidly in his chest that felt unshakable. Sheik placed a warm cup in his hands, the aroma of mint and chamomile engulfing his nose.

“Thank you,” Link murmured, unsure if he was thanking Sheik for the draught or for his words.

A haze of time passed, Link entirely unsure of how long they sat as he surrendered to a lost trail of thoughts, Sheik a warm presence beside him.

“When this is all over…I want to leave,” Link told him after a while, the draught long gone and leaving a sweet taste in his mouth. It wasn’t present in his thoughts before, but there it was, summoned like a spell he hadn’t planned. “I don’t want to stay here and spend the rest of my life guarding this castle. I’ve already served my purpose once and now I will again.”

He peered over at Sheik who didn’t look quite as surprised as Link thought he might. Perhaps Sheik just knew him far too well now to be surprised by the places his mind traveled – with or without him, it seemed.

Sheik nodded. “You have the freedom to do whatever you want, Link. You deserve even more than that. When this is all over no one will stop you.”

If the words weren’t enough, the firm look in Sheik’s warm eyes convinced him that this was true. And Link had almost forgotten that he was free. He wasn’t just a slave to the Goddesses or the Throne. He could leave. He could go to other countries or to Termina or the sea…

“Well, will you go with me?” Link asked, before he could even consider his words and their selfish intent. The mention of the sea and glittering stones nestled in the bottom of his pack had likely summoned them.

How could he just expect Sheik to go with him, Congruence or not? No matter how much their relationship had changed in the past month and even the past few days, he couldn’t assume that
Sheik would follow him to the ends of the earth like Link would for him.

If Sheik wanted to stay...Link would stay, despite his desire to leave.

It was sentimental, yes, but it wouldn’t be the first time Link had made a decision like that for Sheik.

He earned a slightly annoyed, half incredulous expression and Link, for a moment, didn’t know what it meant. Sheik shook his head and furrowed his brows. “That is a stupid question, Link.”

And he didn’t know what else to do but reach out, pull down that annoying cowl, and join their lips in a warm kiss. Because Sheik’s loyalty was compelling and addictive and possibly the only thing keeping him afloat since they first met. Why he ever doubted that Sheik would follow, he didn’t even know – not when those hands were caressing his neck and that tongue ran gently along his lips.

The sleeping draught was laying a fog over his mind, strengthened further by the hot flash of Congruence through their contact. With hardly any provocation, a low moan climbed from his throat and the energy between them flared again, pleasure shooting through his limbs. Like their first kiss, Link felt a surge of power and emotion course through him that wasn’t native.

Sharing power.

Sheik’s tongue slid against his and the texture sent shivers down his spine. Without warning, he tugged Link on top of him and dragged him down by incessant fingers gripping his tunic. Every line of their bodies touched, the sensations driving Link into a wild fever he had never experienced before. The friction of every touch was a flash of electricity to set him ablaze.

And he would gladly let it.

Link wasn’t sure if it was the desperate aura of impending war or three years of pent up tension and emotions, but he had no intention of stopping the wildfire. Because if the Goddesses had their way, there was a very real and terrifying potential they would never have the opportunity again. And he could sense it through their bond:

Sheik knew and Sheik agreed.

With that silent affirmation, Link forced himself to slow down and turn the passionate kissing to something slow and measured. Because he didn’t want to rush something he might never have again. And also his utter lack of knowledge suddenly set his nerves on edge; how funny it was that he had defeated so many horrors, destroyed the King of Evil himself, yet was left somewhat terrified in the face of such intimacy.

But Sheik, being most likely the more experienced of them, ran circles over Link’s spine with soft, trembling fingers and it didn’t matter anymore.

They were both nervous, both overwhelmed, both at the mercy of the storm.

Burning hands roamed over Link’s broad chest and down long, tensed arms, tracing the lines of braided muscles. Sheik’s leg shifted in between his own and for one staggering moment Link couldn’t breathe past the sensation against his growing need. Another moan rumbled from him and Sheik broke the kiss to mouth at his neck. Link nearly collapsed on top of him, fingers tightening
around Sheik’s arm while the touch of lips and tongue and the nip of teeth on skin sent chills all over his body.

Then, rather suddenly, Sheik reversed their positions as he was clearly not satisfied with the options available to him. Link stared up for a breathless moment and almost lost himself in electric, scarlet eyes. Sheik pulled off his belt with in a deliberate, careful movement, sliding the tunic over his head. The surrender of control was foreign yet captivating; safe and comforting. Link had always laid his life in the hands of his companion, without reservation or hesitation. But this was different, however, as he endeavored to let go of his boundaries, to forfeit the cautious space they had been maintaining for years.

There was a pause, their breaths quickened in the too-warm room, Sheik’s hands hovering just over skin shining with sweat. Sheik stared at him for a long moment, eyes reading wondering disbelief.

“What?” Link whispered in a rough voice, tugging softly at Sheik’s hair.

“I just never thought…I would be allowed to have you,” he replied, so quietly Link wondered if it had been said aloud or in his head. And the statement sent thrills through Link’s stomach and downward – he reached up to trace the red scars on Sheik’s chin.

“The feeling is mutual.”

And Sheik remained, for a moment longer, somehow still mystified. Link reached up and pulled the cowl that dangled around his shoulders off, revealing sharp collar bones, the amulet coming loose and hanging between them to rest against Link’s chest. He tugged off Sheik’s tunic as well, having seen his chest hundreds of times but never like this.

This was his. It was a possessive feeling he had never felt so desperately.

_I just never thought I would be allowed to have you._

The words kept echoing through his mind and pulsing through the Congruence like a heartbeat. They lit him on fire and he pulled Sheik back down and ran his tongue along a heated collarbone, earning a sound that sent shivers through his limbs. Link was immediately addicted to its timbre, determined to do whatever was necessary to summon it again and again. He set his teeth against skin and ran fingers down the narrow torso above him.

And then Sheik ground their hips together and Link felt as though he had died for just a short moment. His eyes fell closed, bright light behind his eyelids, and a trembling groan tearing through his lips.

Whether it was the sleeping draught, the Congruence, or just his inexperience, Link had no idea. But the answer was lost on him as their lips joined again and he answered the movement with his own roll upwards. Heat had long since pooled in his groin and the feeling of Sheik hard against his leg was enough to illicit more noise from his throat.

The candle on Sheik’s desk was dying but the meager morning was washing through the window and it illuminated Sheik in a dim warm glow that made his eyes look like the molten circle of Death Mountain. He was all precise angles, long lean muscles, and hard lines. His lashes cast gossamer shadows over his high cheekbones and Link ran his fingers over them in between kisses.

The Congruence was a volatile storm between them, aching and throbbing and pushing and
demanding. The ambrosial scent of Sheik was intoxicating as Link buried his face amidst a golden tangle of hair and warm neck, moaning into yet another push of hips. Sheik nudged his head back and sucked hard at his bared throat causing Link’s fingers to convulse, digging into tensed shoulders.

“Are you sure you want this?” Sheik breathed, lips moving against his jugular. “You’re in no way obligated –”

“Stop talking, Sheik.”

That prompted a deep laugh and a long kiss like a thank you that stole Link’s breath.

If they survived the war, things could always be like this. This could be their future. They could leave together and travel and be like this. Link didn’t want to imagine it being any other way.

He wanted this feeling and this connection for the rest of his life.

It was a strange mixture of vulnerable and empowered as Sheik mouthed his way down Link’s torso. His body burned hotter and hotter as Sheik got lower and lower. And then his clothes were being nudged out the way and he was relatively sure he was going to lose his mind. For a very startling moment, he was exposed and tensed and somewhat petrified. Link hadn’t been with anyone so intimately, let alone allowed anyone to see him, and nothing was more sobering in his haze. But Sheik ran his fingers lightly from tip to base and Link forgot his apprehension.

The Congruence was a hammering, ringing bell in his ears and the very strange sensation of joint thoughts reached into his mind. He could sense Sheik’s thoughts, now a two-way connection rather than the one-sided Mind Speak Sheik had been using. He didn’t have time to examine the connection, however, when Sheik continued his ministrations, pulling sounds from Link he didn’t know he was capable of producing. It was overwhelming and intoxicating, the pleasure clouding his mind and leaving his thoughts in disarray.

Light strokes became firmer and when the first sensation of a wet, hot tongue joined callused fingers Link nearly climaxed immediately. Sheik, who surely could sense it through their Congruence, paused a moment until Link settled before starting again. Losing himself to the rhythm of motion, he buried his fingers in thick blonde hair and chewed hard into his lip. He hadn’t really imagined anything feeling this powerful. He couldn’t even keep his eyes open as the Congruence swallowed him whole.

Link was brought dangerously close to the edge again and again until he knew things would soon end and pulled and tugged until Sheik was back up in his face. The Sheikah looked so wild and beautiful in the moonlight, eyes flashing and lips swollen. Link ran his thumb over them, pulling at his chin and snaking his hand down to caress the hardness pressed to his leg. In return he was rewarded a harsh groan Link swallowed with a hard kiss. In the seconds Sheik fought for composure, he rolled over to press Sheik’s back to the bed.

He could almost feel the burning gaze melting into him as he pushed clothing out the way and moved his fingers slow enough to draw a long groan from the Sheikah beneath him.

If there was ever an opportunity for Link to feel completely out of his depth, it was in that moment. But Sheik’s reactions were enough to distract him from any moments of doubt, every twist of his fingers a search to discover all of the little things that made the man writhe.
Never had he seen Sheik so vulnerable and open and disheveled and he ate it up as Sheik’s head was thrown back, throat glistening from sweat and saliva – a gorgeous scene Link would likely never forget.

Before apprehension could interfere, Link ran his tongue down soft heated flesh and Sheik’s fingers pulled suddenly at his hair, the pain shooting waves of pleasure down his spine. He felt powerful in a way he had never experienced, focusing every bit of his attention to the sounds he could draw from the Sheikah’s mouth. Because his favorite version of Sheik was the one coming undone beneath him, panting and seizing and murmuring his name. Every time he ran his tongue over hard veins and soft ridges, the pleasure compounded through the Congruence like an unyielding rapture.

“Link,” Sheik begged, in an unraveled and hoarse voice. Hands were tugging on his arms, urging him to return – and there was no way Link could deny him anything with a voice like that.

In a deliberate motion, he dragged his body against the one beneath him and neither could keep quiet. He was coaxed back into a deep kiss, his lips almost painfully swollen but hardly caring as Sheik was suddenly a flex of powerful muscle beneath him. They moved hard together and the friction brought another flare of ecstasy and Congruence.

The pressure was overwhelming, its demand building between them and sealing them into a rhythm. Link was past thought, unable to keep his head up and instead burying his groans into Sheik’s neck. And the Sheikah wasn’t in much better shape as arms were bound around him so tightly Link could almost believe they would never separate.

And then he climaxed, shuddering his way down breathlessly and twisting his fingers in everything he could, biting down on the flesh at his teeth. Explosions of energy rattled his skull and his body heaved. It was enough to usher Sheik along right behind him and for one long, furious moment they were just gripping each other as though letting go would send them into the abyss.

They stayed like that for a while, the connection between them still holding although the high was beginning to fade. A warm fog remained hovering over Link’s mind, obviously from the sleeping draught, and he struggled to stay awake despite the comfort of Sheik’s heated arms wrapped around him.

It was safety. It was sanctuary. It was –

“As much as I do not want to move,” Sheik whispered, “we really shouldn’t fall asleep like…this.”

And Link groaned. Because there was a mess between them and he didn’t want to move. At all. “Don’t you know some sort of spell or something?” Link complained.

Sheik laughed beneath him. “A spell? Sure. It’s called get up so I can get a rag.”

“What a comedian,” he sighed, pressing his lips against the very obvious bite he had left behind. Tiredly, he rolled off of Sheik and sat up to peer blearily in the dim light of a sun not yet risen. A cloth was tossed his way and for a moment enjoyed his view of muscles rolling through Sheik’s back and the lovely, low hang of his trousers.

That possessive feeling filled Link’s thoughts once more and he welcomed it with a sleepy grin.

Once clean, he really only made it as far as pulling his trousers back up when the sleeping draught
got the best of him and he flopped backwards. The afterglow of orgasm and the numbing effect of the draught made his eyes heavy and robbed even the motivation to kick off his boots.

“Lazy,” Sheik teased quietly, tugging them off for him and nudging him over.

“You’re the one who gave me the sleeping draught,” Link muttered back.

“You are the one who drank it.”

“Hush,” he admonished half-heartedly, abandoning the fight to keep his eyes open. Link reached out blindly until he found Sheik’s hand and tugged until he felt weight return to the bed. He felt warm and boneless as he pressed himself against a warm body and was gathered into the Sheikah’s arms, soft breath in Link’s hair. The heat radiating off Sheik’s skin was making him a little too warm but he couldn’t care when everything felt so good; he couldn’t imagine a fairy pool ever touching it.

“I wish we could leave right now,” Link mumbled, mind starting to wander as a distinct disconnect formed between reality and just stray thoughts floating through his head. Just like being drunk, his words slurred together and he couldn’t manage to make his mouth cooperate, so he stopped trying.

Sheik still laughed at him a little bit, long fingers running over his spine and neck. “Let’s just wait until this little battle blows over. Then we can go.”

“We could’ve done this so long ago, Sheik. We’re so stupid,” he whined.

“Are you insinuating that we are both inept at articulating our emotions?” Sheik asked with a tired sarcasm. “I am offended.”

“Good. It’s all your fault anyway.”

“How is this my fault?” Sheik’s voice was velveteen and ribbing.

“You’re older than me. You should’ve spoken up,” Link quipped, poking lightly at Sheik’s arm.

“I will remember that next time we argue about maturity.” Link could feel a smile against his hair, a small chuckle coming from the Sheikah. “Go to sleep, Link.”

“Bossy,” he shot back and then promptly fell asleep.

Sheik has a great ass, pass it on.

Editing this chapter at work was fun – nothing like your boss interrupting you from your own porn. While I’ve generally been a “fade to black” kind of writer in recent years…well, I think ya’ll will forgive me for a little indulgence.

One thousand thank you for readers, reviewers, and artists for your words, love, and time. I am really lucky and grateful to have you all sending me kind words and encouragement.

If ya wanna follow me
Tumblr: sincosma
And now onward we go to the shit hitting the fan. o( `ω´)o
XXXIII.

It was likely sometime after noon when Link woke to a warm body on his chest and determined sleepily that he wanted to wake up like that every day. And to his surprise, Sheik was sound asleep. It set his anxiety at ease, as it always did when his lover found sleep.

Lover; the word surprised Link in the way it nestled deep into his mind like it belonged there.

Completely uncharted waters lay before him and his face flushed hot as memories played in his mind of the early morning before. His limbs were so heavy, moving them was a lost cause as remnants of the sleeping draught kept him still and warm.

Link’s mind continued to wander for a time, allowing himself the fantasies he normally kept in check…

Sheik woke eventually, pulling him away from very detailed thoughts, and tired red eyes surveyed him. And Link sincerely hoped he wasn’t quite as flushed as he feared. The Congruence brushed in his mind as Sheik wordlessly leaned over and touched their lips together. He was reminded of how he had tugged at Sheik’s lips all night, bringing him some guilt; Link certainly hadn’t helped given the habit Sheik already had of gnawing on them.

I don’t care, came a soft thought in his head.

Link pulled away in surprise. “You can hear my thoughts?”

“Since last night,” Sheik confirmed, voice hoarse from sleep.

“We were sharing power, too. Like the book said about Congruence.”

“Maybe this power I have now will be of real use. If I can share it with you tomorrow during the battle…” Sheik trailed off. Link could sense the ideas forming in the Sheikah’s head. Even if he couldn’t hear distinct words like Sheik seemed to be capable of, the connection brought him comfort.

They finally pulled away from their shared warmth, grimly knowing they would need to face their last day before the war with concentration. What they had shared would be filed away for later. And Link prayed there would be a later.

The Queen was found in the map room between meetings, heavy blue circles around her eyes, face pale, and dressed in a tunic and trousers. Her hair was pulled into a sloppy bun and there was a focus in her expression that reminded Link that she was first and foremost a warrior and strategist, a fact so obvious on the eve of war.

“Where have you two been?” Zelda asked quickly, voice sharper than she probably meant.

“We didn’t go to sleep until this morning, Zelda,” Link replied. It almost came out rudely but he managed a smirk in hopes she would take it as a quip.
“I’m sorry,” she apologized with a shake of her head, her eyes softening. “I’m…all over the place today. I was hoping to find you both after my next meeting to discuss the book. Unfortunately, I was not able to learn anything new about Congruence and how to sever it, or, at the very least, find a way around the death clause. It follows magical law, however, which is unsurprisingly when one considers the bond goes deep enough to tie together your auras.”

Link paused for a moment, remembering briefly their conversation before he traveled back to Vrika. “You mentioned that before I left. What exactly does it mean when auras are tied together?”

Zelda sat back against her chair, letting go of her quill and watching it flutter to the table. It looked as though she had to dredge her thoughts up from her mind like dead weight – Link had never seen her summon words so slowly.

“I’ve only seen something like this once before, and only for a moment so I failed to find its source, let alone study it. Auras, in a sense, are the energy output of our souls. Both of your auras were distinct and separate before you both left for Vrika. Now they are the same color and seem to join anytime you stand close to each other. It reinforces what the book implies – your souls are dependent on each other now. Should one of you die, the entire connection collapses and the aura becomes too unstable to sustain life. You could imagine it as though one were to cut a boat in half; without the whole shape, water floods in and the boat sinks.”

Although it wasn’t necessarily new information, it still set a knot of anxiety in his chest. It was perhaps easier for Link to distract himself from their shared mortality when it was relatively indescribable. Now Zelda had painted such a grim picture for them and Link wished he could get the boat analogy out of his thoughts.

Thankfully, the topic was left behind and the Queen went over the final numbers and for the battle. With only a few minutes before her next meeting with the garrison captains, they sat on either side of her to finalize the march for the fields. They found themselves in a partially paralyzing situation – there could be no strategy when the Goddesses had insisted the premonition must play out. Judging by their memories of it, they had a general idea of where Foursky’s army would meet them; they would leave at morning to reach it by nightfall.

With the next meeting’s attendees filtering into the room, they left Zelda but not before she could nag them about attending the banquet that night.

“Don’t skip out on me,” she threatened. “This is our final dinner before war.”

Link tried not to groan. Trivial banquets were the very last thing on his mind…but Zelda looked tired and pleading and he just nodded. Of course he would go. It was Zelda.

They then went their separate ways and leaving created an uncomfortable feeling in Link’s chest like they were placing a strain on some sort of connection. Or maybe it was just emotional attachment. Whatever it was, it lingered in Link’s mind as he joined up with the Major General for more inventory through the weapons that had been produced by the blacksmiths the previous week.

To Link’s relief, they actually had a surplus of weapons and he couldn’t have asked for a better problem – if one could even call it that.

The rest of the day was spent issuing weapons, armor, and shields. The men were as restless as he
was, although he wasn’t sure why until, during the fittings for armor began, Link was made aware of just how many of his men were marked. It hadn’t been mentioned to him before and even they looked surprised by the black crescent shapes on their comrade’s backs.

How recently had they appeared?

He started asking around and the general answer was: *it wasn’t there yesterday.*

Link’s mind erupted in tensed shock and worry. How? How had they appeared over night? Evanna was gone! It would’ve made sense if the marks appeared weeks ago when she roamed the castle while they were in the Nether. But it occurred to him that he would’ve heard about the marks a lot sooner had that been the case.

So, how? How were they all marked overnight in their barracks?

The day drew to a close quicker than he wanted. Regardless of the promise he had made to Zelda to attend the dinner, he couldn’t bring himself to do anything other than wash the dirt off his face. Link wouldn’t don any fancy uniform or uphold to any ceremony. Not on the eve of war.

The banquet hall was loud with echoed voices and full of officers from each garrison along with some of the most decorated soldiers. To Link’s surprise, the Order was also present. He supposed it didn’t matter if their presence was known, now on the night before the war. Kalyh nodded to him from her spot at the table, leaned towards Jalin who was speaking quickly to her with a troubled expression. Link was distracted, however, by Duchess Morsa who appeared at his right and grinned coyly up at him.

“Shall I escort you to your seat, Royal Guardsman?” she said in a reverent voice, although Link sensed the humor beneath it.

“I’m surprised you’re still here, M’lady,” Link admitted as he tolerated the way she clung flirtatiously to his arm.

“I wanted to help. There is a war coming,” Morsa replied, suddenly sounding more serious than he’d ever heard. “Being a lady of the court is lovely…but what is the point in living if you are not useful?”

“Being a lady of the court doesn’t make you useless, Duchess.”

“Well, maybe not useless…” she considered as they neared his seat next to Sheik, who was staring across the hall at Kalyh with a troubling concentration. “But it certainly does give me an upper hand!”

Morsa just let out a giggle and squeezed his arm.

“Fight well, Link. Make Hyrule proud!”

And then she flounced off and Link just sighed. Despite how helpful she had been during the evacuation, she was still an air-headed, spoiled priss. He slumped down in his chair and leaned his head back to watch the chandeliers above his head sway ever-so-slightly.

*Link, I need to speak with you.*
Sheik’s words spilled into his head, the urgency and trepidation in them like an alarm that stiffened his spine and furrowed his brows. Their eyes met and Link leaned close and said, “Now?”

As soon as this banquet is through. Kalyh has shared information with me and…we need to discuss it.

If Sheik was unable to share their conversation where they sat, it was clearly something complicated and sensitive. Link found it hard to eat, even despite the decadent food placed before him. His mind spun with worry, predictions of what Kalyh had shared braided with Jalin’s words wreaking havoc on his calm.

Link downed the goblet of wine before him, hoping the buzz it left behind would ease his nerves somehow. While it did nothing to help, he did remember the piece of information he had yet to share. He leaned forward, beckoning both Sheik and Zelda to come closer.

“All of the men are marked,” Link reported quietly, glancing around as though someone could actually hear them despite the noise reverberating through the hall. “They were marked last night.”

He received wide, worried eyes in return.

“How?” Sheik demanded. “Who here could have done it?”

“Something still lingers here,” Zelda hissed, her blue eyes wandering the banquet hall in suspicion. “We have all been feeling it. Whatever it is it’s well-shielded.” She paused, her bright eyes scanning the people who sat eating and talking. “Do you think it could be…Kalyh?”

“No,” Sheik cut in immediately. “I do not think it is her. It is someone else in this castle. We must speak with her after this banquet. There are things I have learned from her that…change everything.”

“What are you talking about, Sheik?” Zelda demanded, voice now so low Link had to lean in even closer and read her lips.

Sheik shook his head, eyes hard and severe in the soft light from the chandeliers. “It is not safe. We must speak in private.”

Paranoia settled over them as they all scanned the crowd, as though a large arrow would hang over the person responsible. Link watched Kalyh speak intently with Jalin, their heads bent close together like he, Sheik, and Zelda’s were. Was Sheik really so sure of Kalyh’s innocence? What could she have told him that changed everything? Was the culprit someone they knew? Or perhaps the person was already gone, fleeing the castle after the deed was done.

There was a tension in the hall that could be explained by the coming war…but it still ate at Link. The energy in the air was jittery. He stared around at faces, trying to imagine who, out of those that remained, couldn’t be trusted.

Who had a motive? Who was working with the enemy? From day one there had been spies within their castle’s walls. None of them would say it aloud, but Link knew they were all thinking it:

The enemy could be in that very hall with them.

The banquet went on and, after a while, Zelda made a heartfelt and dutiful speech about marching
to war and conquering evil. It was well-scripted and delivered with a trained passion that Zelda had mastered long ago. It in no way revealed how exhausted and over-worked she was. White powder covered her dark circles and she looked healthy and brave in the yellow lights before her people.

“We will prevail, as we have always done,” she concluded. “The spirit of Hyrule is ever-enduring, powerful, and holy. May we all find victory tomorrow.”

With that, a roar of clapping filled the room accompanied by yells and whoops of those who would fight. Because war was glorious and romanticized and those were the lies they would all tell themselves to make it through the night before they marched to possible demise in the morning.

And then the applause died down save one pair of hands. They smacked together slowly, the rhythm mocking in the now otherwise silent hall. Link’s eyes darted around the faces, trying to find whoever it was – undoubtedly it would be a drunk lady of the court that hadn’t noticed the applause was over.

Too true, it was Morsa and Link cringed for her.

She rose from her seat and sauntered to the center of the hall, before their table…but she did not look drunk. Her hair was still piled delicately on her head, not a hair out of place, and her dark red dress held no sign of split liquor.

Link wanted to groan; she was about to make a fool out of herself without even the excuse of one too many drinks.

“That was beautiful, Queen Zelda,” Morsa cried, finished with her slow claps and bowing lowly before their table. Zelda looked puzzled but nodded in thanks. “That was a most admirable speech for such admirable people…”

She hung onto the sentence, spreading her dainty, gloved hands out around her like she was about to present something to them.

“…who are soon to die.”

A wave of power coursed through the hall, blasting people backwards and breaking tables in two. A tidal wave of energy barreled towards their table and Link was slammed bodily into the wall as shards of the table pelted him from the blast. The air was knocked out of him and he struggled to his feet, groping for the hilt of his Moon Blade. In his peripheral he saw Zelda and Sheik climbing quickly off the floor as well and the rest of the room was in complete disarray as Morsa stood still, hands still smoking palm up to the ceiling.

The Moon Blade was drawn in a mighty ring and Link stalked forward in anger.

“Who are you?” he thundered. “You’re not Morsa!”

Morsa pointed a delicate finger towards him, heat still rising from the gloves, and gave him a warning smile; he stopped in his tracks.

“Oh, but I am, Link,” she crooned in a sing-song voice. The voice he had been listening to for months, rolling his eyes when she asked a nosy question or insisted on holding his arm and demanding an escort.
She lowered her arm and Link felt the stir of coiling energy in the room. Something was terribly, terribly wrong and the flames above them shivered as though a breeze was sweeping through the hall. A shadow was growing in the room and the people still struggling to their feet were trying to back against the walls as darkness seemed to spread across the floors from Morsa’s slight form.

“You are all so foolish,” Morsa teased, her face settling into a wicked, chilling grin. “Especially you, Queen Zelda. You’ve sensed my presence all along, but simply lacked the power to find me. How weak the ruler of Hyrule must be.”

“What are you?” Link demanded once more.

“I am Morsa,” she replied once more, as though it were obvious. Her green eyes were shifting to a bright, animal yellow and her skin was growing gray as though she was turning to stone. Link felt nothing but fury as he stared at the imposter before him – he couldn’t accept that it was her. It couldn’t be her.

“No, you’re not! Tell me who you are!” he shouted, white-knuckling the hilt of his sword and prepared to lunge if he didn’t get his answers, magical blasts be damned. “What have you done with her?”

“What have I done with her?” Morsa asked inquisitively. “What a silly question. Shall I show you?”

The air seemed to thicken as, to Link’s horror and disgust, her face started to split slowly down the middle. There were shocked screams and gasps throughout the room as blood poured down her smiling face. Skin, muscle, and bone severed in two, spilling gore onto the high-polished floors. The divide worked its way down her neck, through her chest, and into her abdomen, loudly ripping the dress as it went. Her body shuddered and a terrible cry filled the hall with a reverberating roar. It was so loud it hurt Link’s ears and sent him reeling backwards.

Then, in a burst of red light and blood, Morsa was gone and a towering, dark-skinned man stood in her place.

Foursky.

Horror was cold in the pit of his stomach as yellow eyes surveyed him haughtily, the look of superiority that his grandson had worn. His red hair was rich and tousled like a lord of a high court. He wore nothing remotely Gerudo; his armor was gold and red, the crescent moon of Amrita etched deep into his breastplate. A long red cape sloped from his left shoulder to the floor and the true potency of his energy filled the room making Link feel nauseous. The man stretched out long, powerful arms as though he had just woken and cracked his neck with a loud pop.

“Much better,” he sighed, voice deep and rich. “How cramped it gets when disguised as a witless girl for six months.”

“You!” Zelda thundered, drawing her own sword and glaring furiously at the Gerudo before them. “I should’ve trusted my instincts when I saw your aura! I should’ve killed you when I had the chance!”

“But you didn’t! Tell me, do you regret listening to your Sages?” Foursky asked, looking bemused and crossing his arms over his chest. “You’re so loyal to prophecy, Queen, so loyal to your Goddesses.”
Foursky raised his hand and a wave of energy collided with Link, Sheik, and Zelda, pinning them roughly to the wall by some invisible force. The pressure was overwhelming and the Moon Blade was wrenched from his hand, clattering loudly to the floor.

Useless. The blade was just as useless as he knew it would be.

“But enough of this! I have one last order of business before I join my army in the fields for our thrilling battle under the moon,” Foursky thundered jovially. With his arms still spread wide, he turned in a slow circle and boomed, “Kalyh, why don’t you join me?”

The final tumbler fell into place and horror filtered through Link’s body. Despite all the foresight they worked so hard to achieve, they were blind to what had been there all along. Foursky had been living with them for six months. That was why his intelligence was impeccable – why have spies when you could just go undercover yourself?

Foursky stayed because he knew Link and Sheik were going to the desert.

He knew Kalyh would be there.

And he knew Kalyh had the words.

They had played directly into his hands.

So, would Kalyh truly betray them? Link scanned the wreckage of the hall, looking desperately for the woman in question. Many had fled the room when they had the chance, but those who remained – mainly soldiers who strained furiously to reach their weapons – were held against the wall, same as the three of them.

Link prayed he would find Kalyh with her weapon drawn, unwilling to go to Foursky once he released her. He prayed she would be prepared to defend her knowledge at all costs, that she would not complete the circle of deception that Foursky had begun the moment he stepped into the castle as the Duchess Morsa.

She couldn’t betray them. She couldn’t allow this to happen.

But alas, there she was, walking evenly towards Foursky, weapons sheathed and expression flat.

“Kalyh!” Sheik cried, his whole body straining against the pressure. The panic in Sheik’s mind bled into Link’s, rattling him into silence.

Kalyh’s eyes slid over to where they were held flat to the wall, eyes molten in the flickering torchlight. She stopped beside to Foursky looking like a child next to his height.

“How kind of you to come without a fight.” Foursky laid a hand on her shoulder. “Finally, my soldier is returned to me.”

“Kalyh, no!” Sheik’s voice was on the verge of breaking, his entire body shaking to break free.

“I assume you want something in return,” Foursky went on, ignoring Sheik’s words.

“My people’s safety – Sheik included,” Kalyh replied in a dead tone. “And a large sum of Vaspra.”
He let out a booming laugh, eyes cruel as he took in the small woman beside him. “How ruthless you are to betray your friends. But then, Vaspra twists us all into addicts, so I am not surprised. Will this suffice?” With a flutter of fingers, a huge chuck of Vaspra materialized in his hand, the rock itself the size of her head.

Kalyh’s crimson eyes fell onto the stone and a desperate expression filled her eyes as she tugged down her cowl and looked to Sheik who was still struggling past the invisible hold.

“Kalyh, don’t do this,” Sheik begged, voice pushing its limits as he struggled to break free. “Please don’t do this!”

“Remember what I told you, Sheik,” she said, her voice traveling across the hall despite how soft it had fallen. “Remember our promise.”

Sheik pleaded in Sheikah now and the tone was agony to hear. Link couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move, couldn’t conceive that Kalyh would betray them – he could only stand still and help carry the sorrow and pain resonating between them in their Congruence. Kalyh replied in her native tongue, a phrase Link understood because its meaning resonated in Sheik’s mind, sliding into his as well.

*I will always love you, Ra.*

Kalyh took the Vaspra, tossing it in a wide arc to Jalin, who caught it easily, eyes burning in fury. Link couldn’t imagine what could be going through Jalin’s mind as he watched his superior, his comrade in arms, betray them all.

Foursky kneeled down before her so they stood eye-to-eye, an expectant, wicked expression on his face. Kalyh seemed to hesitate for a moment, her hand about to reach for him but held back by racing thoughts.

“If you back out now, I will kill everyone here,” Foursky warned, voice quiet and dangerous. Kalyh shook her head, more to clear her head than to comment on his threat. Determination replaced any doubt that had flashed in her eyes and she lifted her gloved hand to rest it against his broad, dark forehead.

A dark blue light flared from her hand, roping into his skull and Link suddenly realized this was how the words were shared.

“No!” Link shouted. It was happening. Foursky would get the words, use them to control Sheik, kill them both, destroy Hyrule –

Sheik exploded next to him, ripping himself from the barrier in a riveting shockwave that nearly knocked everyone over once more. His eyes glowed that terrible gray and the Nether aura exuded from him like a sick fog. Despite the force on him Sheik stood away from the wall, held outward and shining brightly against whatever power Foursky was commanding. Link shot his hand out, somewhat free as well, and grabbed Sheik’s shoulder. “Sheik – !”

Sheik opened his mouth and bellowed a word Link couldn’t quite process until he felt the energy it summoned:
“HEXA!”

The blast of streaming blue blew outward, eclipsing Kalyh in its light as it stole her life before their eyes. She fell heavily to the ground and Foursky nearly collapsed from the ricochet, heaving for air as though he’d ran for miles.

And then Link’s body began to quake, energy leaving his body in one massive exodus. His vision faded out and his lungs struggled for air. He was falling and falling and he felt his knees hit the floor. And then, before he completely lost consciousness, the connection between him and Sheik was severed with a sharp snap.

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Sooo…

I don’t think I really need to explain how sorry I am for my absence or how grateful I am that you guys were so patiently waiting. I work full-time and adding full-time school to that basically derailed me for a few months. I’ve since found my rhythm and I’m not dying from stress anymore. The only thing holding this chapter back was the amount of revision it needed. Everything here on out is complicated as fuck, so I’m working really diligently to make sure I don’t mess anything up/make things extra confusing.

This was probably the biggest reveal of the fic and I worked really hard to make sure it was (at least I hope it is) a total surprise. Although I don’t think I need to worry, if you do happen to post anything about this chapter make sure to keep it spoiler free! I accidentally spoiled something for someone many months back so I just want to make sure it doesn’t happen again.

Places to find me:
sincosma on tumblr
amandalynnsings on Instagram
ohamandalynn on snapchat

As always, if you spot any errors, please let me know! I’m a little rusty on editing so I apologize if there’s anything heinous in here. Thank you so much for reading!
Chapter 34

**Trigger warning for excessive amounts of blood**

XXXIV.

*Link!

Link!

“Link!”

There was loud snap in his head followed by a persistent ringing. He gasped for air as though he had broken through the surface of Lake Hylia, moments from drowning. There was a painful vibration in his head, his loss of equilibrium leaving him so disoriented the world spun. His body was all pins and needles, like all circulation in his body was slowly, painfully returning. Whoever had called his name was likely the one assisting him into a sitting position. He felt liquid rolling down his face and it soaked into his clothes, warm and thick.

Link felt more nauseous than his arrival in the Nether, folding over immediately and retching blindly, trying to turn away from the voice he now recognized as Zelda’s. His vision was too weak to make out details, but he knew he was vomiting blood.

“Link, breathe,” Zelda commanded and he felt her hands on his head and the familiar jitter of her magic, clearly trying to quell…whatever was happening to him. “You’re okay, Link. Everything is okay.” But her voice sounded so fearful despite her efforts and her fingers shook against his forehead.

“Where,” he struggled to choke out, “is…Sheik?”

“He’s fine, Link. Everything is fine,” she promised but her voice continued to betray her and a spike of fear jabbed at his gut.

Slowly, his vision started to clear as he slowly blinked away what he could only assume was blood. But his body wasn’t finished purging it as he unloaded more to the hard marble floor. Link’s body was locked in a cold tremor as he felt Zelda’s fingers shift so she could turn and shout, “*Where is that damn potion?*”

There was a far-off cry of, “He’s still bleeding! We need potion over here, too!”

Still bleeding? Who? What was happening? Panic chugged through his bloodstream and he struggled to regain awareness, reaching out to grab Zelda’s arm.

“Foursky. Where is he?” Link coughed, struggling to hold down the gore threatening to lurch from his system once more. He could see a vague outline of her, red staining her light blue gown.

“He left. He was weakened considerably and disappeared,” Zelda replied hurriedly. She turned away again and barked, “*Potion!*”

Link’s head spun again and he heaved up more blood, her hands holding his head and shoulder so
he wouldn’t fall over. Her magic continued to buzz in his mind but she couldn’t seem to keep up with whatever was causing his sickness.

What happened? Why did he feel as though his body was dying? Was he dying?

The rim of a flask met his lips and he forced down the bitter draught – Link would endure anything to find his focus again and reach Sheik. His memory was complete chaos, nothing but blasts of blue and splatters of gray…

“Status!” Zelda demanded, looking somewhere else as Link felt his stomach start to settle and the numbing effect of the potion begin to settle in. He tried to focus his eyes to where a voice answered, “He’s coming around,” but his mind wasn’t cooperating.

“Is it Sheik?” he struggled to say around the blood still swirling in his mouth so he turned to spit the excess out. “Is he okay?”

“He’s okay. The potion is working. On both of you,” she assured him, smoothing back his hair and sounding much more confident. “Just breathe and let it heal you.”

Zelda helped him scoot back against the wall behind them and a cold wet rag was pressed his face. She wiped at his skin and it came away bloodier and bloodier. Clearly he had been bleeding from everywhere and it disturbed him so deeply he started to feel sick all over again. But the numbing of the potion overpowered his nausea and he closed his eyes to shut down his thoughts for a while.

It was so quiet in the hall, the only sound quiet voices from across the room where Link assumed Sheik was. There was an occasional riot of footsteps as people hurried in or hurried out, but other than that there was an unsettling silence that felt all too surreal to him.

He didn’t know how long it took but eventually he regained more awareness and his eyes focused on what lay before him. The hall looked like a battlefield – chunks of tables and chairs were scattered haphazardly amongst what remained of food and wine. The cabinet members were either waiting around him or across the hall where Link could begin to make out the figure of Sheik. The Sheikah was laying back against a fractured table and Link’s stomach dropped as he saw what he assumed he also looked like; blood had poured from every orifice on his face, although it was being wiped away by the shaky hands of a cabinet member. He was alive, his chest rising and falling in a labored manner, but too weak to move. At his sides were hands loosely curled palm up, raw and glistening with blood.

What happened?

The Congruence didn’t linger in his mind as it always did. There was no buzz, no warmth; only the now disembodied feeling of being completely alone in his own mind.

And it terrified him.

“Zelda, I don’t remember…what happened,” Link pleaded weakly, trying to reach up and stop her hand from wiping his face. He managed to hang onto her wrist and her exhausted and sunken blue eyes came finally into focus. They were red-rimmed and bruised, glassy and exhausted.

“Sheik used Hexa. He killed Kalyh while she was transferring her knowledge of the words to Foursky. I don’t know how much he got,” Zelda whispered but her voice echoed still in the great
“You both nearly died from the drain…I think Sheik severed the connection between you to take…most of the cost.” She seemed to fight tears for a moment, closing her eyes and breathing deeply through her nose. “He managed to survive…but just barely. Both of you have lost so much blood…”

And then it all flooded back into his mind.

Morsa splitting in half.

Foursky shoving them against the wall.

Kalyh’s betrayal.

Sheik’s voice blaring through his mind, summoning a word Link never thought he’d hear come from that mouth.

_Hexa._

“How?” he demanded, voice cracking from strain. “How, Zelda? He doesn’t know _Hexa._”

“I don’t know, Link. Sheik has always been gifted with magic and…since gaining the new power…maybe Kalyh taught him? I don’t know,” Zelda replied in a rough voice, resuming her task of wiping the blood from his face. “We will discuss it later. Just rest and let the potion heal you.”

And Link couldn’t have continued talking even if he tried. He stared blankly at the destroyed chamber and the limp form of Sheik as three people worried over him, coaxing him back into the living. He felt broken. Everything felt broken. The Congruence was still disturbingly absent. How? The bond, according to every expert in the field, couldn’t be severed.

Right?

With everything he had, Link wanted to stumble over to Sheik and help, somehow…but his body was numb and paralyzed for now.

Zelda was silent, kneeled beside him and cleaning every trace of blood she could find. He had the distinct feeling that the motion kept her distracted, held away the shock and sadness they were all likely feeling.

The Queen looked shell-shocked, in a way, but still fierce and angry in the meager torchlight coming from the half-extinguished chandeliers. Her gown was stained so badly with blood that it was now more of a red dress than a blue one. The stains had found their way to her cheek, down her neck, halfway up the thick rope of her braided hair, and from her fingertips to her elbows.

How much time passed…he had no way of knowing, but eventually Zelda left him to get more water and supplies. He waved off another cabinet member that offered to sit with him. Slowly, bit by bit, Link found the strength to lumber to his feet and stagger over to Sheik. He nearly fell on bits of rubble but managed without the help of the people near Sheik that protested him even being on his feet.

“Go,” Link ordered, shooing away the two women that were still cleaning the blood from Sheik’s face. “I’ll stay with him. Tend to the Queen.”
Link outranked everyone in the room so they obeyed, albeit with disapproving looks. He slowly collapsed to his knees before Sheik and took the rag from a bucket filled with pink water. The cowl was completely soaked in blood, hanging around Sheik’s neck in a sick display. Link carefully pulled it off, trying his best not to get any more blood on Sheik’s blonde hair. Despite how stained Link’s hands were, he held the rag over his palm to create a barrier.

“Please stay with me,” Link whispered, not even sure if Sheik was listening or he was just talking to himself.

“I’m here,” Sheik breathed, lips barely moving as Link wiped gently at his face.

Relief washed through Link like a flood, pulling an almost-hysterical laugh from his mouth. The contact between them summoned the Congruence once more and the space in his mind was again filled with the warmth of Sheik. He thanked every deity he could think of, despite what they had done to him.

Sheik was alive. He was okay. They were going to make it.

“You’re such an idiot, you know that?” Link told him in a broken voice. “You’re the biggest moron I’ve ever met in my life. What the hell did you think you were doing?”

Sheik shook his head, managing a tired half-smile but still unable to open his eyes. Link let out a sigh and cradled Sheik’s bloody hands carefully in his own. Link watched the skin stitch slowly over the bone-deep, twisted burns in the palms, fighting back emotion that tried so desperately to escape.

“You almost killed us, Sheik,” Link mumbled, running his thumbs over Sheik’s unburned wrists.

“I had to do…what was necessary.” His voice was strangled and weak, but the Congruence warbled between them and Link was submitted to the depth of loss Sheik felt. “No one else could do it. I promised her...” but his voice broke, strangled by the loss and devastation Link could feel through their bond.

“I’m so sorry, Sheik,” Link breathed, unsure of what he could do other than share the pain, share the load.

Over time Sheik regained his energy, eventually able to open his eyes and hold his head up. His eyes were completely red, the veins there having burst from the trauma and Link imagined his looked the same. But those eyes would heal, as would Link’s. The Congruence pulsed between them, as if they were healing each other.

Zelda joined them after a while now in clean clothes and holding a new bucket of water and rags, sitting on a chunk of table with somber eyes. She handed Link a fresh white cloth and then re-soaked it every time he handed it back red.

“We moved her body to the hospital wing,” Zelda told them after a while. “What…do you want to do with her, Sheik?”

“She deserves...a warrior’s death,” he answered quietly, staring hard at the debris across the hall. “I will burn her body tomorrow morning.”

The pang of agony that rippled through their connection left Link breathless and he held Sheik’s
newly healed hand, unsure of what else he could do. Zelda nodded, rubbing her face and letting out a shaky sigh.

“Okay.” Zelda fixed her swollen eye on the chandelier above them, only three candles still alive. “I heated some water in the bathing room and made you both draughts to help replenish your blood. You two should get cleaned up and rest. We’ll talk in the morning.”

A few moments passed and she gave Link a look, a warm one but also with a sudden realization, as if she had just put something together. And of course she had, as Link sat there holding Sheik’s hands and wearing what he knew was a loving expression.

The softness in her smile told him she wasn’t surprised. Maybe she had seen it all along.

Zelda left after that, touching both of them lightly on their shoulders. Quiet descended on the hall after that, no one left but blood-stained Hylian and Sheikah.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” Link suggested gently, forcing himself to his feet and reaching down to assist his companion. His legs were still too weak to support all of his weight so Link slung Sheik’s arm over his shoulder and they moved slowly for the bathing room.

The chamber was warm and moist, a comfortable and welcoming sensation against Link’s skin. He shut the door behind them and deposited Sheik on a bench while he brought over a bucket of water. Two mugs sat on the adjacent bench and they downed them quickly, grimacing at the intensely sour taste.

He wouldn’t insult Sheik by doing everything for him, but he could at least make things a little easier for him by leaving the bucket and some rags by the bench. But Sheik just sat there, elbows on his knees and hunched over, staring at the tiled floor.

Link wavered there for a moment – his balance hadn’t fully returned – wondering if he should just leave and give Sheik some privacy. From the vacant look on his face…Link suddenly felt that he should. As much as he didn’t want to leave Sheik to his thoughts after such a traumatic event, it was perhaps for the best.

“I’ll be right outside. Let me know if you need any help,” Link told him quietly, touching his shoulder lightly and moving to leave. He would sit in the hall and maybe even doze off for a little while. Exhaustion hung heavy in his limbs and he was ready to drop.

“Don’t leave,” Sheik whispered, looping his fingers with Link’s. “I don’t…want to be alone right now.”

The admission stole Link’s breath and sent an ache through his chest. The pain pushed back through their connection and he almost lost his composure in its wake. He could only nod and kneel before Sheik and coax him out of his ruined clothes. What else could he do? Nothing. There was nothing that could be done to fix everything but just wipe away the what the trauma had left behind and get them both to sleep so they could heal. Or at least try.

Because nothing changed what tomorrow would bring, no matter how tired they were.

Everything seemed to coalesce into a terrible weight on Sheik’s shoulders as Link set about the slow task of washing away the stray bits of blood off his skin and out of his hair. There was something distinctly intimate about it all and the intense affection that filled him shifted into a
strongly protective emotion.

Sheik had been hurt in every way and, if Link wasn’t there, *no one* would be there.

Because Sheik only allowed Link to see him vulnerable and he would take that responsibility without hesitation.

When he was clean and dressed, Link quickly washed up as well, chucking their bloody clothes in a bin by the door and wondering what the maids would think when they returned to the castle and cleaned the room of dried blood on the floors. Link moved to help Sheik up but was met with resistance. Like an anvil was weighing him down to the bench, Sheik didn’t budge and tugged on Link’s hands, urging him back down.

“Sheik?”

He leaned forward and pressed his face into Link’s neck, folding his fingers into his tunic so tightly he could’ve ripped the fabric apart. Link wrapped his arms tightly around his back, bringing them as close together as possible. And when Link carefully folded his mind into Sheik’s, the Congruence shuddered deeply between them and the floodgates opened, their pain becoming one.

And it was terrible.

*I have nothing left of my tribe.*

*I know. I’m so sorry.*

*I have to show you what she said, Link. You have to know why I did it.*

He was suddenly thrust into a memory, so surreal and disorienting it took him a moment to focus. Link didn’t know Sheik had the ability to share memories, let alone the energy for it, but he was suddenly being siphoned into a memory and left his body momentarily.

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They are speaking in Sheikah, the language familiar to Link’s ears, but strangely he can understand it just as he can understand Hylian. The effect is creating a strange sort of dual understanding.

Sheik and Kalyh are standing alone in a corridor. Kalyh has requested they speak in private. It is hours before the banquet, the Order making their way to the castle in a loose group down the hallway. Once out of earshot, Kalyh speaks:

“I need to teach you Hexa, Ra. I don’t know what’s going to happen once things are set into motion, so I must teach it to you now. I doubt I will have another chance before the march begins and it is imperative that no one learns that I’ve taught you. It is my task to ensure Foursky only learns Hexam and that you only learn Hexa.”

“What are you talking about, Kalyh? What will two people knowing Hexa do to help our situation? I would be another liability. If Foursky knows Hexam, he could use it to force Hexa out of me. How will that help –?”

“The Congruence, Ra. If Foursky attempts to use Hexam on you, you must transfer your knowledge of Hexa to Link. It can’t be taken from him because the prophecy states Link is
immune to the words.” Kalyh’s voice is hushed, stressed, and desperate.

“How do you know about –?”

“I don’t have time to explain. I have sources. I need you to trust me, Sheik. No matter what happens, I need you to trust me. I must teach you Hexa and you must hide it in Link’s mind. I must divide the words. Do you understand?”

Shock and confusion is resonating through Sheik’s mind, mirrored in Link’s as he struggles to process what he is hearing.

“No! What are you saying? How will Foursky only get Hexa?” Sheik’s voice is strained, hands reaching out to grip Kalyh’s shoulders.

She pulls back, out of his grasp as though he will distract her.

“That’s what I need your help to do. I may be unable to stop Foursky from obtaining Hexa as well. I don’t know when or how this will happen, which makes it even more essential that you understand this. You must promise me you will ensure Foursky only gets Hexam. If he gets both words, all of our careful planning will have been for nothing.” Now Kalyh is reaching forward, folding her hands in Sheik’s tunic and tugging him closer. “You must do everything you can to ensure this future. Even if it means you must do something terrible. Even if it means killing me.”

“Kalyh!” Sheik’s voice is now just as pleading, his mind is racing, trying desperately to understand what she is asking of him. “Please explain this to me.”

“There is a bigger plot at work, Ra, and we must play into this prophecy perfectly. You have to do as I say or we will all die. I can’t tell you anything more than this – allow me to teach you Hexa and pass its knowledge to Link should Foursky obtain Hexam. Promise me, Sheik. Promise me that you will do whatever is necessary to make this happen.”

“I don’t –”

“Promise, Ra,” Kalyh pleads. It isn’t the pleading of a child; it is the pleading of woman holding the weight of too many secrets and the destinies of too many people. Sheik hasn’t heard her sound so desperate since Vrika was attacked so many years ago and it twists his stomach.

“I…okay. I promise, Kalyh.”

Kalyh nods, eyes shifting down to focus on the amulet that fell out of Sheik’s tunic during their spars. “I’m so happy you found the amulet. I thought about taking it when I went looking for you, to give it to you when I found you…but I just couldn’t. I couldn’t even go into your room when I realized you were…” She reaches out, pressing the amulet against Sheik’s chest with a trembling hand as emotion bloomed in her eyes. “I will do everything I can to make things easier for you. I’ll try and get more Vaspra, too. You’ll need so much of it to seal the hole…”

“Kalyh, what do you mean you’ll try and get more –?”

“Stay still, Ra,” Kalyh interrupts. “You must trust me now.” She touches her fingers to Sheik’s forehead and says, “Forgive me for everything to come.”

“I always will.” Fear, uncertainty, and dread fills him as he tries to consider what her apology
might be for. He feels helpless now. If something horrible was around the next corner, how would he know what the right choice was?

She nods and an expression of concentration passes her face.

And then Link is ripped from that place, dragged back through a pinprick and is suddenly –

– back in the bathing room, knees throbbing on the tiled floor as Sheik seemed to shudder in his arms. Link shook his head, hardly able to process what he had seen and contend with a full understanding of Sheik’s actions.

Sheik had known what was happening, when Kalyh stepped beside Foursky willingly. He knew what her plan was and he realized – with a horror Link could feel so viscerally – he would have to kill her himself.

All guided by a blind promise, Sheik played a part in a plan that was slowly but surely being revealed.

Zelda’s question was answered:

This was how Foursky would obtain Hexam and not Hexa.

“I have become…a monster,” Sheik ground out through gritted teeth.

Link pushed Sheik away so he could glare at him. The red eyes that met his were so deeply warped in pain it made his chest ache. He ran his fingers over the Sheikah’s jaw and up to his temple. He wished he could make Sheik understand how amazing he was, how very much he was not a monster. He wished he could convince Sheik that such an act was not that of which a monster could make and also feel such loss.

“You’re not,” Link whispered, staring intently into the magnetic eyes he’d been losing himself in for three years. He knew Sheik. He knew Sheik like the lines of his palm or the balanced weight of his sword. No matter what new powers Sheik gained or how much of the Nether was inside him, the spirit touching Link through the Congruence wasn’t that of a monster.

He tried his hardest to push that reality through their connection, trying to make Sheik understand with everything he had. “You’re not a monster.”

Link pulled him into a soft kiss and ran his fingers through the Sheikah’s damp hair. He put everything he had into such a gentle touch – because the march to war was only a handful of hours away and Sheik had to be okay. Both of them had to be okay.

Warm fingers wrapped around Link’s arms, the buzz of their contact like another chorus of soft words and reassurances.

“Let’s go sleep,” Link pressed gently. He pulled away to find Sheik’s eyes still closed, too tired to even force them open. “You’re falling sleep on me,” he teased.

Sheik nodded tiredly, cracking his eyes open just enough for Link to guide him to his feet. His balance was still askew enough for Link to keep a hand on Sheik’s slack shoulder and lead the way
to his own room, the closer of the two.

Link at least found some comfort in knowing he would stay beside Sheik in sleep, his presence perhaps the only guard against the haunted feeling in Link’s head. Neither of them could imagine being alone after what had happened, Link knew for certain.

He couldn’t imagine sleeping alone ever again, in fact.

But no matter what solace Sheik’s warm body next time provided, Link knew nothing could impede the repetitive thoughts in his mind, replaying the night over and over.

Morsa had been living right under their noses, pretending to be a lady of court, and all the while it had been Foursky hanging off his arm and demanding escorts. Link felt truly sick at the thought. Zelda had clearly sensed his presence to some extent, but was limited by…what? Foursky had mentioned something about obeying the Sages but he couldn’t be sure of its full meaning until the morning when they would all convene before the march to reflect, mourn, and plan.

The worst part of the entire situation, however, was the reality of what Foursky now knew:

Sheik knew Hexa. And Link was willing to bet on his life that Foursky knew by now that he’d been more-or-less tricked by Kalyh.

So, what would they do now? Follow Kalyh’s commands and somehow move the knowledge of the word to Link? Did that mean Link would be capable of using it once it was pushed into his mind? Did Sheik even know how to do such a thing?

The questions hurt his head; they would have to wait until morning for further examination.

They fell into bed, bodies heavy as lead and minds wounded from loss. They pulled each other as closely together as they could; this was their last night and Link couldn’t bear to think of losing what he held against him now to the prophecy of tomorrow.

The events of the banquet had lined them all up perfectly for the premonition and, no matter how clear that was now or how the Goddesses had insisted on it, Link still could not accept it.

Whatever happened when the full moon rose, he would not surrender Sheik.

He would not let Foursky have him.

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I’m almost finished with NaNoWriMo and today I was very sick so meeting my word count and pooping out this next edit was easier considering I didn’t really leave my bed.

Thank you all for your kind words and enthusiastic reviews of last chapter. It made me so happy to hear many of you saying it was worth the wait. This is now the point in this story that everything is going to come together very quickly, so hang onto your butts. This is easily the most complicated plot I’ve ever written in my life so thank you in advance for your patience.

Places to find me:
sincosma on tumblr
amandalynnsings on Instagram
ohamandalynn on snapchat
amandalynnsings.com for my music (I’m so bad at this but I don’t know if I’ve ever mentioned it before – I’m a professional musician so here’s my website if you’d like to hear my stuff!)
XXXV.

The morning was soft hair against Link’s jaw and a warm body tucked securely into his. It was just before dawn and soft rosy light wandered in through the window to paint the dark skin of Sheik’s arm with a hazy glow.

His head throbbed and his body felt heavy as lead. Their Congruence shivered into focus and it was clear Sheik was awake. Long fingers ran along his spine beneath his tunic and lips pressed against his collarbone. With a long sigh, Link pressed his face into the bright blonde hair at his chin.

“I feel terrible,” Link grumbled.

“You were almost dead last night,” Sheik reminded him in a hoarse voice; Link could feel the pain Sheik was experiencing too.

“So were you,” he went on, closing his eyes to the dim room once more. “You scared me.”


And Link furrowed his brows; he hadn’t had the time or energy to think about that until now. Blood dripping from his body was sort of a distraction the previous night. Sheik had successfully performed Hexa and hadn’t died. He thought back to what Kalyh had told him about the few masters who managed to successfully perform the spell but died soon after.

How were they still alive?

“It must be because of our Congruence,” Link wondered. “We shared the cost instead of it only taking your energy.”

“That seems to be the only answer.”

They went quiet after that and neither really wanted to break the silence even though there were a thousand more questions and things to worry about. Fingertips danced along Link’s back and breath puffed against his chest. They had maybe an hour before they would have to report to Zelda and start moving out.

An hour before the official start of the war.

That reality twisted a hard, hard knot into Link’s stomach and he pulled Sheik closer out of instinct. He had never felt so possessive over one thing before, let alone a person. Not with Saria, Zelda, or Malon. Not even the friends he had made among the ranks of the army.

“Where do you want to go when the war is over?” Sheik asked quietly. And the question summoned too many strong emotions all at once; hopefulness that maybe they would survive and they really could leave Hyrule together; fear that their future would never come and those words would only die on their lips on the battlefield; love for knowing that, no matter the outcome, they had found each other in the dark and had their moment of nirvana before the end.
Where do you want to go when the war is over?

Link thought about the stones still in his bag. “I’ll tell you when we get there.”

Sheik pulled away to prop his jaw on a fist and stare at him with warm, ruby eyes. Despite recent developments, there was still open wonder in his expression, as though Sheik couldn’t believe they were friends…comrades. Lovers. And Link found himself still feeling just as surprised, lucky, grateful.

It was still so new but also so familiar. He knew the scent that lingered Sheik’s clothes but he hadn’t known the map of veins at his wrist. He knew that deep, accented voice, but he had never heard the moans one touch could elicit.

Link reached out and ghosted his fingertips over the Sheikah’s brow line, temple, and down to the sharp angle of his jaw.

“I wish I had told you how I felt after the last war,” Sheik told him, closing his eyes as Link slid his fingers softly over his jaw line. “I feel like we have wasted so much time.”

“I don’t think it was wasted.” He traced the lines of Sheik’s face, trying to commit the warmth and texture to memory. “Even before the Congruence was awakened we were still bound together. Even before all of this happened…you were still my closest friend. I will never regret the way everything played out.”

Sheik leaned forward and kissed him gently, emotion blazing in his eyes before they closed. And Link tried to memorize the feeling of his lips, too. And the sensation of calloused fingers on his neck and the warmth of the body pressed securely against his. He thought about two nights ago, gasping into the night air in Sheik’s bed…he dearly wished they had time to do it again, one more time before the war and the unknown.

But Link could hear the sounds outside his window of the Royal armies awakening. The day was opening up, splashing bright gold light on the bare walls. There was no time and it made him grip even tighter to his lover.

He needed more time. They needed more time. Why couldn’t they be allowed more time?

There were voices echoing down the halls and it was enough to bring them both back to reality; they needed to get ready and join Zelda.

It was time to march to war.

They pulled away begrudgingly and dressed. The armory would be a bustle of commotion by now, Link was sure, and he wasn’t ready to argue with people over chainmail…but there was nothing for it. He tugged on his boots and buckled the Moon Blade across his chest.

Link reached for the door knob, ready to lead the way towards the armory, when Sheik grabbed his arm. With his cowl having been ruined by the blood, Sheik was still bare-faced and gazing intensely at him. The Sheikah reached up and pulled the amulet from around his neck, the red stone glinting sharply in the morning light. Before Link could even argue, Sheik looped it over his head and tucked it beneath his tunic. Sheik laid a hand over his chest where the amulet lie and Link took in a sharp breath.
“Sheik, I can’t.”

But he shook his head. “Don’t argue with me, Link. It is mine to give. If this prophecy comes to pass…you are going to need it more than I am. Someone must guard it.”

“That’s bullshit, Sheik,” Link argued anyway. “You’re the one who will need it. You’re a Sheikah and this is a Sheikah amulet. You should be wearing it. Your mother gave it to you.”

And then Sheik was suddenly crowding him against the door, hand still pressed over his chest and eyes like fire. “And now I’m giving it to you.”

Link wanted to ask why but the question died suddenly on his lips. Because it terrified him. The amulet pulsed softly against his chest, spreading a familiar warmth over his body like it had done when he had held it in Vrika for the first time, as though it were alive.

He was too afraid – even in the face of war – to ask why Sheik was giving it to him, because the answer would likely break him in half. It would skew his priorities and make him falter when he was already under so much strain.

So, he just nodded.

He would ask for the answer after the war.

After.

Sheik kissed him one more time, the Congruence vibrating energetically between them now that they were no longer so weak. Link held on for as long as he could, running his tongue over Sheik’s lips just enough to elicit the smallest of sighs, pushing his fingers into Sheik’s wild hair, and memorizing the cadence of their breaths back and forth. They pulled away and shared one last look before becoming Zelda’s soldiers, marching to war.

And then they left.

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The armory was, as Link feared, a flurry of activity. While the garrisons had their own armories in their barracks, this was the armory for the top brass – himself included, he supposed. The three blacksmiths that had remained to help send off the troops were frantically polishing and straightening blades while straps were being re-sewn and buckles repaired. And as expected, he did have to argue over chainmail. Well, that was until Zelda entered the room and whisked him away, ignoring his questions completely and asking her own.

“Are you feeling better?” she inquired as they hurried down the corridors towards her chambers. “How is Sheik?”

“Yes,” Link assured her with a nod. “And Sheik is better as well.”

“Lord Bilios left last night,” Zelda reported before Link could even bring it up. “Apparently Foursky had sent him a false letter seven months ago, claiming to be a past mistress of his. She told him he had a daughter, Morsa, and she was sending her to live with him. Bilios never questioned it out of fear of revealing just how many mistresses he had.”
“So, he fled like a coward?”

“Actually,” Zelda countered as they reached her chambers, “he went to the city where she lives in to ensure she was okay. He was worried Foursky had gone to extreme lengths to hide his identity as Morsa.”

Well. That was at least a little more admirable.

They entered her parlor and, for a moment, Link hadn’t even thought about why she had drawn him away. He was too concerned with trying to plan when and how he and Sheik would explain what Kalyh’s plan had been. But Zelda turned away from him, moving instead to the tall window that overlooked the barracks and training grounds where her armies were preparing for their march. The morning sunlight was illuminating her figure and Link suddenly realized she was dressed in her full battle armor.

The armor she was wearing in the premonition.

Zelda glanced back at him over her golden pauldrons and her brow furrowed in pain. “Link…I am so sorry. About everything.”

“Did you know?” he asked, but it didn’t come out as accusatory as he thought it would. He was angry, but then he understood that Zelda had likely been put in a terrible position. Just like him. Just like Sheik.

“Not entirely…but I knew one of the ladies of the court was an imposter. Foursky is very skilled in shielding his presence. I had planned to interrogate them all while you and Sheik were in the Nether…but the Sages stopped me. They insisted I allow the situation to play out. They warned that I would be interfering with prophecy if I proceeded, and such action could have disastrous results.”

“It’s very hard to accept that all of this death has been worth adhering to some prophecy,” Link said darkly, face folding into a scowl.

“Sheik showed me the memory this morning, before I retrieved you. Kalyh…was very brave. It seems we all misjudged her.” Zelda paused, gazing down in thought, then back at Link. “It is clear that she has had an ally long before we even knew she still lived. Her own plan had been designed to aid us, for which we are all grateful. But the addition of yet another plot only compounds our issue, however. I just cannot shake the feeling that there is something bigger at work; something bigger than Foursky.”

“What do you mean?” he pressed, moving to stand by her side at the window.

“Do you remember the dreams I told you about, on the day of your ceremony?” she asked, the sudden change in topic displacing Link’s concentration for a moment.

“The dreams..?” he repeated, trying to recollect their conversation, dragging the memories out of his tired mind.

_I have just been having dreams lately. I don't know. They are vague. But they all feature the same things: an elephant, a crescent moon on golden armor, and a heart with horns._
“A heart with horns?”

Zelda nodded quickly, pleased Link remembered. “Yes. I can’t even begin imagine what it means right now…but those dreams have never stopped. Every time I have them, there is this feeling I get, this horrible sensation of evil that not even Ganondorf could boast. I think…the true enemy is still hidden, Link.”

Silence dropped between them, the darkness of their conversation almost a real weight on Link’s shoulders. The small feeling of success they had gained by learning the truth of Kalyh’s intentions and obtaining a larger portion of Vaspra was beginning to shrink as they considered the potential that their current problem might just be even bigger than they imagined.

“Nonetheless, there is little we can do, other than prepare for anything and everything,” Zelda continued, her tone suggesting a change of subject as she guided Link over to an armoire in the corner. “Let me show you why I brought you here.”

When she opened the doors, Link wanted to leave the room instantly.

No way.

Hanging within were the clothes of the Hero.

While Link had made a point to burn the Kokiri garb he had saved Hyrule in, green had always been the color of the Hero through every century his soul had appeared.

This tunic was still the same green but the cloth much thicker. The gold chainmail beneath it was fine and glittering at him as it caught the sunlight from the windows. The pauldrons were the same gold, heavy and finely-made; compared to the leather he had been wearing for two years, he wasn’t looking forward to adjusting to added weight. And then, it all seemed to tie together as he noticed, hanging off the shoulder, a deep red cloak.

He’d seen the paintings many times; Link knew exactly what – or better, who – Zelda was hoping to have him emulate.

“Zelda,” he complained. “Come on, you can’t be serious.”

“Don’t argue with me,” she snipped, clearly prepared for his objections. “You saw the same premonition we all saw – perhaps it slipped your notice, but you were wearing green, Link. Seeing you like this will give people more hope. It is only right and you know it.”

“Sorry, Zelda, I was a little too preoccupied with watching a possessed Sheik kill me than noticing my own future outfit,” he replied, voice thick with sarcasm.

“Link,” Zelda growled in challenge. She clearly wasn’t going to back down.

Link gave the hat an offended look…just when he thought he was done with hats. The only reason he had put up with it for as long as he did was for Navi’s sake. “I personally think blue goes better with my eyes,” he shot back.

“We are going to start a war right here if you do not stop stomping your feet and put this on, Link,” Zelda demanded, elbowing him hard in the ribs.
Despite the harsh words, there was a smile playing in her eyes, the first real one he’d seen in a month. Although the last thing he wanted to wear again was Kokiri green, he would trust in Zelda’s judgement.

“People will respect you more if you actually look like what you are, Link,” he quoted. These were the words she said to him three years ago when a similar argument began due to his exasperation over his Guardsman uniform. Oh, how he wished he could go back to a simpler time when his only complaint was about the color blue.

“You are finally learning, Link,” she said in approval, a wide smile lighting up her tired face.

“Is this really all I am?” He hadn’t meant to ask it aloud – it was merely a bitter thought that crossed his mind – but the words fled from his lips and Zelda gave him a surprised look.

“No,” Zelda replied, voice hard like a gavel on wood. “You are far more than just this. You are far more than just the Hero. But right now…this is what you need to be. For Hyrule. For me. And, most of all, for Sheik.”

For a moment, Link was reminded that Zelda obviously knew about the change in their relationship, had likely seen it coming, and understood where his priorities were. For this, he was surprisingly grateful; he had nothing to explain to her.

“Stop asking stupid questions and get ready, Link. I will meet you in the fields.” She began to leave the room so Link could change, but then paused with a sad look on her face. “Go be with Sheik. He is…holding a pyre for Kalyh. He told me that he wished to be alone but…we both know he shouldn’t be.”

The reminder of Kalyh’s funeral was painful in his mind and he suddenly felt awful for forgetting. Zelda left him alone after that, boots clicking on the marble floors as she went.

Perhaps it had been Sheik’s intention to burn Kalyh’s without Link there, but he couldn’t allow it.

Link changed quickly, mindful to avoid mirrors – he would look like the first Hero chosen by the Goddess Hylia that was painted on the ancient walls of Hyrule castle’s archives. He wasn’t sure he could handle the anger that always accompanied the story of what that first Hero had endured.

Anger at the Goddesses.

Link moved to the window, casting his eyes across the bright sky to hunt for a shadowed column of smoke. He found it by the ramparts on the eastern side of the castle and quickly left the room to head that way, the cloak an unfamiliar weight and sound behind him. The people he passed in the corridors and then outside in the training areas all did a double take when they saw him. Perhaps many were expecting their general to, well, dress like a general. Or maybe he looked so similar to the first Hero that they almost believed they were seeing a ghost. The thought of Sheik kept him from caring, however, as he became within sight of the fire.

The flames were huge and wild, the pyre having been built in carefully stacked rows now slowly crumbling in fiery deaths. Heat and the smell of soot and ash punched through the air, the force even more oppressive in the summer temperatures. A bundled shape of a person lay in the middle of the angry orange and yellow like a black smudge. Sheik stood before the pyre, his sword stuck in the dirt by his side, shoulders tense and head down. All around the fire were Sheikah words
carved into the soil – after having spent a night in Vrika’s tombs, Link recognized it as ceremonial script for the dead.

Pain siphoned from Sheik and into his mind as Link approached, laying a careful hand on his shoulder. The contact strengthened the emotions and he was exposed to the same destructive force of loss Sheik had been forced to experience in Vrika and last night. Link could see his lover’s face now, twisted in pain and eyes piercing blindly into the fire.

“When I left Vrika and went into hiding with Lady Impa and Princess Zelda, I mourned Kalyh just like this. I never thought…I would have to do it twice.” Sheik’s voice was wound up so tightly Link wondered how he even spoke at all. With the cowl in the way, only the violent flicker of his crimson eyes could be seen, moisture gathered there that refused to fall.

“She died a hero, Sheik,” Link reminded him, standing close and running his fingers over Sheik’s. “At least her death wasn’t in vain.”

He just nodded, allowing his fingers to thread in with Link’s. They watched the fire for as long they could before the sound of the march assembling pulled them away. Together they turned away from the fire, away from the sorrow and loss.

Sheik finally took in Link’s appearance as they trekked quickly to the field, a strange look crossing his face that Link briefly enjoyed being the subject of.

“Nostalgic, huh?” Link sighed, the cloak rustling loudly down the deserted halls of the castle.

“Indeed,” he asked, catching part of the red fabric in his grasp and studying it as they walked, then allowing it to slip from his hand. “Zelda?”

“Of course,” Link confirmed. “I told her it would look better on her but she insisted.”

“You look like one of the paintings in the archives,” Sheik told him, shaking his head a bit as though he was shrugging away an illusion. “It is…uncanny.”

“That’s why I look this annoyed,” he said irritably, scratching at the infernal hat. “I really thought I had put all this green behind me but – ”

They were nearing the stables now, the green swath of Hyrule field laid before them down the hill, teeming with restless soldiers struggling to form ranks. The sight of it interrupted his next complaint, a wave of anxiety washing quickly through his chest. Link fell silent and Sheik didn’t question it.

Epona and Kronos were retrieved and they galloped swiftly through Castle Town to rendezvous with the Queen at the drawbridge. The men who surrounded her hurried to-and-fro with their arms full of weapons and rations. Zelda pointed and beckoned in one direction after another, communicating briskly with officers that volleyed in and out of her attention. Link felt overwhelmed just watching her.

Beyond her circle of commotion was a greater legion of disorganization in the distance – captains walked up and down endlessly long lines, shouting to correct soldiers into the desired position.

Link was grateful that coordinating the ranks was not his job. It was one of the things on the very short list of what wasn’t his responsibility.
“You look great,” Zelda commented as they arrived, throwing him a forced smile.

More garrisons began pouring out of the ramparts behind them, lining up more obediently atop the dew-covered grass now that the formation was cleaning up into a well-organized grid. There was still quite a bit of bellows as captains worked hard to get their men in order. And Link found himself swept back up into his role of General as the Lieutenant General and Major General came to him with practically an essay of issues.

People were missing, and not just because of the group that escorted the refugees to Vrika. Many were simply just standing in the wrong place, making it an easy fix, but it was clear there were men who were truly absent. The disloyalty, while it angered him, didn’t surprise him; these soldiers had been advised they would most likely be possessed by powerful magic through their marks and be forced to kill their own.

Who wouldn’t shy even slightly away from such a possibility?

But as the sun began to glint from over the side of Death Mountain, he had to start overlooking issues and coax the army into motion.

It was midmorning when the parade began. And there was something distinctly surreal about it all as he rode next to Zelda and Sheik, surrounded by thousands of soldiers as their footsteps stomped out a hypnotizing cadence. Most people, when imagining war, thought of just this – scores of men marching to the battlefield with swords on their backs and heavy armor glinting in the daylight. To Link, however, this was completely foreign.

His war had been fighting alone in the darkest places of the world, carrying the entire fate of the kingdom on his shoulders and trudging back and forth through time. Walking in a seven-thousand-manned processional was about as out of his depth as he could get.

Their path would take them around Lon Lon Ranch, keeping a considerable distance as Link dearly hoped the Nether beasts would leave them be. They may be thousands but even a Bloodback would break their ranks, take a huge amount of lives, and slow them down. For the most part, the party was quiet despite the loud rhythm of their footsteps and the snort of horses. But the energy in the air was tense and the sun began to burn into their heads and shoulders as the hours dragged on.

Since they left, Link had felt out his connection with Sheik and stayed meshed with his mind to distract himself from the biting anxiety at his stomach. While there was no actual conversation between them – the constant exchange of stray thoughts was enough to keep him calm.

It was midday when, after coming across a line of five Balta and making short work of them, they stopped for a break, the orders taking a solid ten minutes to fully halt their ranks. The end of summer apparently had every intention of going out fighting as the sun scorched them with waves of terrible heat. Link ditched the stupid cloak, tying it around the horn of his saddle before folding down on the grass, sweaty and downing half his canteen.

“We are making good time,” Sheik commented, sitting next to him and pushing his hair out of his face. Of course, to Link’s great annoyance, the Sheikah looked completely unperturbed by the heat and no trace of sweat shined on his face.

“Unless we all die of heat stroke,” Link countered, pulling his hat off and shaking out his hair.
“How the in the hell did I save Hyrule dressed like this?”

Sheik just gave him an amused look and a small teasing poke was felt through their connection. “I recall you complaining just as much back then.”

“How would you feel if you were forced back into your old clothes? Should’ve had Zelda find that body suit for you,” Link shot back.

That wiped the smirk off Sheik’s face and Link earned an elbow in his shoulder for his taunt. Zelda joined after a while, sitting next to them in the grass with her hair tied up, her pauldrons off, and her legs crossed loosely. Sweat rolled slowly down her face, but she said nothing about the heat; she instead surveyed her army, a mesh of blue and gold over the rolling hills.

After a healthy gulp from her canteen, she wiped her mouth and said, “Our scouts have seen nothing. It makes me wonder from what angle they will approach.”

“I suppose that depends on if they are coming from the portal in the Lost Woods,” Link considered. “That is where Termina and Hyrule connect, right?”

She nodded, eyes scanning the horizon as though she would see movement any moment.

“I think it is time we discuss what we are – well, you two – are going to do when Foursky uses Hexam on me,” Sheik spoke up, surprising them both. Zelda’s eyes flickered over to his and the expression there was like the same one she and Link shared right when they returned from the Nether, Sheik’s condition completely unknown.

The dread of having to make an impossibly hard decision about someone they loved.

Link still didn’t want to accept that the premonition would pass…but now it was only foolish to deny it – Foursky had Hexam and Sheik had Hexa. The chess pieces were perfectly lined up now, prepared to at least put their side in “check”.

So, what did they need to prevent? Link asked this aloud, breaking the brooding quiet between them.

“Well, there are two reasons why the end of the premonition will not come to pass – first of all, as we now know thanks to Kalyh and your Congruence, the knowledge of Hexa will be safe in your mind, Link. And second of all, the death clause of Congruence itself; if Foursky does not already know about your connection, he will soon enough. In a way, we have unknowingly prevented it.” Zelda sat back on her palms and leaned so her face was turned to the sky.

“So then, what happens after the premonition? Foursky orders Sheik to stand down when he realizes killing me is a bad idea? What then?” Link asked, a little hopeless.

“I don’t know, Link.” Her face was grim, eyes dark despite the bright sunshine. “I suppose we will find out. Regardless, the primary objective should be to prevent any loss of life, however events unfold…”

Link hated it. Here they sat amongst a sea of soldiers all heading for war and none of them new if there would be a fight or a retreat…or a mutiny. Sheik would be possessed and it wouldn’t just take some loving words and a hug to get him back to reality. Hexam’s hold, while Link had never truly witnessed it, would very likely be treacherous. The only thing they could hope for was a way in
which to break the mark on Sheik’s back, an idea which Link voiced.

Zelda nodded. “I can only hope the Goddesses have a plan for that. I still maintain the opinion that the Master Sword would be able to break the mark…but there must be another way, if the Goddesses are still unwilling to lend it to you.”

Link looked away, staring at the grass between them as images of the premonition flashed through his mind as they had for weeks. If only the blasted Goddesses had just shown them a little more…

“We’ll have to figure it out as we go,” Link decided, stealing Sheik’s phrase and giving him a hard look. “But either way, we’re getting you back. So, don’t get too comfortable with the idea of being Foursky’s puppet.”

“Believe me,” Sheik muttered angrily, the outright revulsion at the idea humming through their Congruence, “I will not be comfortable.”

I am terrified of hurting you. Sheik’s mind was flaring in Link’s and he tried to settle against the anger as much as possible, trying to soothe it. This new strength I have…

I’ll be fine, Link assured him, pushing his thoughts as hard as he could, still so unfamiliar with Mindspeak. You know I’ve been through worse. And we’ve sparred a thousand times – I know what to expect.

If I hurt you…I will not be able to forgive myself.

Link gave Sheik a glare and said, Yes, you will. I’ll make you.

He received an annoyed expression but no other arguments. Zelda, unaware of the entire exchange, was lost looking over the troops that stretched almost a league. She had the look of a burdened leader, her expression revealing the same fears Link felt as well – they were both responsible for these men and horribly unsure of how to keep them all alive.

Because it wasn’t just Sheik at stake to Hexam – it was the soldiers as well.

The sun moved from its zenith and they all grew restless. Zelda made the call to move on and they began the last leg of their journey.

To an unknown future.

To war.

To ruin.

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I cannot even express to y’all how much I love the first Hero. Please humor me dressing Oot Link up like the first Hero. This was purely for my own enjoyment.

Unfortunately, because I’ve revised the plot so much from what I originally wrote over a year ago, I had to almost completely rewrite this chapter. It’s likely that moving forward, the rest of the fic will require intense revisions so I apologize in advance for delayed updates.
Much of this chapter was exposition and set-up so I also apologize for little action – next chapter will be literally the opposite. We’re about to hit hyper-speed, so prepare your bodies. Shit’s gonna get weird.

To the person who literally reviewed with “I love you”, I love you too. I love all of you, in fact. Thank you so much for all your support and love. I say this every damn chapter but it never loses its meaning for me. Every day you guys confirm for me that I might have a future as a novelist. So, thank you endlessly.
XXXVI.

The scouts returned at sunset in a flurry, horses heaving for air and soaked with sweat; the enemy had been spotted in their approach. Suddenly, the war became somehow even more real and Link felt the omni-present knot in his chest tighten like a noose.

It was nightfall when they finally spotted the army of Amrita approaching. Their torches flickered in the distance and the echoing of enormous footsteps – the elephants, Link had to assume – pushed across the field in waves of sound. The mood in the ranks went tense and tight, hands squeezed at sword hilts out of nervousness. There was silver light coming from the horizon beyond the approaching armies, its glow like an aura around the dark mass of movement.

“Link,” came a quiet voice below him. He glanced down and saw Jalin stalking next to him to keep with the stride of Epona, tugging his cowl down. The Sheikah looked up at him with serious, dark eyes and said, “Remember what I said before. The Order is loyal to you.”

Link nodded, realizing he hadn’t the chance to speak to Jalin since Kalyh’s death. And he had so many questions, too. “I’m sorry for your loss, Jalin. My condolences to you and the rest of the Order.”

“I appreciate that.” He paused for a moment, eyes fluttering down in thought – when they met Link again, there was a deep, horrible pain there that reminded him of the pain he had seen in Sheik’s eyes so many times. “She told me, the night of the banquet, that she would likely die. I think… Kalyh may have known of Foursky’s disguise. I think she has been working with someone close to Foursky and that has been the source of her intelligence.”

The words Jalin had given him when they trekked across the field a few weeks ago replayed into his mind:

One day, Kalyh came back from a scout and told us we were going to Vrika, that Foursky planned to invade Hyrule and that we would defeat him there instead of Termina. We were to wait in Vrika and for what…none of us really knew.

“Who could she have been working with?” Link asked, sure Jalin didn’t know but obligated to ask anyway.

“I truly do not know, Hero. I assume it would be someone who wishes to see Foursky fall…but that would be a many number of people,” he admitted. “I apologize that I do not have more information. The Order stands by you, however, no matter what comes.”

Before anything else could be said, Jalin departed, returning to the small rank of Sheikah several paces back.

What did that mean? Zelda had mentioned the potentiality of Kalyh having an ally…but now Jalin was saying the same thing.

His eyes met Sheik’s, Kronos trotting next to Epona on his opposite side. It was clear by his
expression that he had heard Jalin’s words.

“Who do you think it is?” Link couldn’t help but ask.

“I believe speculation will be of no help by now. Even if we knew…it would be too dangerous to act on such information. We have more pressing things to worry about.” Sheik’s gaze held nothing but stress as it shifted from Link to the field before them. There was a sudden darkness in his expression that beckoned Link to follow his gaze.

Through the light summer mist he could now make out the shapes of elephants in the luminous light of the moon. The top of the silver circle began to peek over the distant treetops and weep light over the inky black sky. Their army was enormous, ranks folding back over the hills to an unknowable distance, only the flickers of torches to indicate where the men started and stopped.

Link, I wanted to say it earlier but…

Sheik was speaking through their connection, but before Link could focus in on his words, a sharp horn rang out in the hot summer air and sent a freezing chill down his spine. It came from the massive army before them, the sound slicing through the tromp of footsteps echoing through the fields.

“We will not barter with him,” Zelda said sharply, loud enough for the party surrounding her to hear. “No matter what he threatens, we are making no deals with the enemy.”

“Not even to avoid bloodshed, your Majesty?” asked a meek-sounding cabinet member. His pale face and slight body looked completely out of place on a battle field in armor.

She shot him a fierce look and said, “If you truly think bartering for the words will avoid bloodshed, you are severely mistaken, Gaius.” Zelda looked back ahead, eyes dark and angry as the space between the two armies shrank and the moon finally rose above the trees to bleach color from the landscape. “There will be no negotiations tonight.”

Time dragged at an unbearable pace as slowly, step for step, the forces of Amrita drew ever closer. In the light, Link could make out the gold armor of the soldiers, brightly contrasting with their dark, desert-worn skin. Some had yellow eyes and some had red, a clear indication of a mix of races between Sheikah and Gerudo. Engraved deeply in the chest of their armor was a crescent moon on the left and a triangle on the right.

Heading the ranks were two enormous white elephants, even more intimidating now that the moonlight illuminated them. They stood at least ten men tall and their trunks swayed with each step, tied carefully with sharp spikes that gleamed in the light.

Sitting atop the beasts were Foursky and Evanna.

Never had Foursky looked more like Ganondorf than in gold and black armor, a halo of curved spines standing tall from his shoulders. Evanna wore the same plating, her enormous Vaspra-laced sword laying over her back.

While they were formidable to view, the aura of energy surrounding them was its own nightmare: oppressive and dark, twisting up in Link’s chest and pressing an ache into his head. It felt like Ganondorf. It felt like the Nether. It felt like evil.
And more than anything, it felt immensely and unfathomably powerful.

How could they possibly win against this?

Time seemed to stop as, under the white light of the full moon, the two armies stopped yards from each other. Zelda and her party moved forward to face the two immortals on white elephants. The intense sensation of déjà vu sent adrenaline barreling through Link’s system as he stared up into the haughty faces of their threat.

“How kind of you to show up, Queen Zelda,” Foursky boomed, looking sincerely happy. Anyone easily fooled could almost trust the look on his face if they omitted the army waiting like a tight coil about to spring behind him. “And you brought your army. I appreciate that.”

“This is your last chance to back down, Foursky!” Zelda called out, the tightness of her voice making her white steed stomp and fidget nervously. “There need be no bloodshed tonight! We gave you your Vaspra, as Evanna asked! Now leave my kingdom!”

“But you have something else I want,” Foursky countered, crossing his legs on top of the elephant and propping his chin on a fist. His amused yellow eyes fell on Sheik and another cold chill spread through Link’s body. “And I’d really prefer to not take it by force.”

“I do not care what you want. You will not have it,” Zelda ordered, tone utterly frigid.

“Give me Hexa and I will leave your kingdom in peace,” Foursky said, the offer sounding close to genuine if not for his eyes glinting dangerously.

“Even Hexam will not win you the word of death. Forfeit and leave.” There was a confidence in her voice that gave Link a small bit of hope – yes, if they played their cards correctly, Link’s possession of Hexa would protect them both.

“What a risky bluff, dear Queen. Are you truly ready to test that claim?” The Gerudo’s expression faded from amusement to challenge. He was losing his patience and Link knew Sheik would need to transfer Hexa now before they lost the opportunity.

“Sheik,” Link breathed. “Now.”

He barely nodded, the movement just noticeable in his peripheral. The string of Congruence between them swelled bigger and brighter in Link’s mind. The word Hexa began to echo in his mind, a chant that grew and grew in a voice he didn’t recognize. A pressure settled in his forehead as shuddering wave after wave of energy pulsed between them.

“The prophecy protects Hyrule. You will never win!” she shouted, pushing her horse forward and in front of Kronos. “You will have to pass through my army to get to him.”

Foursky threw his head back and laughed. Evanna joined him obediently and the sound was a cruel one.

Suddenly, a cold and terrible wave of reality settled in Link’s chest. It was happening. Any moment, the premonition would begin and all Link could do is hold fast to his connection with Sheik, tangling their minds together before everything changed.

Before Sheik was no longer his.
Foursky was still laughing and Link reached out and grabbed Sheik’s hand, holding it tightly. The Congruence lit up like a fire – like the one Kalyh was put to rest in – and neither of them could move.

It was the gasp before a leap. It was the coil of muscles before impact. It was the heartbeat before attack.

“It is not your army, Queen.” Foursky growled, pulling from a pouch at his side a chunk of Vaspra the size of his fist, the other hand reaching out towards them. “It is mine.”

All the energy seemed to be sucked from the air as, in one intake of breath, there was a word:

“Hexam!”

It sent a tsunami of electricity across the field, plowing through their ranks and knocking them all to the ground. The impact knocked the air out of Link’s lungs and tore their hands apart. He could feel the word drive through his body, leaving a trail of agony in its wake.

It may as well have been an explosion.

Cries of pain filled his ears and it took a solid minute before he could reorient and scramble to his feet. All around him, soldiers were trembling on the ground as Hexam possessed them.

Link looked desperately to Sheik, praying silently that somehow, some way, he would see his Sheikah as himself. But dread flooded all thought, stripping his mind blank as he could do nothing but watch as Sheik lay trembling on the ground, eyes rolling up to expose only white.

Powerless.

Link was powerless as he watched Sheik be possessed, limbs writhing as a horrible, ragged growl tore from his mouth. It lasted forever, it seemed; he watched for too long as Hexam wreaked havoc on Sheik’s body, manipulating it into silence.

And when it finally stopped, Sheik clambered from the ground slowly. His eyes opened and they were the blue from Link’s nightmares.

The blue of Vaspra.

Rage flashed through Link’s mind like lightning, body tensed and ready to attack as Foursky retracted a smoking hand.

“What a show,” he commented through a roguish grin. “How simple it is to possess the minds of mortal men.”

With a sharp flick of his wrist, Sheik was suddenly commanded forward, body moving in a jerky, doll-like fashion. The Gerudo leapt down from the great head of the elephant and rested a hand on Sheik’s rigid shoulder, giving Link a mocking grin that set his blood on fire.

“I’ll bet it just eats you alive, seeing him like this,” the man mocked quietly. “Your prophecy may protect you, but your Congruence is your weakness. Once I extract Hexa, not even your Goddesses will keep you both from death.”
So Foursky knew about their Congruence.

During their brief stand-off in Vrika, Evanna had mentioned a friendship with the scholar who wrote the book about bonds – perhaps it had been clear to her then that the bond existed between them.

What did that mean now? Did the transfer work? What if Fousky managed to pull it from Sheik’s mind anyway? Their deaths would be swift should that be the case. Link felt desperately for their Congruence but only met a wall between them. He suddenly felt terribly alone and isolated in his own head.

It felt like the loss in the Nether, a loss that felt as though it would tear him asunder. He stood there useless and angry and empty, at a loss of what to do.

Foursky summoned Sheik’s hand to his dark forehead. “Give me Hexa, now,” he ordered quietly, closing his eyes.

Moments passed and Link waited breathlessly on the edge of unknown. He could sense Zelda beside him now, her hand held on Link’s arm like a vise to lend her strength.

They waited.

They prayed.

But…nothing happened.

“What is this?” Foursky demanded fiercely, grabbing Sheik’s loose hand and pressing it harder to his head. “Give me the word, you desert rat.”

Evanna fell weightlessly from her elephant to join him, as though she could lend some guidance and it was then that Zelda leaned in.

“Link,” she hissed. “Their auras are identical. She’s drawing power from him…she has none herself.”

Auras? Identical? Did she mean…?

“What’s happening, my Lord?” Evanna asked, hovering at her king’s side like a subordinate.

“It’s the word,” Foursky growled back in anger. “It’s...”

“It’s what?” There was an edge to her voice now.

“It’s gone.”

A silence fell over the field, the expression on Foursky’s face calculating and dangerous. Evanna eyes remained impassive, her gaze moving slowly from Sheik to Link.

“What will you do, my Lord?” she asked, a flat anger in her words. “How is it simply gone?”

“Because,” he responded, voice deep and dark and powerfully furious as it moved through the hot
summer air, “it is with the Hero now.”

A surge of hope bubbled up in Link’s chest as he watched the rage grow in Foursky’s gaze. They had finally managed one small step ahead of their enemy. Foursky had clearly not foreseen this. And if he truly needed both words, they were kept from him by Congruence.

Their weakness was their strength.

“I’ll give you this, Hero,” Foursky began, voice rising in mirth as his hand came down on Sheik’s shoulder and gripped tightly. “That was clever.”

“If you kill him, the words die with me!” Link bellowed.

Foursky let out a short laugh, eyes menacing in the moonlight. “You may be right, but that doesn’t mean I can’t convince you otherwise.”

The Gerudo moved away, Sheik seemed to come to life, turning and drawing his sword in several disjointed movement. The premonition unfolded itself before him as a look of fury cross his face and he advanced so aggressively Link felt a real pang of fear in his chest.

“You.” The words were spat from the Sheikah’s mouth, his eyes full of vitriol and fingers bone-white on the hilt of his sword as the space between them shortened with each stride. And Link had no idea what to do. Because this wasn’t Sheik, this wasn’t Sheik, this wasn’t Sheik – he repeated it over and over in his head.

What was Foursky going to do?

“Sheik,” he said, even though there wasn’t a point to his words. What good would they do? What could he possibly do against a powerful Sheikah being controlled by an even more powerful Gerudo?

“You let me die.”

No. No. This wasn’t happening.

The dream bloomed in his mind as the Sheikah kept moving forward, blue eyes an unearthly glare. He wouldn’t allow the premonition to play out verbatim. He couldn’t bear it. He kept his mouth shut, stood his ground, and drew the Moon Blade.

Foursky couldn’t kill them, but he could torture them.

For a moment, Sheik stood still before him and oppressive energy pulsed out of his body, clouding Link’s senses. There was a strange vibration between them, like their auras were fighting to rejoin despite the separation Hexam had caused.

It was a moment of hesitation that he recognized – Sheik was fighting it.

But it didn’t matter. Link looked down and realized why Foursky had gripped Sheik’s shoulder so tightly; Vaspra had been fused into his skin, his armor and clothing burned away in its wake. Sheik held out a hand and Link felt a burst of power collide with his chest, knocking him to the ground with a breathless impact, knocking his sword from his hands.
The brutal power of the Vaspra pushed him hard into the soil as Sheik crouched over him, holding the sword to his jugular.

“Look at what I’ve become!” He pressed harder. “Look what you’ve turned me into!”

But Link could only lie there, completely paralyzed by the horrible pressure and the bite of a blade that had never been turned on him until now.

“Sheik, stop! Fight it!” he heard Zelda shout. Link could feel the cadence of her footsteps on the ground but then there was a scuffle and she let out a grunt, punctuated by a clash of metal. Anxiety shot through his veins as he struggled to move his head and make sure she was okay.

But he couldn’t. Sheik held him firmly in place, eyes burning blue and incensed.

“Consider this,” he started to say, but then he stopped. The venom in his expression faltered for just a moment as Link felt the amulet Sheik gave him slide from under his chainmail and tip over his collarbone. His eyes twitched, like the amulet hypnotized him into staying his hand.

“Sheik,” Link said weakly, unable to find his full voice against the pressure of the blade. “Sheik, come back. Come back to me, please.”

The blade shook against him as Sheik began to resist the pull of Hexam.

“Sheik, fight it,” Link begged.

“Release the word and I’ll spare your lives,” Foursky offered, his voice booming around him. “Release the word and I’ll spare your people.”

It was a lie Link was surprised Foursky even attempted to tell.

“No,” Link ground out.

“I’ll give you some time to consider my offer. If you haven’t yielded by the time…well, you’ll know when. If you haven’t yielded by then, I will kill you both. I’ll destroy your kingdom in your absence.”

Foursky exerted his force upon Sheik once more and any fight he had was squashed. Briefly, the blade was pulled from Link’s throat, but the last thing he saw was the butt of the hilt coming for his face.

His head erupted with pain and he was cast into darkness.

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You’ve met with a terrible fate, haven’t you?

Link.

What’s with that stupid horse of yours? It doesn't listen to a word I said to it. There's no point in riding a thing like that. So I did you a favor and got rid of it.

Link.
Let’s play good guys and bad guys... I’ll be the good guy, and you be the bad guy, and when you're the bad guy, you just run.

Link!

I grant to you a soldier who has no heart. One who will not falter in the darkness.

“Link!”

His mind lurched like gears suddenly shoved into motion and he was awake and panicking on damp ground. Indigo sky, silver moon, empty air, and every inch of his body felt bruised. A groan came unbidden from his mouth and he sensed a presence close to him, a muffled voice pressing against his ears.

“Link,” Zelda said louder, voice breaking slightly. He felt a hand at his cheek and the familiar buzz of her magic go through his head, coaxing him back to reality.


Once more, he awoke to confusion with only Zelda’s magic and wisdom keeping him informed. He forced his body upright and surveyed the area around him – and there wasn’t much to see. The field was empty in all directions…save a group of bodies not too far away. The cabinet members lay limp bloody, the only people that had likely not been taken by Hexam.

Zelda was crouched next him, blood beading from a wound at her hairline and another one soaking her left arm. She gaze was fierce and desperate, seemingly unfazed by her injuries.

“Foursky has our army. He had them kill the cabinet members…and ordered them to kill me, too. But they wouldn’t obey – they would only fight. I don’t know why…I guess it’s possible the prophecy may be protecting me as well,” she explained quickly, knowing well what he would ask.

“They left and took our men with them. Foursky drew a portal to the castle and closed it behind him.”

Link swore violently, slammed a fist into the grass, and labored to his feet despite how dizzy he still felt.

“So what the hell am I supposed to do now?” Link cried, running his hands through his hair, shoving the hat off his head. “This is now a stalemate – if I give him the words, he’ll kill us all. If I don’t, he’ll still kill us all. Why does he even need Hexa?”

She pressed a bloody hand against the wound on her head, the loss of blood clearly ebbing at her strength, and said, “The Goddesses needed this to happen, Link. This was the only way to keep Foursky held at arm’s length from…whatever he’s trying to accomplish. If you stop him, this stalemate won’t matter.”

“So what do I do?” he repeated. “How do I possibly defeat him?”

“With the Master Sword.”

This gave him pause.
“The False God will be awakened with the dreadful heart of the cursed. He will gain power greater than has ever been seen. You must wait until the sky falls. Only then may we help you,” Zelda quoted. They were the words the Goddesses had proclaimed when he sought them for help, words she had been studying for days.

“But how do you know they will give me the sword?” Link asked incredulously.

Zelda’s face folded into pain and dread as she raised a bloody hand to point above his head at something behind him. Her hand shook and cold fear settled in his gut as he spun around to follow her gaze.

There was the moon, enormous and sinister where it hung. It took up half the sky in its slow descent for the castle glittering far in the distance below its trajectory.

The moon was falling from the sky.

*You must wait until the sky falls.*

“No,” Link whispered weakly, all feeling deserting his limbs and leaving his body weak, hardly able to stand.

“We are going back. You must destroy him. You must stop the moon from falling. When you do, we will seal him and Evanna in The Nether with the Vaspra…Kalyh died to get us.” Zelda voice was hard and even.

“How will I defeat them both?” Link felt like a child, desperately asking for directions.

“They are both skilled at shielding their auras. It was only in their lapse of focus tonight that I saw the evidence. I’m ashamed it has taken me this long to figure it out…but they are Congruent, Link.”

Link surely gave her a stupid, shocked expression; he could recall her saying their auras were the same and they were sharing power but impending doom had distracted him from absorbing that information.

“So…we only have to defeat one of them.” A strange relief filled him – maybe he *could* stand a chance against Foursky. The obvious target would be Evanna; it was unlikely she could use Hexam considering she was drawing power from Foursky. She was clearly weaker than him. Perhaps he had been the source of her magic all along.

How they had managed to share power over such distances…well, they had had plenty of time to learn such a skill, Link figured.

“This is why they have been going to great lengths to shield themselves. They don’t want anyone to know.”

“But they’re immortal! Kalyh said we would need a source of Vaspra equivalent to what they’ve absorbed for Hexa to destroy them,” he argued.

“I know,” she said, nodding in agreement. “That’s why I brought all the Vaspra we have with me.”

Zelda reached under her cloak to reveal a pack that had been looped over her shoulders under the
cloth. She handed it to him, its contents light as a feather, an indication that an expanding spell had been cast to negate its weight – it reminded Link of the bag he and Sheik had taken to the Nether to collect Vaspra for Evanna.

“Vaspra, by its very nature, fuses together. We have a very large piece now. It *might* be enough, Link.”

Maybe it *would* be enough. More hope filtered into him, replacing some of the dread and fear.

They had a shot. A very real shot.

Zelda produced another item from a pouch at her hip – the Ocarina of Time.

“Warp to the Temple, Link. Get the Master Sword and destroy the mark on Sheik’s back. Together, you both can defeat them,” she commanded, pushing the blue ocarina into his hands.

“Wait, what about you?” he demanded. “You’re coming with me, Zelda.”

She shook her head. “I need to get to Lon Lon, to the tear. I’ll try and clear the field for you as much as I can, so you can bring their bodies and we can end this. *Truly* end this.”

Link gawked at her. “No way! I’m not leaving you out here wounded and alone!”

Zelda fixed him with the most irritated glare he may have ever seen and her voice was suddenly so loud it made Link flinch. “I am the *Queen of Hyrule*, Link, not a damsel in distress! I can take care of myself – arguably better than you can! Get your ass to the Temple! That’s an *order*, General!”

He frowned and glanced down at the instrument in his hands. Its magic was so familiar against his skin, as though it belonged there. Even shooting blind in the dark, Zelda had managed to stay several steps ahead of everyone – Link wasn’t sure what he would do without her when he left.

Her blood-stained hands closed over his, her face softer now as she offered him a sad smile.

“I am so glad that you and Sheik stopped dancing around each other,” Zelda told him with a chuckle. “It was a little painful to watch at times. You both have always denied yourselves the things you truly want, for fear of losing them. That and you have both always been a little dense.”

“Hey,” Link warned, but couldn’t help the smile her words brought him.

For one moment in the middle of war, it was just the two of them again. Like brother and sister, picking on each other, sharing inside jokes at the expense of egotistical lords, and taunting one another during spars.

“Have you at least told him you love him?” she prodded kindly.

Link shook his head, the idea of saying such words summoning uncomfortable heat to his face.

“Then *go tell him.”

--

Got all that?
I apologize if things are starting to get very confusing. This whole fic is essentially me trying to lasso lots of things together very slowly over 250k words.

As always, thank you to the people reading, reviewing, and supporting this story.

Places to find me:
Sincosma on Tumblr
Amandalynnsings on Instagram
Ohamandalynn on Snapchat
Amandalynnsings . com for my music
XXXVII.

Link rematerialized on the warp pedestal in the Temple of Time.

The Temple was just as cold and hollow as memory promised. Motes hung in shafts of moonlight through stained glass windows and, for a moment, Link could almost pretend all was well and he was only visiting.

But he wasn’t – what he prayed would be the final battle awaited him at the castle and the fear and trepidation wound like an unyielding knot in his stomach.

Link burst out of the Temple and into stuffy summer air, immediately sensing the energy displacement. His gaze went instantly to the silhouette of the castle above him and his stomach plummeted to his feet. The vivid light the moon was reflecting blinded him momentarily and he squinted his eyes desperately to adjust.

And then he could see and its mass took up nearly all visible sky.

Link didn’t know what dark magic had possessed it, but a terrifying, sneering face had been carved into its cratered surface as it slowly dove towards earth. His legs felt unsteady for a moment and he gripped the wall of the Temple next to him.

How in the name of the Goddesses could he possibly stop that? As if Foursky and Evanna weren’t a formidable enough force…but the moon? How could they possess the power to perform such a feat?

How could he stop the moon from colliding with the Hyrule?

A hazy, blue glow was resonating atop the castle, below the glaring face and Link could see the tallest tower had collapsed by hand of some great explosion. The castle was a third shorter now and the top was leveled out directly in the path of the falling moon.

As much as he wanted to storm into battle, Link needed to get through the Door of Time; one last attempt. Because now, if they kept their word, he would finally receive the Goddesses’ help. They could end his torture and give him the one last thing that stood a chance to stop the coming apocalypse.

He darted back to the towering, stone door, the small depression from his fist still visible. Hopefully the Goddesses would forgive him that – he honestly was surprised it wasn’t already magically fixed. His heart thrust against his sternum as he played probably the sorriest rendition of Song of Time he’d ever produced.

And, ready to thank every deity that had ever existed, the door began to open and a resounding, tripled voice echoed in his head.

*You may wield the Master Sword, Link. Seal all evil here to the end of creation.*
“Gladly,” he muttered under his breath, storming forward for the legendary sword waiting dutifully in its pedestal. As much as he hated to even touch that hilt again, he grasped it soundly and wrenched it from the stone.

The eruption of power that travelled up his arm rushed into his head, clearing his eyesight, and reenergizing his body. Having the sword once more was salt on an old wound…but he had to admit the wave of electricity was a relief. The energy of his ancestors filled him and it took some of the edge off the overwhelming task before him.

Maybe – just maybe – he had a chance of getting Sheik back now that he wielded Evil’s Bane.

The run to the castle was effortless in his adrenaline rush. The path up to the main gates was devoid of life but the aura grew heavier and heavier as he raced through the front lawn to the main castle doors.

It was there that he met first resistance.

A combination of possessed Hyrulean soldiers and Amrita warriors attacked him the moment he set foot in the castle, forcing him to attempt differentiating between just knocking out his friends and killing his enemies. If he made mistakes, he couldn’t linger on the thought: he’d contend with it later or they’d all die.

It was slow working through the halls for the stairs. The castle was a mess already from the war preparation but now it was in even more disarray as he fought fiercely for the sixth-floor terrace. Moonlight flashed through the windows and the closer he got to the top, the thicker the air became.

Whatever wait for Link above was not going down with any ease.

He emerged back into the bright, hot air. The Master Sword seemed to quiver in his grip as he evaluated the scene before him:

Foursky faced away from him, his huge frame shivering – not from fear but Link recognized the movement of powerful energy through his limbs. Something covered his face, its silhouette splaying horns around his head. Evanna sat at his side, lounged back in the same black chair she was notorious for summoning. Sheik stood still as a stone beside her, his vacant expression disturbing to behold.

Was Sheik still in there? Link dreaded the answer.

And then he noticed a new addition to Sheik’s appearance – his entire right arm was now laced with Vaspra, little clusters of glowing blue crystal shredding skin and protruding in sharp points. Anger rippled through Link at the sight.

“Foursky!” he thundered, taking position for any attack. He earned Evanna’s impassive gaze and, by her body language, it was clear she had been waiting for his arrival.

The Gerudo in question remained still in the moon’s glow for a moment. When he did move, his motions were careful and measured as he pulled the object off his face. Foursky turned around, his yellow eyes beaming as the moonlight revealed a warped face. His nose was turned down against his upper lip and his mouth was twisted into a terrible scowl.

“How kind of you to finally join us, Link,” he said, his demonic voice far too reminiscent of
Ganondorf. They even stood there on the roof of the castle; he never dreamed he would be forced to relive that battle once more. “And I see you’ve brought your little sword. Excellent. You’re just in time for the end!”

With this, he gestured up to the awful moon, its burning orange eyes and gray, bared teeth bearing down on them. It was such an unreal sight, Link still couldn’t accept what he was looking at. His eyes flickered down to whatever Foursky held in his hand, the brightness of the moon casting it half in perfect shadow. What was it? A mask? There was something so unsettling about it…

“What have you done?” Link demanded, drawing closer and struggling to see through the shadows for the object’s identity.

“This?” Foursky asked, glancing up at the moon as though it were not out of place. “This is my destruction upon Hyrule. This is Termina’s wrath, its prophecy spilling into your world, caused by the displacement of time.”

“But why are you doing this?”

“Because you, Hero of Time, destroyed reality by staying in this wretched time after you defeated my grandson,” Foursky snarled. “The timeline was meant to be reset and I had every intention of taking Ganondorf to Termina, to use him in continuing my kingdom. You took that opportunity from me and doomed my kingdom. You took him from me and locked him in the one place I could not retrieve him. This land has plagued me for too long – it is time for Hyrule to end.”

He held the horned thing above him, at last revealing it in the bright, silver light and the strangest sense of terrible familiarity passed over Link, although he had never seen it a day in his life. It was a shadowed silhouette from his vaguest dreams. It was a whisper just at the edge of his mind. And every fiber in his being wanted to destroy it, as though he was always meant to.

It was a mask. A strange, colorful, heart-shaped mask. Two yellow horns protruded proudly above haunting gold and green eyes, four more horns reaching out on either side of it. There was something wholly unnatural and disturbing about it. It felt…alive.

“This,” Foursky said in a quiet, chilling voice, “is Majora’s Mask.”

Link recognized the name, although he had no idea how.

“It’s a mask of terrible power, the result of hundreds of years of dark ritual and death,” he went on, running long fingers over its surface with reverence. “I’ve been searching for years to find a way to control it. Because the mask is treacherous. It would devour me. In fact,” he gestured to his face, “it’s already trying to, even despite the command of Hexam.”

“I won’t believe that my choice to stay would warrant this. You have Blithos! You have the next Gerudo King! You have an entire kingdom and more Vaspra than you could possibly need! Why come back to destroy us?” Link cried. “Your reasons are groundless!”

“Your land, your Goddesses, your bloodline – it is a cycle of power that silences others,” he replied simply. “Time and time again I have been scorned by this land, driven away by my own people… so they paid in their lives, a debt they’ve owed me for centuries. I have their King and Amrita will flourish once more. I will destroy this land and I will conquer all of Termina at last. And no Hero or Goddess reincarnate will impede me.”
Foursky took three massive strides forward, careening dangerously close into Link’s space. The heavy aura coming off him pressed into Link’s stomach and summoned a tight nausea. His burning yellow eyes were all consuming as they held Link in place for a long moment.

“So, tell me, General,” he snarled, “what exactly confuses you about my reasons?”

A blast of energy ensued and Link was thrown backward, flying several meters and nearly cracking his head open on the ground had he not maneuvered himself into a roll at the last moment. His chest ached and the Master Sword pulsed heavily in his relentless grip.

“It’s clear you’re still in need of convincing to relinquish Hexa and, luckily, I know just how to make you suffer, Hero,” Foursky laughed, mouth stretched wide and unnatural. “That is, after all, the only thing you and your ancestors have ever been good for.”

The Gerudo put Majora’s Mask back on his face, its horrible eyes piercing in the white-hot moonlight. Foursky turned away, flipping a large hand towards Sheik, who came to life like a marionette in response. Sheik drew his sword with a grating ring and Evanna watched him carefully, like a slave master eyeing a servant.

“Draw it out, won’t you, Sheikah?” she asked in a velvety voice. “Make sure not to kill him, though. I still need that word in his head.”

Sheik gave a stiff nod. For a moment, nothing happened…and then, in a blur of motion, the Sheikah was in his face, swinging his sword towards Link’s stomach. He dodged it at the very last moment, flipping backwards in a slightly sloppy motion as he felt the whoosh of quick air against his scalding skin.

“Sheik!” Link shouted, reeling backwards while blocking another bone-rattling blow. “Sheik, I have the Master Sword! If you’re in there-

But Sheik dove for him and clipped his side, effectively cutting off his pleas. Link blocked swing after swing, parrying and dodging all he could. And Sheik was ruthless, never allowing him a moment to root himself to the ground and formulate a strategy to break the mark on the Sheikah’s back. He would never get close if he was constantly in defense.

“Sheik, I know you can hear me!” Link begged as he narrowly missed another harrowing blow. “I need you to fight, like you did in the field! Please!”

It had no effect; not that he really thought it would, but what else could he do? Link had no idea how he was going to incapacitate such a powerful opponent without seriously injuring him. Sheik’s strength had doubled since the Nether. Even if Link managed to catch him off-guard, Sheik might unleash his magic and Link wouldn’t have a chance against it, especially now with an arm laced with Vaspra at his command.

He needed to break the mark. He needed Sheik to use Hexa. He needed their Congruence.

Evading attack after attack, Link worked hard against the mental wall blocking their Congruence. He said Sheik’s name over and over, pressing and pressing for just the slightest flicker of fight in those empty blue eyes. Because he had seen it hours ago in Sheik’s face with a blade pressed to Link’s throat.

The moon drew ever nearer and Link wondered just when its descent had begun; he had only
woken up to find it lower than it should be, no passage of time to inform him. He couldn’t imagine the horror of those remaining in Hyrule, seeing the plummeting moon in the distance. How much longer did they have? In the few glances he could steal, he saw Foursky still rigidly focused on the nearing moon and Evanna watching their one-sided fight dutifully.

But their battle had to end.

Perhaps words were the key, as they were with everything else.

Link didn’t want to reveal his plan to break the seal with Evanna so avidly watching – she would likely intervene quicker than he could even move his sword to ruin the mark. But anything else was fair game and Sheik wasn’t really the most emotionally sound person as of late…so summoning the right emotions with the right words was likely Link’s best shot. As much as he didn’t want to re-open wounds, he was going to have to dig deep to illicit anything through the unyielding grip of Hexam.

“Remember Kalyh! Remember what she died for! By letting them win, you make her death in vain! You disgrace her memory!” Another swipe earned him a deep laceration on his bicep, the blood hot and wet as it soaked his sleeve and ran down his arm. “You have to come back! We have to win this and leave, like we said we would!” A mean, unforgiving swing left a biting gash in his side as he began to fatigue under Sheik’s ruthless attacks.

“You have to fight this, Sheik! For me! We’re Congruent! We’re supposed to stay together until one of us dies…it can’t be today!” he went on, another strike catching his other side. Blood loss tugged at his awareness and he knew he wouldn’t have much longer before his strength would begin to seriously falter. While death was not yet to come – they still needed Hexa from him – it was clear Foursky thought weakening Link enough would convince him to forfeit the word. And lingering on the edge of death, unable to fight…what if did break him?

“Please, Sheik! Please! We have to fight this! Together!”

Sheik wasn’t listening – in fact, he seemed completely unfazed by Link’s words. It seemed, however much it risked them both, there was only one option left:

Link dropped the Master Sword and held out his arms in surrender.

But the sword was coming quick anyway, ready to slice into his ribcage, and Link found himself completely unsure if Sheik would stop it. Or perhaps Evanna would stop him because they still needed Hexa for whatever reason. This blow might kill him eventually, however, if it broke through his ribs and punctured his lung – it would guarantee a long, dreadful death.

Time seemed to stop when the blade fell short at his torso, before it could pour more blood to the ground and Sheik wavered in a coil of tension and rage.

Link reached forward and touched Sheik’s hand. The reaction was instantaneous; Sheik dropped the sword and roughly tackled Link to the ground, his head hitting the ground with a dizzying thump. Hands went tight around his throat and his vision blurred. He reached blindly for the Master Sword, fingers just glancing off the end of the hilt.

“Sheik!” he gagged, legs bucking involuntarily as those bright blue eyes eclipsed the rest of his vision. “Don’t…do…this!”
The pressure was inescapable, his windpipe squeezed so tightly Link could only manage a little more air before he would likely pass out. And should that happen, all would surely be lost – no one would be there to stop the moon from colliding with Hyrule. More than that, Link couldn’t let one more thing go unsaid between them should they die. And maybe it would be the one word to save him. To save Sheik. To save Hyrule.

To end it all.

“I love you,” Link struggled out.

And he prayed that Sheik would hear it, that it would matter, that it would work, that it would save them.

Because with every fiber of his being he meant it. He had meant it since they first met. He meant it with everything he was and wished he could be. It had lingered in every thought, word, and touch. The words had always been there. And he dearly wished such an admission had been in better circumstances.

But it couldn’t.

And perhaps it was always meant to be that way.

The hands around Link’s throat were suddenly gone and Link gasped for air, flailing his hand furiously for the Master Sword. Sheik was still above him, body shaking as a battle clearly waged in his head. His eyes flickered between red and blue and Link, despite his failing vision, finally found purchase on his sword’s hilt. He yanked Sheik down on top of him by his cowl and, fighting desperately the darkness of unconsciousness, Link grasped the other side of his blade and brought it down on Sheik’s back.

There was a loud crack, followed by a strange sizzling and the terrible aura that engulfed Sheik was abruptly sucked away. Their Congruence rushed back into Link’s mind like a flash flood, the barrage of sensation overpowering but feverishly welcomed.

“Link,” Sheik breathed in his ear, body shaking from relief. “I love you. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I love you, Link. Are you okay?”

Link felt himself laughing in relief at the weak and babbling voice in his ear, savoring it before they would have to find their strength and fight once more. Although he wasn’t hearing Evanna’s voice yet, Sheik’s unpossessed state would be obvious very shortly.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” Link assured him hoarsely, trying to memorize the breath at his neck and the hands gripping his shoulders. “I told you I’d get you back. I told you I would, you idiot.” He pushed at Sheik’s chest. “We have to stand. We have to fight.”

Sheik, still full of energy and powered by the Vaspra in his arm, pulled them both to their feet. Link’s balance was still questionable but the sight above them was sobering enough – the moon so close to the earth, it filled the sky and blocked out everything else. Evanna stood rigidly, Vaspra-laced sword drawn and face unreadable.

Foursky was still focused on the moon.

This was their only chance.
Link felt the shock filter through Sheik’s mind. Despite his skills, they had managed to hide their auras and shared energies from him, just as they had from Zelda. But regardless of whether it spelled certain death or not, this knowledge would turn the tides:

Congruence was strength and Congruence was weakness.

“How clever,” Evanna sneered, holding her sword aloft, eyes black and gaping.

Sheik pushed words furiously through their connection, his voice crystal clear in Link’s mind: *If we get her sword, I can use Hexa on her. That might be enough Vaspra to do some damage.*

Kalyh had told Link they would need the same amount of Vaspra Foursky and Evanna had absorbed to kill them…but who knew what that quantity actually was? There was a calculated risk to take – would the sword, Sheik’s arm, and their shared power be enough?

“You think you’ve won?” she thundered, lunging for her first strike at Link.

Link dodged the blow easily, his equilibrium returned now that the Congruence lent him some extra energy. He only needed one side-step to avoid the next one. He threw a puzzled glance at Sheik – something wasn’t right. Perhaps Link had expected more fury, a fiercer attack, more than…

“You have no idea what lies ahead!” Evanna growled. “Do you think you’re strong enough to take me?”

Another swipe that could hardly count as a decent parry. It was clear she had no intention in harming them. And then, rather suddenly, she stopped moving. There was a strange expression on her face, as though she was…forfeiting?

“Don’t mess this up. Make it count,” she said, her voice that of resignation. Link couldn’t imagine what she meant until, suddenly, she threw her sword to them. It slid evenly through the air, clattering onto the stone at their feet, Vaspra sparkling brightly in the moonlight.

What? *What?*

Sheik was quick on his feet, as always; he scooped her sword off the ground and held it aloft in defense. But there was no threat before them as Evanna remained still with her hands held loosely at her side and Foursky kept his back turned, somehow still oblivious to what betrayal was happening behind his back.

Unless it wasn’t betrayal. Was it another trap? What was she playing at?

It didn’t matter to Link – it was their only chance. “Sheik, do it,” he ground out, pushing Hexa back through their connection. “This is our only chance.”

But, while Sheik accepted the word back into his mind, he hesitated. A calculated look passed over his features and, for a moment, Link wanted to scream at him.

This could be their only opportunity. What was he waiting for? What did he see that Link didn’t?
And then, a strange and nasally voice pierced through the thick, humid summer air. All of their focus, including Evanna’s, snapped to the Gerudo standing at the edge of the roof. His body was shaking violently, hands on either side of the mask.

*Did you really think you could control me with weak Sheikah magic?*

“*Hexam!*” Foursky cried, a touch of panic reaching his voice as he engulfed himself with blue energy.

And then, Link realized what was happening. The mask was resisting Hexam. It was powerful enough to completely deny what should’ve been the ultimate power, even with the enormous amount of Vaspra in Foursky’s possession.

How? How could *anything* fight such persuasive influence? The ground began to shake and Link struggled to keep his bearings as the mask spoke again.

*What a boring game you play, Gerudo!*

“Evanna, bring me more ore!” Foursky commanded, pulling at the horns of the mask and becoming unsteady on his feet. “Bring me your sword!”

But she remained, watching her King with impassive eyes. It was almost as though she had expected this to happen. But how was that possible? If Foursky hadn’t known, how could she?

A huge pulse, like a colossal heartbeat, thrummed through the roof, its source the haughty mask upon his head. The sound of crunching bone met Link’s ears and Foursky’s head twitched unnaturally. He emitted a pained, awful groan as the mask seemed to break his skull.

“*Evanna!*” Foursky howled, beginning to pull desperately at the mask. “*The Vaspra! Bring it now!*”

Link flicked his eyes back to the woman in question. Evanna’s face was twisted into disgusted scowl, backing from Foursky and the cursed mask.

*You’re so boring. Give me someone more fun.*

“End me,” Evanna said, moving swiftly so she stood between them and the struggling Gerudo, her arms stretched outward. Her voice was cold and her expression was determined, but there was almost a *plea* hidden somewhere in her words. “You have enough Vaspra. Finish what I started, Sheikah.”

And, this time, Sheik didn’t need to be told twice; he lunged forward and Link braced himself in a crouch, praying to the Goddesses despite himself. Although the Sheikah moved at an unsettling speed, time still somehow seemed to slow dramatically, every moment before the final blow like a lethargic and painful heartbeat.

The sword swung down on Evanna’s delicate crown.

“*HEXA!*”

Blue light ruptured in every direction and Link was thrown backward such a distance, he thought he would never hit the ground.
And then he did.

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For once, I’m not going to apologize for the delay because the past two months have honestly been utter hell for me.

I had roommates bail two weeks after signing a year-long lease and I’ve had to spend the past two months scrambling to find a place to live so I wouldn’t have to live out of my car. I also left my miserable job of 5 years for a new and better job – I’m a professional editor now, which is amazing. But I’m also still in school (full-time job and school), so I’ve had to deal with that in the middle of everything else. I *did*, thankfully, find somewhere to live, but that meant I had to move for the second time in three months to a place 30 minutes away from where I was living previously.

TL;dr I’ve been through a lot the past two months and Congruent hasn’t been a priority. But thank you to all that have been patiently waiting and thank you to the new readers that gave this fic such wonderful, sweet reviews.

In other news, it’s honestly a wonder that Link doesn’t have brain damage with all the concussions he gets.

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amandalynnsings . com for my music
Chapter 38

XXXVIII.

He didn’t necessarily lose consciousness, but Link’s senses were too overwhelmed from the blast to be considered aware for a handful of minutes. When he did return to reality, a few things were made abundantly clear.

First, his arm was very broken and the realization was a strike of pain through his body as he stared at the sky. Which led to the second thing: the very normal moon at its zenith, barely visible through the cloud of dust and debris hanging in the humid air. Link struggled to sit up and survey the area, bringing him to the final thing:

Foursky and Evanna lay still in the rubble paces away from him, amongst broken stone and shards of Vaspra lying everywhere.

Despite taking a sword to the head, there were no wounds to speak of on Foursky. Link could only assume the mask had shielded the Gerudo from the blow. But, from his position, he could see the mask, too.

It lay unmarred in the debris.

“Link!”

Through the haze, a bloody Sheik came stumbling forward, looking half-dead and exhausted. But he was on his feet and a tsunami of relief engulfed Link as he struggled to yell back through the dust that choked him. He wanted to reach out with both arms but his broken one wasn’t going to move for anyone so just one would have to do.

“Thank the Goddesses,” Sheik coughed, struggling his way over the terrain. He fell to his knees and grabbed Link’s face, kissing him hard on the mouth. It tasted like dirt and dust and sweat and blood, but none of it fazed him as – for the first time in a month – the fear and anxiety finally melted away and he could breathe. Perhaps not in the literal sense, what with the dust in the air, but in a way that seemed to transcend all of that.

Because they were alive.

They were alive.

And they won.

“Thanks for taking care of that prophecy for me,” Link mumbled against his lips.

“To hell with prophecies,” Sheik growled. “I’m done with them. No more, Link.”

When the adrenaline started to wear off and the pain set in, they sat there in the broken remains atop the roof and stared at the still bodies of Foursky and Evanna. They didn’t look alive…but Link knew better. He could still sense their beating hearts. They were immortal and even losing their Vaspra, apparently, wasn’t going to change that.
“We need to get them to the tear at Lon Lon,” Link said quietly. “Them and that awful mask.”

“What was that thing?”

“He called it Majora’s Mask and let’s just be glad we don’t have to battle it, too,” Link replied, reaching down to fuss over Sheik’s busted knuckles. He wished he had the strength to heal them, like the spell he had cast so long ago in Vrika. “But I still don’t know why it felt so familiar…”

They fell silent. Sheik fished a potion out of Link’s pack and helped him gulp it down. There were no more enemies left to fight so he didn’t worry when the sleepy, numbing effect of the elixir set in and the bones in his arm snapped back together in a disgusting fashion.

When the moon sunk below the horizon, they finally stood and started the last leg of their task. Sheik collected the chunks of Vaspra scattered about, the size of cabbages, and Link checked the pulses at the necks of their enemies just be completely sure.

Alive. Definitely alive.

But they were held in some sort of stasis, the Vaspra they had absorbed now ejected from their bodies. Did that mean that now, with all of the blue ore out of them, it was possible to use Hexa once more and actually kill them? Link voiced this thought and Sheik shook his head after a moment’s pause.

“I don’t think they can be killed, Link. They were made immortal by Vaspra and a spell – even if we have forced all the ore from their bodies, their condition can’t be changed. We are lucky that we drained them enough to put them in this catatonic state. Let’s not push it.”

Link could most assuredly agree with that; he was done pushing it for possibly the rest of his life.

It was then that they both heard a weak little cry on the wind. Giving each other wide-eyed, dumbfounded looks, they both searched quickly to find its source.

It was Link that found Blithos whimpering behind what was left of a tower. The little Gerudo was curled tightly in a ball, his desert-clothing torn and dirty. Worried that raising his voice for Sheik would frighten him, Link lowered himself (painfully) onto his knees and spoke in a quiet voice to the little Gerudo boy who stared at him with nothing short of terror in his watery, yellow eyes.

“I’m Link, Blithos. We met at the fortress, remember? I’m not going to hurt you. Those terrible people are gone now. And your mother is nearby. I can bring you to her. Is that okay?”

The boy’s whimpers turned to soft cries and, for a moment, Link assumed he was making matters worse; he never really had a great track-record with kids. But there was relief in Blithos’ face and, with a little yelp, he threw himself into Link’s arms and sobbed.

Link picked him up with his good arm, balancing him carefully over his shoulder and shooting Sheik a frown.

This was to be the next Gerudo King and he had already seen such strife. What had Foursky really intended to do with his boy?

Link could only pray Blithos didn’t follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. Hopefully
Lanaia could raise him to keep his kind and gentle disposition intact. Perhaps the Gerudo – what was left of them that was – would see a just and good King for the first time in three centuries. It took only a few minutes for Blithos to calm down and, surprisingly, fall asleep.

And Link couldn’t blame him – the boy was only four and had been put through enough hell to tire anyone out.

He carried the little Gerudo back through the broken window Link had emerged from hours ago, laying him gently onto a dusty chair in the hallway. Blithos barely stirred and, for a moment, Link stared down at him and suddenly, vividly, saw himself.

A young boy, displaced by time, and already cursed to an uncertain future.

Link shook himself sober; they had work to do.

It was nearing morning when they carried the bodies and mask down to the stables. Placing their still, rigid forms on the back of a cart, a thick canvas tarp was laid over Foursky and Evanna. All around them, as they prepared to leave for Lon Lon, soldiers newly returned to themselves milled around in confusion. And Link wanted to laugh at their expressions as many came up to him with more questions than he had the strength to answer.

He handed the sleeping Gerudo child to one of them, ordering the lieutenant to take him to Lanaia – although Link had no idea where she might be or if she had survived the battle. Even as the soldier took the toddler, he had a hundred questions on his lips and a shell-shocked look in his tired eyes.

“We defeated Foursky,” Link assured him. “We won. We’re safe now.”

“What are our orders, General?”

Link shrugged with his good shoulder and laughed. “I don’t know. I’m not your General anymore.”

And this earned the most comical of looks, but he didn’t stick around for any more questions or arguments. The potion was still tugging at his center of gravity and he held Sheik’s shoulder for support. Even as they bridled Epona and Kronos up, ready to transport the bodies of their enemies to Lon Lon and send them into the abyss…it didn’t feel real.

The angst and the fear of the past month didn’t feel like it could be dispelled so easily. How could it be over? The dread had been building up for so long. And yet, in just the span of a few hours, it was all over and in the most unexpected of ways.

There was no grisly battle into the morning light. Link had only fought Sheik, never even laying a hand on Foursky himself.

Majora’s Mask had done it for them.

Link and Sheik headed out into the fields as the sky awoke behind thick, slate-gray clouds. Thunder mumbled as a morning storm rolled in, the air quick and cold, shooing away the heat of the night. Link had hoped Zelda would make it back by then but when he didn’t see any sign of her on the horizon, his stomach tightened in worry.

“I never should’ve left her,” he whispered.
“Zelda is the Queen of Hyrule, reincarnate of the Goddess Hylia,” Sheik reminded him. “She can handle a night in the field. You did the right thing.”

Of course, Sheik was right. Link wasn’t trusting her abilities like he should but all he could see in his head was the blood dripping down her arm and the terrible look in her exhausted eyes. He tried to reassure himself that she could take care of herself but...maybe protecting someone for so long never wore off, even when that person didn’t need the protection anymore.

Zelda wasn’t that little girl he met in the courtyard nine years ago anymore, fearful of her dreams as she watched the Gerudo King feign fealty to her father.

The world around them began to awaken as a crisp wind cooled Link’s skin and marked the beginning of the end for summer. And it was a summer he wanted to soon forget. But like the first war, he knew it would take time. Link knew he would wake up in cold sweats, struggling to escape the nightmares once more.

But he would have Sheik, so what did it matter?

“The only reason we won,” Sheik said softly, leaning back against the seat of the cart and closing his eyes, “was Evanna.”

Link nodded. “I know. I still don’t understand why, though. Finish what I started, she said…what do you think she meant?”

“She betrayed Foursky – perhaps that was her plan all along?”

“I wonder when and why she decided to do it,” Link mused, trying to fit the knowledge they had now into the vast puzzle they had mostly solved.

The thunder got louder and the sky a little darker. They moved at a moderate pace and Link, despite the lingering haze of the potion, looked over to inspect Sheik’s right arm next to him. His armor was gone from the initial fusion and, from collarbone to fingers, his whole arm was exposed and glinting in the dim light. What remained of his shredded skin was dark gray and even black in some places where it could be seen in between clusters of blue crystal.

It didn’t even look like an arm anymore. It was beginning to look like Evanna’s sword and Link wondered if that was an effect of fusing the ore to objects.

“We have to get that Vaspra off you,” Link told him worriedly.

Sheik glanced down and grimaced. “I don’t...know if we can. I tried earlier while collecting the Vaspra debris. It seems to be rooted to my bones.”

Anxiety twisted Link’s stomach but he worked it away with their permanent mantra – we’ll figure it out as we go.

They always did.

Link watched the horses sway in front of them, the cart sliding over the smooth road to Lon Lon Ranch; he reached down to lace his fingers through Sheik’s despite the little, pointy spikes of crystal on his knuckles. The Congruence was a soft echo between them and Link thought darkly of
the same connection Foursky and Evanna had shared.

Congruence was so warm, so persuasive, so comforting – how could two people deny that? Had their lust for power truly been so consuming that even such a positive force couldn’t affect it.

Then again, Link thought, he was comparing their Congruence to what all pairs might experience. Perhaps the nature of the bond was entirely dependent on the nature of those it lived between.

Link proposed this idea to Sheik, who agreed.

“To them, it was likely a tactical advantage for the most part. Sure, it created a weakness between them…but absorbing so much Vaspra fixed that problem. More than that, I have a feeling that Evanna and Foursky were the case of Congruence that book about bonds was warning about – it’s very possible that they were the ones that tried to sever the connection, once they realized its vulnerability.”

It seemed like years ago since he had thought about that old book...but it had only been a day or so ago that he’d discussed it with Zelda and Sheik’s theory rang true in his mind.

“That mask was more powerful than Foursky, even with all his Vaspra and immortality,” Sheik wondered quietly. “To defy Hexam...that thing is a danger to the living realm. We need to depose of it carefully. I shudder to think what would’ve happened if it had actually devoured Foursky and gained his powers.”

And Link didn’t want to think about it either. He would much rather pretend as though the mask had been a random and unexpected anomaly that they would soon be rid of. He didn’t want to consider why the name still rang shrill bells in his head or how those burning eyes had lingered in his dreams long before Foursky had even infiltrated their castle.

Lon Lon Ranch grew in the distance and Link was surprised he saw no Bloodbacks flying overhead or Vog lurking in the field. And he wasn’t about to complain; the fact still remained that the monsters had spread through Hyrule and they would just have to be hunted down and killed.

The aura surrounding the ranch was too familiar and Link’s fingers tightened around Sheik’s. The Nether would always haunt him, likely until the end of his life. Being so near it again was sickening and he prayed it be the last time he felt that cold, disturbing sensation. They pulled through the gates and up the hill between the house and barns. Motionless bodies of Nether creatures lie everywhere, some of them freshly cleaved through by a sword.

Link threw Sheik a puzzled expression: who could have taken on so many of these beasts? Malon, Talon, and all of their farm hands had fled to Kakariko. They passed the empty, dark outbuildings, heading for the field as they followed the Nether’s signature.

In the middle of the pasture was a giant...well, tear. It looked two-dimensional, like a piece of the landscape had been ripped out of reality to leave only a black mark. But as they moved toward it, Link could see it clearly hung in one spot, the world behind it unscathed. Darkness rolled away from it in waves as nothing but black could be seen through the rip itself.

Sitting next to it was Zelda.

Before Link could watch himself, still dizzy from the potion, he leapt off the cart and ran to her. She sat cross-legged, sword propped against her right shoulder, and her eyes closed. She was
covered in blood and dirt and looked exhausted, but alive. Her sword was layered in the blood of the Nether creatures and her magic was still lingering in the air.

She had been watching the tear until they arrived.

“Zelda!”

Her eyes flickered open tiredly as he stopped and nearly fell to his knees before her. Instantly, her exhausted eyes came to life and relieved sadness filled her face as they gripped one another. Link couldn’t even complain about the lingering pain in his arm as it was crushed by her grip. She laughed a tired, hysterical, contagious laugh and buried her sweaty, bloody face in his equally sweaty, bloody neck.

“Thank the Goddesses you’re both alright,” Zelda cried. She pulled away from him so she could hug Sheik as well. “Thank the Goddesses.”

“Are you okay?” Link demanded as Sheik pulled away and they all just sat on the soft grass in the middle of the pasture. He glanced at the quivering tear in paranoia.

Zelda nodded. “I am, but forget about me. Tell me everything that happened.” Her gaze wandered over to the cart where Evanna, Foursky, and Majora’s Mask lie waiting to be banished from the living realm.

So, as quickly as they could, they surmised the battle and waited to hear what she had to say. Because, all along, Zelda had known much more than they had and she owed them some answers.

“I never thought…” Zelda started, unable to find words for a moment. “The Sages knew something was coming and they implored me to not intervene. Because this prophecy was pivotal.”

“Pivotal, how?”

“Time is…dangerous when tampered with. By choosing to leave behind your childhood and stay here after the war, you created a ripple in the continuum. Because, according to the prophecy concerning the Hero of Time, you were supposed to go back to your childhood. According to the Goddess’ wishes, this reality we’re living in now was not meant to continue. By choosing your own path, Link, you created this ripple and the Goddesses were forced to create another prophecy to cancel out the ripple. If not, it would have grown into a violent wave and thrown the living realm into chaos.”

“So, you’re saying…I’m the reason for all of this suffering and…” Link whispered, unable to even complete the sentence as sadness and anger pulled heavily on him. Sheik tried to quell it through their connection but the effort was futile as the emotions continued to swell in his mind.

“No,” Zelda said quickly, voice sharp to dispel the blame he was already beginning to assign himself. “No, Link. You are free to make your own decisions. You possess free will, regardless of your lineage or status. It’s not about your actions, it’s about…symmetry. If you had gone back as the Goddesses had desired, I have no doubts you would have faced Majora’s Mask then. But because you stayed here, the Goddesses had to express that prophecy differently.”

“So, it would’ve happened anyway?” Link asked, shaking his head. “I would’ve had to fight the power of that mask…as a child?”
Somehow, that idea was not the least bit shocking considering the nature of the Goddesses he had come to know.

“I’m really not sure, Link,” she admitted. “I don’t know what that prophecy was because that reality never happened. If you had gone, this reality would have collapsed and we all would have awakened seven years prior with no knowledge of the war because it would have never happened. By staying here, you became a sort of…pillar holding this reality up so it wouldn’t collapse.”

Link shook his head in disbelief. What a senseless, complicated way of getting things done. It was the logic of deities he would never understand; why all the smoke and mirrors when the Goddesses could create and destroy anything they wished? Why have everyone go back in time when they could just prevent Ganondorf from ever killing the King?

“No, I couldn’t intervene. Both of you had a preordained part to play in all of this. The Goddesses, the Sages… I am their puppet in so many ways,” Zelda told them with a frown. She held the same expression Link was sure he wore as well.

It was the frustration and disdain of being a chess piece in someone else’s game.

Wait.

Suddenly, something horrible occurred to Link and he jumped to his feet, new adrenaline pumping through his limbs. Both Zelda and Sheik gave him a bewildered look.

“Wait,” Link hissed, looking back to the cart and then to Zelda once more. “The Goddesses said Sheik had to play his part…what was his part exactly?”

Her blue eyes went wide in confusion, clearly not catching on to what he was saying. “Well, he was the only person who knew Hexa. He was meant to use it to destroy Foursky and Evanna and – ”

And then it seemed to hit her, a ragged intake of air punctuating her shock.

They were fools.

So, so stupid. Link hadn’t even really thought about it, even as he and Sheik sat in the ruined aftermath of the battle. It had never crossed his mind. Because it was over.

The battle was over.

But it wasn’t.

He sprinted back to the cart before any more could be said, thunder suddenly loud over their heads; the storm had arrived without their notice. Link ripped the canvas off the back of the cart – Foursky and Evanna lay still and cold.

What was he missing?

Why couldn’t he shake the horrible, visceral knowledge that they had missed something huge? It was like missing a step down a spiral staircase or miscalculating the height of a leap. The prophecy
had been so clear. Why wasn’t anything adding up? He looked back up to find Zelda and Sheik joining him by the cart, their eyes like lamps in the gray light.

Then a freezing hand caught his wrist. The grip was an iron vice and he tried to rip away as he saw it was Evanna’s hand on him. Her eyes were still closed and the remainder of her body motionless, but her fingers were tight and unyielding.

*Link, you must listen.*

The voice echoed in his head, the presence too familiar. He tried to push it away instinctively; she had done this before, so long ago when they first met.

_The fate of the world relies on this, Link. You must let me show you._

His eyesight was drowned away and replaced by a desert, a man...a Gerudo. Link was in someone else’s body, angry and scared of the man standing before him. Who is he? What does he want? Link can feel a dagger in his hand as the man says, “Join me willingly and I will give you the power you so desperately desire...defy me and I will enslave you into torture for the rest of our days”.

Then Link understood what was happening; his experience with Sheik was enough to inform him.

Evanna was sharing her memories.

Link was half-aware that Zelda and Sheik were speaking to him and he struggled to tell them to wait. He needed to see what Evanna had to show him. She had orchestrated the end Foursky’s reign. To Link, that was enough to allow her to share her knowledge with him.

“Okay, Evanna,” he ground out under the heaviness of her presence in his head. “Show me.”

--

She is picking at her nails impatiently, leaning heavily against the warm stone behind her. Sunset is bringing cool night air, dry and crisp as the desert sands. Over the dunes, she is watching the red circle settle under the horizon and anxiety is churning in her stomach.

_Late, she’s thinking to herself. And we’re running out of time._

“Evanna.”

She whips around from the balcony’s view and takes in the sight of a masked Sheikah crouching in the darkness. Flooded with relief, she is hurrying forward to join the figure in the shadow of the castle wall.

“You have made me wait too long, Kalyh,” Evanna snaps, shooting the Sheikah a baleful glare. “Do you have it?”

“It was not the easiest thing to find, you know,” Kalyh returns in a scathing tone, her maroon eyes tired but still venomous. “You are lucky the map from the Library was right. I have it. And I retrieved the Vaspra from the mountain vault as well.”

“Good. We will need it. Your efforts at the Library played well – we’ve confirmed your return to
Hyrule. Foursky is fully convinced.”

Kalyh is nodding in agreement. “I will give you this much – you are a good liar in a tense time. You did well to convince him I had returned.”

“I only fed the dragon that was already there. It did not take much to convince him.” Evanna is shaking her head – how pathetic he had become as hundreds of years passed and he still didn’t have the ultimate power he sought.

“Now,” Evanna is continuing, “you must give Sheik the words as close as you can to when Foursky may reveal himself. Once he sheds his disguise…I am unsure as of now what the best course of action will be. But we may need to separate the words. You understand what that means, right?”

A familiar darkness is settling in Kalyh’s gaze. It is the look of a soldier preparing for a suicide mission. “Yes.”

Evanna is satisfied with this and surprised that, despite the years of cruelty, this Sheikah is willing to participate in such a complex, dangerous counter strategy. It is clear that the moment Kalyh saw Sheik was still alive, her part in their plot was made permanent; Evanna will never understand the things fools will do for love.

“I will return to Hyrule and negotiate the terms of their descent into the Nether. I must ensure they follow the right path.” Evanna shakes her head in frustration. “It’s like ushering rats through a maze.”

There is a pause, as Kalyh watches her and Evanna senses the hesitation to hand over the package. True to form, it is clear Kalyh will never fully trust Evanna, and rightfully so – it is that caution that has kept her knowledge of the words from Foursky.

“Give it to me so I may keep it hidden,” she insists, holding out her hands. “I’ll store it away until the time is right.”

Kalyh is watching her for one long moment, calculating her odds with an intense scrutiny. Decision made, she is slowly bringing between them a satchel in the darkness, giving it a look as though she expects it to explode at any moment.

Evanna holds it carefully in her hands, sensing the ancient energy it radiates. She disciplines her mind, ensuring that none of its effects are felt through the Congruence.

“Foursky is truly deluded to believe he can harness such power. It’s too old and too powerful to be reckoned with. The prophecy will unfold…and Foursky is arrogant enough to believe it is about him.”

Kalyh shakes her head. “I still do not understand why you put so much stock in this prophecy – how are you so certain it is talking about – ”

“Prophecy is not to be taken lightly, Sheikah,” Evanna snarled. “Prophecy destroyed your people. Prophecy gave you those scars. Prophecy has ruled your entire life, whether you accept it or not. You have no idea the decades of planning that have gone into this. You want Foursky dead and your people freed? Do not question my orders again.”

Kalyh is unfazed by the aggression in those words.
“If the prophecy is not talking about Foursky, then who is it taking about?” Kalyh demands.

“The less you know, the better, Kalyh,” she responds, anger leaving her with a sigh. Kalyh flinches at her given name, suspicion in her gaze.

Evanna is tired. So tired. And now she is nearing the end and the last tumbler is falling perfectly into place. “I will prod those two to Vrika, as we discussed. Make sure you're ready. When you return with them to the castle, I will have further instruction for you. I must find a way to separate the words…Foursky must receive Hexam, but not Hexa. If we fail to do that, all is lost. You must follow my instructions explicitly, Kalyh. Swear by it.”

Kalyh gives her a furious look; just as Evanna had been in her youth, this Sheikah is not built to be subordinate. She has never known the centuries of servitude Evanna has endured as Foursky’s bond mate.

“Upon Din, I…swear it.”

--

There was suddenly a whirlwind of noise and sight, Link feeling himself being transported to a completely different memory like water dragged down a small drain.

--

She is just outside the old training area within the castle grounds, where the Order are vigorously training. Her spell has made her invisible and she prays Foursky doesn’t notice the extra tug of magic on her end of the bond. Evanna stretches out her magic to prod Kalyh in the back; the Sheikah is speaking with her second in command but tenses slightly at the sensation. Kalyh excuses herself and follows the trail of energy Evanna has left for her.

Hidden behind an old rampart, Evanna remains invisible and speaks:

“Link and Sheik are Congruent, Kalyh,” she begins. “I followed the Hero back to Vrika and Sheik arrived soon after. I saw the connection immediately. This is the answer. Give Sheik both words now. Be sure you give Hexam only to Foursky once he reveals himself and requests the words. Instruct Sheik to hide his knowledge of the words in Link’s mind, through their bond. The prophecy renders Link immune to either of the words. Do not tell Sheik any more than that.

“When Foursky possesses Sheik, he will have no means of obtaining Hexa. This means he will be unable to kill the spirit within Majora’s Mask and it will turn on him. It is then that our true enemy will be exposed. I will provide the Hero with his weapon and Sheik will play his final part.”

Kalyh is looking troubled now, angry in fact. “What do you mean, Sheik will play his final part?”

Evanna knows she can’t tell Kalyh the truth – evidence of the potential fallout is right before her. Kalyh’s alliance may waver if she knows what still lies ahead for Sheik.

“Kalyh, I need you to focus. If there was ever a time I would beg you, it is now. Play your part. Sheik will be fine. If you fail now, he will die.” Evanna no longer feels her pride. It is imperative that everything falls perfectly into place now more than ever. If she must beg a dishonored Sheikah warrior, so be it.
They will both be dead soon, so ego and pride were no longer necessary.

And Kalyh seems to finally understand that. It is evident in the expression that settles over her face now; resignation.

“Can Foursky really be defeated so easily? One little mask will end a Gerudo King?”

Evanna gives her a grim smirk. “Foursky may as well be a weak little Skull Kid when compared to the power of Majora, Kalyh.”

--

Link erupted from the memory gasping, Evanna’s grip on him gone and the touches of Sheik and Zelda now on his shoulders. His mind was in chaos as he tried to process what had just happened.

“Link!” Sheik demanded loudly, shaking him back into reality. “Link, talk to us. What happened?”

But his vision settled and he didn’t have the voice to answer questions. With trembling hands, he pushed aside Evanna’s black cloak to reveal the same blue satchel she had given Sheik and Link for their trip to the Nether.

“Link?” Zelda asked frantically beside him. “Stop being so quiet! What’s going on?”

He opened the top of the satchel, its mouth stretching wide as he reached into its expanded contents. A strange energy filled the air as he reached his hand within and grasped a hard, wooden object. He knew, intuitively, that this was what Kalyh had delivered that night in the desert. He pulled it out into the gray daylight and all the air in his lungs was sucked away.

It was a mask.

The face was pale like the dead and its hair the same white as freshly fallen snow. The eyes were a vacuum black and there were red and blue markings on its forehead and cheeks like war paint. The mask seemed to shiver in Link’s hands, a massive ripple of terrifying energy coursing through his body like he’d been struck by lightning.

Link was staring at himself.

“Link,” Zelda said slowly, fingers going tight on his shoulder. “Why…does that mask look like you?”

“I have a better question,” Sheik said in a very clipped, hard voice that forced Link to look at the Sheikah. But Sheik wasn’t looking at them; he was looking at the cart.

“What?” Link demanded.

“Where’s Majora’s Mask?”

--

Alright, y’all – two more chapters. I can’t believe we’re this close. I never thought I’d successfully post this when I wrote it two years ago. I’m gonna try and get these last two chapters out as back-
to-back as I can so there’s no lost momentum.

Thank you to all of you that have stuck with me the past two years (I started posting in February of 2015, which still blows my mind). Y’all are directly responsible for the continued posting of Congruent. Without all of your in-depth reviews and sweet comments, I would’ve probably given up after posting just a few chapters. I’ll be thanking all of you forever, so prepare yourselves.

Places to find me:
sincosma on Tumblr
amandalynnsings on Instagram
ohamandalynn on Snapchat
amandalynnsings . com for my music
**Warning: this chapter contains dismemberment.**

XXXIX.

It was quick and it was silent.

One moment, Sheik was there. And then, very suddenly, he wasn’t. He was on the ground and a wave of energy blasted in a circular radius. Everything around it went flying and all Link could see was debris and the dark sky. When he hit the ground, air left his lungs painfully and his body rolled in a violent motion. He could hear the cart being tossed, the horses struggling to break free from their reins, and Zelda letting out a cry some distance from him.

But somehow, he managed to hang onto the mask.

Adrenaline insisted he stagger to his feet despite a sudden stabbing pain in his left knee. The horses broke free and were galloping away with hysterical whinnies. The cart was shattered and the still bodies of Foursky and Evanna lay not far from it.

And standing in the same spot was Sheik, convulsing as his hands scrubbed desperately at his face. Sheik was wearing Majora’s Mask.

Link almost fell back on the ground. Because there was no way. No way. Just when he thought he had reached the end of this battle...

They had all read the prophecy wrong and Sheik still had one last part to play.

Because, not only would Sheik help draw out Majora’s Mask...he would become it, too.

The relief after the battle at the castle had filled him up and shut him down, making him too tired and weak to fight whatever horrors were now to begin. He had thought they were out of the woods when they hadn’t even moved in the direction of the tree line. With a still mending arm, torn muscles, and a weak knee...how was he possibly going to fight the entity that overpowered even Foursky?

“Sheik, no!” Zelda cried, still struggling to her feet. But it was clear her leg was broken and Link rushed over to help her back to the ground before she damaged it further. “Take it off!”

“Zelda, stop,” Link ordered in a tight voice, gripping her shoulders, and forcing her to look at him. “Stay here. I’ll fix this.”

“Link –”

“Stay here.” He worked hard to give her the angriest look he could and it seemed to work as she went still. Her face was a twist of despair and Link couldn’t look at it anymore. Instead, he rose and drew the Master Sword, it in one hand and the mask in the other. He turned to face Sheik and felt an electric shock run through his body to find his lover standing perfectly still and staring.
The mask was a splash of livid color against the washed out backdrop. A new, terrible aura was coming across the field and setting his blood on fire. Link approached cautiously until they were several meters apart; the white-faced mask in his hand seemed to tremble at the proximity.

“Do you want to play with me?”

There was a dual tone in those words as though two people were speaking in perfect unison. The voice mimicking Sheik’s was higher and more maniacal sounding than his deep timbre. It sent chills down Link’s spine and filled him with rage.

“Let him go,” Link commanded.

“Do you want to play with me?”

“No! Let him go!” he shouted.

Link’s still-mending arm ached from holding his sword. He would have to use his right arm to fight and, while he had trained vigorously for just an occasion like this, he knew the difference in strength would be considerable. And he had very little energy to use magic, as well. He was going to have to figure out how to fight despite his long list of disadvantages.

His thoughts turned briefly to the mask he was holding…would it be just as dangerous as Majora’s Mask was to Foursky? Could Link truly risk putting it on when so many odds were clearly already stacked against him?

“Do you want to play with me?” Majora repeated for the third time, tone still benign and childish, hardly perturbed by Link’s anger.

He was going to have to play this game.

“Yes,” Link growled.

“Okay, let’s play good guys and bad guys. I’ll be the good guy. You’re the bad guy,” Sheik and Majora chorused. “And when you’re the bad guy, you just run.”

Before Link could analyze those childish words, Sheik leapt into motion and shot out a long beam of silver light that Link barely dodged. He tumbled out of the way, too unsteady on his feet and sword arm aching. He still held the mask in his hand and it seemed to shiver even more as the situation intensified.

Evanna had said she would provide Link with a weapon. The mask he held now had been at the center of Evanna’s unknown deception. All this time, she had been a double agent.

For this mask. To her, it had been their only chance against the spirit of Majora.

Link spun away from another barrage of light and he yanked the Ocarina of Time out of his pack. Before Sheik and the mask could regroup and gather his energy back up, he threw it to Zelda. She was half-crouched despite her broken leg and looking ready to leap into action if needed; she caught it, giving him an incredulous look.

“Get out of here!” he thundered.
“What about you!” Zelda roared, looking murderous as Link rolled out of the path of another shaft of energy.

“I have this mask,” another dodge, “and I don’t know what it’s going to do! It’s too dangerous,” and again, “to have you here when you’re wounded! Get to the castle! The soldiers are back to normal!”

“Link!” she called as another blast caught his hip, burning straight through his tunic, chainmail, and into his flesh. He grunted in pain but stayed fast on his feet nonetheless.

“Zelda, go!” Link snarled, throwing her a desperate look. She had to go. Why couldn’t she just listen to him? She was the biggest liability there was. If this possessed Sheik turned on her…

Thankfully, she left. The mellow tones of the ocarina reached his ears mid-roll and the flash of light from the warp seemed to catch Sheik’s attention for a moment. And with that distraction, Link was finally given a moment to put on the mask.

Because what else was he going to do? Dodge attacks until he dropped dead? The tides had to turn in this fight. So, in one swift movement, he shoved the mask to his face.

And, instantly, Link wished he hadn’t.

Within seconds, the wood of the mask dug deep into the edges of his face, from temple and down to his jaw. It broke flesh and a horrible sensation filled his head and resonated through his body. Everything began to shift like he was about crawl out of his own skin. His bones began to shatter and reform, his skin stretching and shredding. Magic surrounded him briefly and he saw nothing but white as another presence filled his consciousness.

It was almost like Congruence but this thing was as overwhelming as the presence of the Goddesses. Link’s body was on fire and soon his grunts of pain were cut off as his form finally seemed to settle, briefly out of his control.

Finally, I may face my foe.

The voice sounded in his head, rattling his mind and leaving him breathless. Link forced his eyes open, seeing the pasture through sharper vision than he had ever thought possible, as though he had transformed into some apex predator. His shoulders were wider, clad with heavy pauldrons and an even heavier breast plate across his broader chest. There were no more wounds to speak of on his person; he felt more powerful than ever before, a harrowing energy coursing through his veins and coiling his muscles so tightly he could’ve sprung high into the air like a cat with little effort.

In Link’s left hand was an incredibly strange longsword, the shape like a single helix and its two blades a metallic green and blue. It looked formidable and alien as he swung it a few times, its weight and length forcing him to wield it with two hands. One glance down showed the thick silver breast plate with similar markings as the Amrita armor – a crescent moon and a triangle. Bright, silvery white hair surrounded the peripheral of his vision as the wind from the storm swept through the pasture and thunder crashed overhead.

Sheik wasn’t moving, locked in place by the image of…well, whatever Link was now. It was evident that Majora recognized the new person he had been rebuilt into. Anger that was not his own overwhelmed his thoughts at the sight of Majora’s Mask and he became even more aware of
the sentient being sharing his head space.

“Who are you?” Link called out, voice lower now and almost unrecognizable. The question was directed to both of them and both of them answered.


_I am the Fierce Deity, the true God. This is my foe._

Gods? Link stared at the horrible horned mask before him and felt the volatile mind against his.

These were not Gods. These were titans of an ancient world, battling throughout time over and over again, like quarrelling children. Link could feel the familiarity of this knowledge vibrating through him from the Fierce Deity he shared consciousness with.

This was bad blood and Link and Sheik were just caught in between.

Puppets for prophecy.

Without any warning, Link was robbed of control and his body launched forward to attack Sheik and Majora. He could only spectate as the helix blade sliced through the air, still several meters from their adversary, to Link’s confusion. What good would a sword do if it didn’t meet its mark?

His thoughts were disproven as a blinding, silver curve of light erupted from the sword and collided bombastically with Sheik and the mask, throwing the Sheikah off his feet.

“Don’t hurt the Sheikah!” Link managed to say through his and Fierce Deity’s shared mouth.

_I care not for the puppet. He is a bystander. I have waited thousands of years for this battle. I will not listen to the words of a child._

“I don’t care how long you’ve waited for this battle!” Link shot back, struggling to regain control of his body. “I want to destroy the mask just as badly as you. Let me do the fighting so Sheik isn’t harmed.”

Although he heard no answer from the Fierce Deity, he regained control quite suddenly and just in time to twist away from another attack. Aiming with his new precise vision, he flicked the sword and sent a beam straight at the mask. Sheik managed to stay on his feet but the mask seemed to waver from its position as though just barely hanging on.

Another attack and Link dodged it with an ease he had never experienced. The amount of power at his beck and call was astonishing. He spun once more and unleashed yet another powerful beam that almost tore the mask from Sheik’s face completely.

Sheik wasn’t really doing well either, though. Even with Link’s care in aiming, the backlash of the beam was damaging the Sheikah as well. Slashes covered his armor and clothing, blood and smoking skin visible with such clarity Link was forced to look away.

He had to get that mask off before…

_You are hindering the battle. I will take control._
“No!” Link shouted, but like a hand covered his mouth, his words were stopped and the rest of his plea echoed in his own head. *Sheik and I are connected! If you kill him, I will die, too!*

Fierce Deity dealt another blow, a gash forming deeply into Sheik’s chest. But at Link’s words, he froze before another attack.

*You need me to even take this form. If I die, you’re just a mask. Get Majora off Sheik’s body and then you can do whatever you want.*

Foreign anger rippled through his head…but control was returned to him begrudgingly and Link saw they were not far from their goal. The mask shuddered violently on Sheik’s face and bloody fingers tugged at its horns.

Sheik was fighting back.

But before Link could reel back for one last blow, Sheik’s body went limp and his limbs swung to and fro like a doll. The mask rose in the air, giving Sheik another shake and then dropping him bodily to the grass where he lay still. Worry gripped at Link’s stomach and his fingers tightened on his sword’s hilt.

“What a nuisance…is there no one powerful enough to be my friend?” Majora asked, voice full of mirth. The floating mask shuddered and a cluster of long red tendrils streamed from behind its face, trailing lazy behind as the mask moved forward to attack.

How could Majora have enough power to act independently?

What were they really in for?

It was the strangest duality as Link and Fierce Deity fell into the rhythm of attack. Rain started to fall in thick drops as beam after beam was sent in the mask’s direction. Some strikes were dodged but most were not. Link worked hard to coax the battle as far away from Sheik’s unmoving body as he could. The sky was almost black and a hot wind swept between them as, after a series of catastrophic blows, the mask fell in a seizure of cries and shudders.

Wait. Was it actually over?

*It is not.*

And the Fierce Deity was right; the mask rose from the ground and suddenly sprouted arms and legs. The limbs were as vividly colored as the mask itself and a little spiked head emerged from the top, one great, green eye fixing its laser-like gaze on them. Majora cackled and giggled at such a high pitch frequency Link was sure, had he still been in his normal body, it would’ve damaged his ears.

“What is that?” Link whispered as Majora seemed to take a moment to adjust to its new body.

*His second form. There shall be one more after this. This is Incarnation; next is Wrath.*

Link nodded. But he couldn’t care about the forms Majora preferred to take or even about the mortality of a battle. No, not with the power Fierce Deity could wield. It’s no wonder Evanna kept this mask carefully hidden from Foursky – had he obtained *this* mask instead, they truly would have been lost. He couldn’t help but smile at how, at last, he had an upper hand in the fight. It
almost made him feel bad about banishing Evanna to the Nether.

Majora shot forward, speed uncanny as its form became a slight blur. But Link could still track it with his new, superior vision and sent a series of blasts its way. The creature howled in pain, too easy of a target now with its enlarged size.

And then, far too quickly, it screamed and writhed as if flopped bodily onto the ground. Was this even a fair fight? Majora’s power was so clearly dwarfed by the energy Fierce Deity’s sword unleashed. But there one more form, as promised: Majora’s Mask began to shudder violently…but also grow.

It doubled in size and thickness, the horned head protruding even further to reveal a terrible face and long, mean-looking whips that hung menacingly from its hands.

This form…looked furious.

_You can’t beat me this time! I am God, not you. I am the good guy and you have always been bad,_ Majora thundered. _Why won’t you play fair? Why won’t you do what I say?_

It was like a child’s tantrum and Link couldn’t help but wonder what he was truly fighting. A truly evil spirit? Or just a vengeful, ostracized child?

Whatever it was, Link doubted if Foursky’s original plan to use Hexa on the spirit of Majora and possess the mask’s power would’ve truly worked – it seemed to him that its power originated from the *spirit*, not the *mask*.

The Wrath of Majora roared loud enough to shake the ground and spun like a top, whips careening out and catching Link’s leg. He went flying, only just managing to roll out of the impact. Before he could gather his own senses, it was Fierce Deity that launched the next attack. Bright, burning streaks of energy went flying as Link and Fierce Deity wove in and out of control with a synchronicity that reminded him a little of Congruence.

Link and Majora’s Wrath maneuvered around the pasture in a fatal dance, his every motion hardly an effort. The rain turned hard and soaked them all, affecting his accuracy – he was knocked backward once more by a painful snap of a whip. This final form of Majora was much more of a challenge than its previous incarnations. The storm was deafening now and reduced the visibility so much, Link knew it would’ve made him utterly useless had he still been in his own body.

The fight went on for a long time, a fast and violent waltz through soaked, muddy pasture. But, finally, in one combined effort, the helix sword sliced through wet air and sent the last needed blow of energy to Majora. The creature let out a horrific scream, the sound reverberating as loudly as the storm. Majora’s Wrath hung above the ground like a rag doll, shuddering as it began to disintegrate, coming apart as a Stalchild would in sunlight.

Then there was a blinding white flash and when it disappeared, nothing was left behind.

And so it was done.

The battle had been long and arduous, but then it had also been dangerously easy. The Fierce Deity mask had lent him such unimaginable power, he found himself wishing the mask had been available to him long ago. In fact, part of him wondered if he should keep it. Who knew if he might need it again? It was dangerous…but it was also terribly useful.
You were a decent comrade.

“Thank you for lending me your power,” Link said carefully.

I did not lend it. Your time is over, child. I have yearned for thousands of years to regain physical form. I can feel the greed in you. You will give yourself willingly to have my power. Submit to me.

Very suddenly, the presence in his head magnified, its pressure almost pushing Link to his knees. Every instinct within Link’s mind urged him to get the mask off. Because Evanna and Kalyh’s caution when handling the mask had been well-placed. It was ruthless, manipulative, and persuasive; some fragment of reason within Link instantly knew it was far too powerful to be in the hands of anyone.

No! I will not be locked away once more! I was once feared! I was once respected! I was –

Pain erupted in Link’s head as he reached up pulled and pulled as hard as he could on the edges of the mask. A disconnect started to form like a crack of sunlight in a dark room as he could feel the sting of his own skin.

No! You cannot defy me! I –

With one last heave, Link ripped the Fierce Deity’s mask off – it seemed so strange that Majora could nearly devour Foursky, yet this far more powerful mask could be pulled off much easier.

Perhaps being the Hero of Time helped. Or maybe there was more to the story of Majora’s Mask and Fierce Deity that Link would never understand.

The mask was off and his body shifted back just as painfully as before. Light surrounded him again and he felt blood running down his face and onto the mask now in his trembling hands. His knees refused to hold his weight any longer and he crumpled to the mud beneath him.

Link moaned in pain; the damage he had obtained while joined with Fierce Deity was now detailed on his original body. Lacerations covered his chest and shoulders, and his right wrist was broken from one of the two nasty falls Majora’s whips had caused.

So, in the end, the prophecy’s False God had been Majora.

Sheik had played his part. And so had Link.

Their true enemy had been hidden the entire time, shielded by the greed of an immortal Gerudo.

Link considered for a moment what it would’ve been like to battle such a creature as a child; the Goddesses truly were cruel. He wondered if, had he followed their plan for him, he would’ve met Fierce Deity in his travels as well.

He tossed the mask to the side as Sheik let out a groan of pain and he struggled to his feet to stagger across the pasture. “Sheik!” he croaked out, voice nearly gone. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve…had better days,” he replied, trying to sit up but unable to find his strength.

Link helped him up, checking the wounds on his face and the ones littering his body – there was a
deep cut all the way around the edge of his face, undoubtedly from Majora’s Mask; Link assumed the blood running down his neck was a product of the same wound.

“You know,” Sheik said hoarsely, “next time you speak with the Goddesses, let them know I feel deeply offended that I wasn’t even mentioned in the prophecy considering how much I had to do with it.”

Link laughed tiredly, a broad smile cracking his face as relief – real relief – filled him up and cancelled out the pain of his battle-worn body.

They were alive and the prophecy was finished.

Hyrule was saved – all that was left to do was toss in the rulers of Amrita and seal the Nether.

For good.

“It’s over,” Link breathed, leaning forward and kissing Sheik softly. “It’s really over.”

Sheik wrapped his arms around Link’s neck, burying his face in Link’s shoulder. “It’s over,” he agreed.

It took some time, but as the rain slowed to a drizzle, they found their strength and rose from the drying mud. They were both a mess – there was a bath waiting for them at the castle once they completed their final task and it would probably be the best one Link would ever have in his life.

They hobbled their over to the broken cart where the still bodies of Evanna and Foursky waited strewn on the ground. Link leaned down to whisper a quiet thank you to Evanna, a woman he had despised up until that day. She had opened her arms to defeat during the battle at the castle; she knew what they planned to do with her and Foursky.

End me. You have enough Vaspra. Finish what I started, Sheikah.

And so they would.

Foursky went first: they roughly chucked his body through the unsettling, black tear hanging before them. Link gave a satisfied nod when the man was finally gone from their world. Evanna went next, much kinder however, as though they were pushing her body into the sea.

He tossed in the Fierce Deity mask as well – nothing that powerful should exist in the living realm – and backed away from it, a shudder running through his shoulders. The tear was horrible to be around, the sickening resonance of Nether aura infecting Link’s mind. How he couldn’t wait to be rid of that feeling.

Sheik retrieved the sack full of Vaspra shards next, holding the canvas away from him as though it were about to explode.

“What about your arm?” Link asked. Sheik’s arm was still black, fragments of Vaspra glinting dully in the gray light. Link couldn’t say it out loud, but in his mind he couldn’t shake the idea that there was no saving it, that it had rotted under the influence of Vaspra.

“I don’t know,” Sheik replied, “but we need to close this tear now, before anything else comes through.”
As much as Link didn’t want to leave Sheik’s condition unaddressed, he nodded. Because, truthfully, it wasn’t really over until the Nether was sealed. Although this part was simply clean-up and damage control, it was just as vital that they do it as quickly as possible.

They would figure it out later, like they always did.

Sheik stood as close as he dared to the tear and took an enormous, heavy chunk of Vaspra out of the bag, chucking the remainder back into the Nether. He took a deep breath, and Link could feel Sheik flexing his mind into focus. He then began to speak softly in Sheikah, using the old Sheikah magic that had opened the portal in Vrika.

Then, to Link’s horror, the opening got larger.

“Sheik!” Link shouted as air began to drag towards the opening. Like the rip was a massive drain, wind spiraled inward with the strength of a tornado dragging in debris.

And Sheik.

Link launched forward and grabbed Sheik around the waist, keeping him from being pulled into the gravity that seemed to have no effect on Link. Then Nether creatures were swept past them – Vog, Bloodbacks, Baltas, and one Mrith – pulled from every direction and crowded back into their realm.

Clearly, Link realized in horror, Sheik was now considered part of the Nether, too.

“I’m not letting you go, Sheik!” Link shouted over the gale of wind surrounding them as more and more creatures were swallowed by the suction. “Hang on!”

And then voices crashed in his mind, pulling him away from the present and back –

– to the white void, in the presence of the Three Goddesses.

“You must let him go, Link. He must go back to the Nether if there is to finally be balance in the world.

Shock and anger and revulsion filled Link as his mind became unhinged.

“No! Send me back! What are you doing? I have to keep Sheik from being – ”

“Congruence is unaffected by the barriers between the two realms. He is a creature of the Nether
now and he must return –

“Then restore him to his original form!”

We cannot restore him –

“Don’t lie to me! You’re the Goddesses of Hyrule and you’re telling me you can’t – ”

We have made many concessions for you, Link. We have allowed you many things. We allowed you to wield Evil’s Bane once more. We allowed you to stay in this timeline despite the displacement it caused. We are your creators and you have the arrogance and greed to ask for even more?

“SHEIK IS THE ONLY REASON I STAYED IN THE FIRST PLACE!” Link roared, voice so loud in the void it seemed to rumble for a moment. “HOW DARE YOU CALL ME GREEDY, YOU HORRIBLE PIECES OF SHIT! YOU HAVE ONLY TAKEN FROM ME! I HAVE GIVEN YOU EVERYTHING! I HAVE DONE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE EVER ASKED OF ME! I AM A SLAVE TO YOU! I HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO ASK FOR MORE!”

There was a deep silence as his words seemed to give the Goddesses pause. He wished he could see them, attack them, and try to make them understand what they were doing – he no longer cared who or what they were. They were nothing more to him now than enemies. Emotion crushed his throat and, although there was no body for him here, he trembled before them in agony.

When the silence went on and the fear of what might be happening to his body outside of the void consumed him, his rage broke.

“Please,” he begged, voice so small now. “You have taken almost everything from me. Don’t take this. Don’t take him, too.”

Silence.

“Please just give me this one thing.”

Silence.

“I’m begging you.”

Silence still.

“PLEASE!”

Very well, they said. He may stay but he must forfeit the Vaspra and the Sheikah magic in his blood. He must forfeit that which makes him dangerous.

Something snapped in Link’s head –

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– and his mind was deposited back in the pasture, back in the whirlwind trying to steal Sheik from him. The thunder was still rumbling overhead and Sheik was letting out terrible cry of pain.

His body was no longer being dragged back to the Nether:
It was his arm.

“No!” Link roared, reaching out to wrap his fingers around Sheik’s upper arm. The Vaspra crystals cut into this palm but he felt no pain as he struggled to keep his bondmate in one piece.

The influence of the Nether only seemed to increase and Link could feel the limb being pulled even harder. And then he knew – and he could feel that Sheik knew it too – what was going to happen. It was a realization they shared between their Congruence and knowing made it exponentially worse.

Link ripped the Master Sword out of its sheath and shoved it deep into the soft earth, using it as a tether. He kept his other arm tight around Sheik’s waist, feeling utterly helpless and sick as Sheik’s cries of pain became screams. He vividly felt Sheik’s arm as it was yanked from its socket and only tearing muscle and skin holding it in place.

Link could feel the pain through their bond, an agony he had never experienced before. But he tried so hard to siphon it from Sheik’s mind, to numb the mortal wound that would be left behind. And it worked to some degree because the screaming stopped…but Link couldn’t process any more than that as Sheik’s pain completely consumed him.

There was a heavy jerk and Link shut his eyes as tightly as he could, feeling a monstrous scream claw its way out of his chest.

The air settled around them and the Nether energy was swallowed away.

And then Link opened his eyes and squinted through the pain.

Blood poured everywhere, the junction of what had been arm and shoulder now an unintelligible mess. Sheik’s body shook harshly as it descended into shock. Link struggled to position the his body carefully on the grass, hurriedly fishing a potion out of his pack with slippery fingers in a horribly familiar way.

It was the Nether all over again.

“Link, I – ”

“Shut up.” he tried to shout, but there was nothing left to carry his voice more than a harsh whisper. He lifted Sheik’s head to help him swallow the potion. “Don’t talk. Just breathe and let the potion work.”

“It won’t –”

“What part of shut up did you not understand?” Link demanded, tugging off his stupid red scarf and pressing it hard against the wound. Sheik let out a shout of pain that echoed in Link’s mind. Blood stained everything in sight and Link reached up to try and wipe some of it from Sheik’s face.

It was going to work.

They were going to make it.

This wasn’t going to happen.
Not again.

Sheik was going to make it.

“Link, I don’t know...if the potion will...”

“Sheik, please,” Link begged. “Please don’t say that. You’re going to make it. The Goddesses... they’re letting you stay. They spoke to me. They’re letting you stay and you can’t die.”

“You don’t have to lie, Link...”

Link almost lost it, a sob spilling from his lips as he pushed Sheik’s bloody hair from his forehead. “I’m not lying, Sheik. They spoke to me. I gave them a really hard time – I even called them horrible pieces of shit. But they’re letting you stay.”

Sheik laughed hoarsely at that, a pained smile passing his features. “They deserved it...I wish we had more time,” he whispered, his breath coming and going erratically.

Link opened his mouth to yell at Sheik again but all that came out were breathy sobs. Because everything had finally broken him up to nothing more than the half-adult he truly was. The Goddesses were merciful enough to allow Sheik to stay but cruel enough to let him die. Let them both die. How could he spend his life fighting as their champion? Were they really so fucking stupid? How were they just going to allow their Hero of Time to die?

With all that Link had left, he felt out their connection and tied himself up with Sheik’s mind. He absorbed the pain of Sheik’s missing arm, the panic of his dying body, and the deep agony of knowing they would both die together.

The rag at his Sheik’s ruined shoulder was saturated, blood generously leaking onto the mud and grass.

The potion was doing nothing.

The potion was doing nothing.

“Sheik, stay with me, please,” he begged, voice weaker than a whisper. He leaned over and pressed his forehead to Sheik’s, squeezing his eyes shut. Sheik’s arm came around his shoulder, trembling against his back. “Please, Sheik.”

“I love you,” he whispered.

“No, don’t say that,” Link begged, kissing him hard to cut off his words.

“I’m so happy we had the time we had,” Sheik went on, driving knife after knife through Link’s chest. “I’m glad that...Void Walker gave me more time with you. I would be recycled a thousand times to...stay.”

Link couldn’t even reply anymore, crying somehow harder than he had when he was alone in the Nether. And not because he knew his death would follow, but because images flashed in his head like visions.

He saw the quiet, content moments around a campfire in the field and heard their soft voices as
they as lay side-by-side on the warm stone of a balcony, talking about the stars. He saw the moment when they truly grasped what was between them and found they had been connected since the beginning, to a depth that was nearly mythic. He saw the furious kiss against the courtyard wall in the Vrika under the chaos of a storm and the soft touches on Sheik’s bed afterwards. He felt about the heat of ecstasy in pale light of early morning as he surrendered everything he had to Sheik on the eve of war. He remembered about his silent promise to bring Sheik to the sea after the war, so together they could honor Gota and return the sparkling blue stones still at the bottom of Link’s pack.

Because, no matter how hard they tried, they were still not out of the woods.

They would never be.

With power and destiny came burden and death and sacrifice. It was a never-ending cycle that could not be broken. Because prophecy was the absence of free will and this prophecy said nothing about survival once it was fulfilled.

Like a nightmare continuum, Sheik would always be dying and Link would always be holding him together, desperately trying to wish away the agony with empty words of reassurance.

At least, he thought to himself, he wouldn’t have to go on without Sheik. He would follow him into oblivion and Link couldn’t know what awaited the soldiers of the Goddesses…but maybe it wasn’t so bad.

So, this was it.

It really was the end.

Link remembered sitting on Sheik’s bed and asking Sheik to come with him after the war, to leave Hyrule and divine obligation forever. He had had visions of foreign mountain ranges and new lands with new people. He had had visions of alien cityscapes and all familiarity left behind as they forged their own place in the unexplored world.

And it would be just them. No prophecy, no royalty, no dead cities, and no people to save. He had always seen them growing old together and never knowing when to settle down since the conclusion of the first war, even before their Congruence.

But it was a bitter taste of blood in his mouth and the sound of his lover dying against him that chased those images away.

It really was the end. And at least they’d go together.

Like they always did.

\textit{Link!}

The voice was small and strange and Link shot straight up at the sound of it, heart in his throat. He froze, his body locking up as he tried to comprehend what he was seeing.

Hovering before him, was Navi.

Her blue glow shimmered in the stormy light and behind her, the sky was filled with fairies. Some
were blue navigators, like Navi, but most were pink healers from the fountains. A whole flock of them were fluttering down to them and Link started to fear he would truly pass out. Or maybe he was just hallucinating. He had missed Navi so desperately and, like the visions of someone on their deathbed, she was suddenly there.

“Navi,” he struggled out. “Navi.”

*The Goddess Farore sent us!*

“One of the healers, bring one of the healers,” he tried to say, but nothing came out despite his moving lips. His voice was gone, but Navi bounced in the air and chirped to the pink fairies descending around them.

“Sheik, fairies,” Link breathed.

But Sheik wasn’t moving. The warmth of Congruence was fading slowly from Link’s mind.

Navi cried out to them but darkness swept in and then everything was black.

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I AM A HORRIBLE PIECE OF SHIT.

PM me for my home address so you can come EJECT ME FROM THIS PLANET, INTO THE VOID OF SPACE.

“I Found” by Amber Run is my song for them and it’s all that got me through this chapter.

Next chapter is the epilogue.

Places to find me:
sincosma on Tumblr
amandalynnsings on Instagram
ohamandalynn on Snapchat
amandalynnsings . com for my music
The damage done to the castle was extensive. Like the aftermath of the war two years prior, it would take a long time until Hyrule was restored to its former glory. As quickly as possible, the people taking refuge in Vrika were sent for and brought back to Hyrule. Civilian losses recorded so far were thirty-six. Losses to the Royal Army were in the hundreds. There were hundreds more that were wounded and the fairies Farore had sent were put to work for days after the war’s conclusion.

To the Queen’s great pleasure and relief, surrounding countries came to Hyrule’s aid and sent men to help rebuild. And they sent supplies, too; Lord Bilios was a very active benefactor in that endeavor. So, with help from strangers and hopeful hearts, the people of Hyrule put their kingdom back together. Because that was what the people of Hyrule did, after all.

“Link?”

Zelda stood in the doorway to the library. She looked, for the first time in a very long time, well-rested. Her blonde hair sloped down her shoulder in a thick braid and a hesitant expression lingered on her face. The sunlight pouring through the open window illuminated her figure and it was easy to remember she was the reincarnation of a Goddess.

“The horses are ready,” she said, smiling sadly. Her fingers were laced together in front of her and the light scars left behind from battle crisscrossed her knuckles.

Link slid off the window sill, feet crunching on broken glass still there from the battle. “I’ll meet you at the stables.”

Zelda nodded silently and made her way back down the hall. He knew she was having a hard time dealing with his decision, but Link pushed it from his mind as he returned to his room one last time.

It had always been quite empty, but now it was devoid of everything but a bed and his pack. The Moon Blade, newly cleaned and sharpened, lay sheathed on his bed and he equipped it slowly. Throwing his pack over one shoulder, he left the room without a second glance and walked down the hall.

When he reached the next room, he found the door open and glowing sunlight coming from the shattered window. This room was very empty, too.

Except for Sheik.

He sat at the end of the bed, pack and weapons next to him, and his nose in a book. The light turned his hair golden, woven now in a braid which was no doubt Zelda’s doing. His royal uniform was nowhere in sight and, like Link, had packed away only plain travelling clothes; for now they both wore clothes for the desert.

His presence was detected and red eyes snapped up to meet his, a smile spreading on Sheik’s bare face. The cowl was around his neck but wouldn’t be raised unless it was needed. He snapped the book shut and shoved it in the pack.
“Ready?” he asked quietly.

“Very,” Link replied.

Sheik pulled on his gear, a task he got faster at every day, and shouldered his pack. As he stood, Link crossed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Sheik’s waist. An arm settled around his back and they were silent for a moment, only the echoes of the healing castle to punctuate the silence.

They would not hear it much longer.

Link felt lips at his temple and moved his head to meet them, feeling their Congruence shiver ever-so-slightly. When they pulled away, Link ran his thumb over Sheik’s chin, the red scars of a Sheikah warrior now visible to the world – but like Kalyh, he had violated the Vala and was no longer worthy of their meaning.

Not that Sheik wanted it, anyway.

“Let’s go.”

They strode slowly through the castle, saying goodbye to the people they saw. They had specifically asked to avoid a big send-off, but people followed them out in a processional until they reached the main gates. They cheered words of farewell until Link and Sheik were out of sight. The walk to the stables was short and quiet then, only the distant sounds of Castle Town and the shouts of newly-returned vendors in the square.

At the stable stood Kronos and Epona, saddled up for their last journey and looking magnificent in the cool sunlight. Zelda stood beside them, checking straps, and adjusting buckles like a fretting mother.

The moment they reached her side, she grabbed onto them both for a few minutes as she breathed deeply and gripped their tunics. And they just held her because there wasn’t anything else to do. She would always be like a sister and they would, like brothers, shelter her in a moment of weakness.

“I love you both,” she told them, as though it was an order. Her voice shook slightly and it pulled sadness through Link’s chest like a rough thread woven into his tunic. Zelda moved away and her eyes were a little wet. Her hands stayed on their shoulders. “Remember that.”

Link said, “Of course. How could we forget?”

That earned him a half-hearted punch but she was smiling, too.

“Thank you for being my family,” she went on. “And thank you for saving us all.”

Link didn’t know what else to do, sudden emotion curdling in him uncomfortably, so he just nodded. Goodbyes weren’t his thing but he endured it for Zelda.

“Link,” she continued, using her best Queen voice, “make sure you keep practicing your magic. You have to master as much as you can since Sheik’s was taken, okay?”
Link cringed. Magic was also not his thing. But, of course, she was right.

*He may stay but he must forfeit the Vaspra and the Sheikah magic in his blood. He must forfeit that which makes him dangerous.*

The Goddesses let Sheik stay, but at the price of his Sheikah magic and his Vaspra-laced arm. He was still a creature of the Nether – they all knew that wouldn’t change – but taking his magic had been one concession on the parts of the Goddesses.

Sheik had known it the moment he awoke. Link, having not left his side since their return to the castle, saw it in his sad, red eyes and opened his mouth to explain, to apologize, to try and help somehow. But Sheik shook his head and said, “I would’ve given up *anything* to stay with you.”

Link had realized that an arm and some magic had no value anymore when compared to all they had endured. It was a minor loss amidst a timeline of tragedy. But they were alive and they were leaving, just as they’d planned, and that was all that truly mattered anymore. No more prophecy, no more magic, no more divine obligation, no more Hyrule.

“Sheik, make sure you keep this bonehead out of trouble, okay?” Zelda ordered, flipping her gaze over to the Sheikah that was trying to edge away from the conversation.

“I usually do,” he replied off-handedly, tying his pack to the saddle with one nimble hand. “Though I can’t really guarantee it right now – I have no idea where he is taking me.”

Zelda just rolled her eyes. “Typical Link, vague and tight-lipped.”

Link just snorted at this. “I think you take the prize on that one, Your Majesty.”

After one last tight hug and a kiss to his cheek, they mounted their steeds and left. Zelda watched them go, Link was sure, but he made a point to not look back because he knew she was crying.

They trotted through Castle Town, catching gazes as they went, people curious as to where the Hero of Time and the Queen’s Royal Bodyguard were going.

The ride across the field was peaceful and quiet. They spoke every now and then, stopping only once to let the horses graze so they could lie in the grass next to each other. The wind was cool and soft, not a cloud in the brilliant sky above them. Link ran his fingers over Sheik’s, heads pressed together as they enjoyed their last day in Hyrule. It was so easy to pretend as though the war had never happened, that people hadn’t died, and that they hadn’t changed irrevocably.

Kakariko, however, *did* look like a war had happened; it was weathered and the air smoky, evidence refugees here and there in the general state of disarray. People were still hurrying about before sundown, rebuilding houses and fences.

Malon was waiting for them by the entrance of the graveyard; Epona and Kronos would fall into her care now. The lantern that hung at her hip illuminated her pretty face and red hair as she smiled brightly up at them. Epona snorted and nosed at her side, where Link was sure treats were hidden.

“Thank you for taking them, Malon,” Link said softly, running his fingers over Epona’s mane for the last time. “They can’t go where we’re going.”

“I’m happy to take them for you. I’ve missed Epona and Kronos will make some fine offspring, I’m sure,” she laughed softly as Kronos nosed her side as well. “And be careful, where ever you’re
going, fairy boy.”

“I always am,” Link promised.

Malon gave him a tight hug, kissing his cheek just as Zelda had. She even caught Sheik in a hug, to Link’s amusement. Link took an extra moment with Epona, pressing his forehead hard against hers and whispering a rough, “Thank you for everything”.

“Make sure you come back and visit,” she warned them before taking the reins of the horses to lead them off. Malon and Talon would soon be returning to their ranch, once they finished the repairs; Epona would run in the same pasture she had grown up in. Link could almost pretend that he had never had her by his side, had never exposed her to all horrors that still haunted him every moment, as if she had just lived out her life at Lon Lon in peace.

Link just nodded, unable to tell her they weren’t coming back.

“Goodbye, Malon.”

Into the graveyard they went, passing through the portal and back to Vrika.

The familiar dry air comforted Link as they emerged from the icy cold of the portal and Sheik led the way as, for the last time, they paid respects to Sheik’s parents and, most importantly, Gota. There was no magic to overwhelm Sheik this time, however, just the despair in his eyes and the tremor of his hand in Link’s.

“I wonder…what she would say if she saw me now; armless, magicless, a violator of the Vala, and leaving everything behind. I’m, in so many ways, a disgrace now.” Sheik’s voice was quiet, just on the edge of breaking.

Link reached out and pulled the Sheikah close, feeling moisture and shaky breath his neck. “I don’t know what she’d say, but I know I would say…you will never disgrace the Sheikah. You honor them. You saved the entire kingdom. It’s impossible for Gota to be anything less than proud of you. I just know she is, Sheik.”

They spent the night in Sheik’s bed and made love in candlelight. It had been the first time since the battle two weeks prior. Even with the magic of Farore to heal them, their recovery had kept them from such activities and it showed. The long kisses and the light nip of teeth, the stray fingers in tender places and the tangle of furs around them as they found their rhythm – these were the things that would begin to mend them both. It was heat of Sheik’s fingers against his throat and the weight of his body against Link’s chest. It was the whispers of reassurance and the soft lips at his ear that would chase away the things left by trauma.

Sheik’s hand fell to the amulet still against Link’s chest and, for the hundredth time, Link asked, “Are you sure you don’t want this back?”

Sheik shook his head, blonde hair falling into Link’s face, and kissed his shoulder. “I want you to keep it.”

“Is this some weird Sheikah symbol of ownership and you’re just not telling me?” Link teased.

“Maybe it is,” Sheik shot back.
Link maneuvered them over and kissed the Sheikah soundly. He ran his fingers over the side of Sheik’s shoulder, where his arm once was. Link could feel the tiniest bit of insecurity through their Congruence but smothered it with reassurance.

“You’re beautiful,” was all he said, leaning down to run his lips against the ragged scars left over. “So beautiful.”

In the morning, they headed out. They walked through Vrika, past the courtyard where Kalyh first used Hexa, Sheik almost killed Link, and they shared their first, very angry kiss. The mountain of Vrika towered over them, illuminated brightly by the sun at their backs, and followed the path towards its base until they reached the rainforest.

Even despite the change in seasons, the air was still hot and humid, bugs buzzing excitedly around their faces as they entered the foliage.

“Do you know where we’re going yet?” Link asked him halfway through the day. Thank the Goddesses for his compass or even he wouldn’t have known where they were going.

“I have an idea,” Sheik replied as he sliced through some plants obscuring their path with a lazy swing of his sword. “And if I am right, then you’re the most sentimental person I’ve ever known, Link.”

“I guess there are worse things to be,” he sighed, earning a chuckle from Sheik.

The rainforest definitely wasn’t Link’s favorite place in the world, but it was leagues better than the desert. The green plants were thick and rubbery, sunlight streaming down in strident shafts through the canopy. It reminded Link of Kokiri Forest a bit and he felt a small twinge of regret that he’d never see it again.

It took two days to reach the sea.

They travelled quickly and quietly, falling into their familiar rhythms like they always did. Sometimes Link would have to help Sheik with tying knots or anything requiring two hands, but those moments were never lingered upon.

It was hard, but if there was anything they were used to, it was being at a disadvantage.

The rainforest slowly transformed into less muggy air and rolling hills with alpine trees. Cautious deer crossed their paths and hares rustled in the underbrush. Not a single creature attacked them, but Link knew it would be a long time until they both stopped waiting for the worst to happen.

They heard the slosh of waves and the cries of gulls long before they broke the tree line. And when they did, Link stopped in his tracks. Unable to move and air leaving his lungs with a long sigh, he drank in the sight before him.

Under the bright azure sky stretched dark sparkling waters all the way to the horizon. The shoreline was littered with stones, all glimmering in the light like diamonds against sapphire blue and Link grinned.

“So, I guess you’re wondering why we’re here,” Link offered quietly, glancing over at his companion. He didn’t think he’d ever seen the Sheikah look quite as happy and calm as he did now – his eyes were warm and his body moved as if it had shed some great weight.
“I guess I am.”

Link reached down into his pack as Sheik watched with curious eyes. He fished around until he found his prize and pulled them out to drop in Sheik’s hand. The three stones that had lived on Sheik’s desk now sparkled brilliantly his brown palm and he went quiet, eyes flashing between anguish and surprise and gratitude.

“I thought,” Link whispered, “maybe it was time you brought them back. For Gota.”

Red eyes looked back up at him, so full of emotion Link almost lost his breath in the salty air. The waves murmured ahead of them and wind whipped their hair around in their faces. Link knew what this meant for Sheik and that one moment made everything in the past three years worth it.

Suddenly, he was yanked close and kissed, lips hard and passionate against his.

“Thank you, Link,” Sheik said, voice harsh and broken. “Thank you.”

The Congruence thrummed between them as they moved to the beach and Sheik laid the stones back among its brothers, the water reaching up as if to welcome them back. They stood for a little while, holding onto one another, watching the sea breathe and the gulls hover on the strong ocean winds.

After a while, they settled on a large, rocky outcropping above the water and Link asked, “Well, where are we going now?”

“You decide.”

“Why me?” Link asked. “What if I pick something awful? Are you sure you trust my judgment?”

Sheik laughed, the sound musical to Link’s ears. Fingers ran over Link’s knuckles and eyes bright as garnet flickered in the midday sun.

“We’re Congruent,” he said reasonably. “So, I suppose I’ll just have to trust you.”

Link grinned at this, glancing around them for a moment as he made up his mind.

“North. Let’s go north.”

Sheik nodded.

“Okay. We’ll go north.”

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There are people that I need to thank.

First, and most importantly, I need to thank Sage and Cherry. They read this story as I was writing it, during one of the darkest periods in my life and had they not been so supportive and insistent, I never would have finished Congruent. They are also the only reason I posted it. The size of this
story completely overwhelmed me and it would’ve just died on my computer if they hadn’t encouraged me to begin editing it and posting it. They even beta’d the first eleven chapters for me and helped me become a better writer. Plainly, we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for them.

Next, I need to thank Mariah. She’s been my best friend for 11 years and has been encouraging me to write those entire 11 years. I credit her at the end of all my fics and for good reason – she has always been the person endlessly cheering on every single thing I write. Thank you, Toby. <3

Now, to those who consistently read and follow me on Tumblr and generally give me a hard time (there might be some doubles in here – I know some of you have different handles for different things and this is a mixture of names from different places):
Sasurealian, ordonianhero, Sharkarians, Alex, Ian, Naiesu, Overgrownruins, Petite-neko, Thechosenone305 (maybe one day you’ll say good morning to me), Produdftititty, Madamekoosdisco, Thewishingcap, Starryheavenstos, Paranoidcoffee, Laptoplocked, Karankun-ulquibat, A-bunch-of-garbage, Alynn90, Missionfailure, Abyssocreativity, Luosaugury, Haveyousinnedtoday, Immortal-t, Fightingwaterlesbian, ii-sheikah, Inlemon, Snowcat17, Sugarelixir, Fightingwaterlesbians, Foggybrains, Hyruledragee, Cass_butt8, Failisse, Taegeye, Mistress Moitie, chocobro-s, Hyruledragee, Celestialsks, Cheloya, Eibhlin Catha, Feartheiksa, Rollingstarr, Lilyshilo, 24601timeloardeowyn, and Acirejumi.

I know I’m forgetting a ton people so please feel free to message me on tumblr at sincosma so I can add you to this list – please let me know!

A super special thank you to those who have done fanart and/or have done cosplay for Congruent: Sasurealian, Creativelea, Ordonianhero, Kylianthehylian, Oleandder, Rollingstarr, Courierglyph, QHXZ, Thewishingcap

You can find their art and all future art/cosplay at “sincosma . tumblr . com / tagged / congruent-art” so you can follow those artists!

As far as going forward… I’m going to start actively posting Sanctuary, the other Shink thing I posted the first chapter of a while ago. I’ve been working on a very long-winded Wolfstar fic, and a one-shot Spirk thing as well. If there’s anything Congruent has taught me, it’s that I can post things, no matter how long, no matter how intimidating.

I’m a professional musician and you can find my music at amandalynnsings . com

For other social media, amandalynnsings on Instagram and ohamandalynn on Snapchat.

This project has been an ongoing thing for me, a thought constantly in the back of my mind, and a thing to both dread and look forward to. I’m honestly not really sure what the hell I’m gonna do without it, but thank y’all for sticking along for the ride.

For those of you that are reading this since the whole thing has been posted, thank you. You’re just as loved by me, even when years have passed and everything I’m saying here is dated. Thank you for taking the time to read this and I hope you enjoyed Congruent as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you for everything, from the bottom of my heart.

I love you guys.
Works inspired by this are:

Hometown by violet_jedi

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!