A Pair Of Ragged Claws

by ryttu3k

Summary

Sheik, the Queensguard to young Queen Zelda, has spent the last several years barely hanging on. But salvation may come when he least expects it...

Notes

Please note - this is a direct sequel to an earlier fic, The Sky Above, The Field Below. Without reading that first, I'm afraid none of this will make much sense! If you haven't, and you still wish to read this, I suggest you head on over to have a read - this story will wait. I promise.

And as an up-front warning - this fic deals with dark, potentially triggering content, including depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and memories of / attempted rape. I will warn for triggering material with each chapter, but as so much of the story includes this material, I'll find absolutely no offense if you choose not to read it. Thank you!

Also, you will receive an internet cookie if you can identify where the chapter titles all come from!
Once upon a time, there was a boy who walked through time.

In the light of day, his life was ordinary. But when he closed his eyes at night, he saw scenes of the future - dark premonitions and evil deeds yet to be done.

His life was an ordinary one, if isolated. Friendless save for just one, the boy who had not yet been chosen by a fairy, he wandered the forests of his home, yearning to find a way to see reason in it all.

And then, a fairy came to him.

The boy left the forest, death on his heels.

In to the wide world he travelled, and everywhere that he went, the scent of blood and violence followed him. He met a young princess, and swore to her that he would help her. He met a tribe of stone and a tribe of the water. And then he returned - and everything promptly turned on its head.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who could see the future.

Not yet a queen but trained for it from birth, she witnessed dark doings in her dreams and worry began to set in. A fearsome king of the desert, allegedly a friend to her father the king, would stalk her dreams.

And yet there was hope - a boy from the forest, one who would part the dark clouds and bring salvation to the land.

She waited. She met the boy and sent him on his journey. And she waited again.

When she found her father dead in his study, the king of the desert looming over his body, she knew, then, that she could wait no longer.

And so she fled.

Once upon a time, there was a boy who thought himself ordinary.

He lived with a couple he referred to as his parents - an orphan, but lacking grief for what he did not know, he chose them as his own. He learnt his lessons. He explored the land.

And one day, a letter arrived telling him of a faraway land on the brink of war. He was not what he thought he was, but was instead the survivor of a war, a member of an ancient and dying race. And he was asked a very important question - would he give up his comfortable life in a seaside town far from the taint of war, and come to protect a girl he barely knew of?

He accepted, and found himself in his ancestral home, hidden away with a girl who would one day become his sister.

Once upon a time, three lives became touched by the same war. The boy who walked through time reached for a sword he was not yet old enough to wield, and found himself trapped in a seven-year sleep. The girl who could see the future waited and watched, teaching her newly found brother all he would need to know for his duties. And the boy who thought himself ordinary was taught to listen for songs of magic, songs that he would need to one day use for the aid of their land.
When the boy who walked through time awakened to find himself in a shattered world, it was the boy who thought himself ordinary who was waiting for him, prepared to aid the girl who could see the future. His tasks would take him through fire, beneath water, through the shadows and through the sands. It would return him to his childhood home and it would tear him far from it.

And all through it, the boy who thought himself ordinary would guide him on his path.

And yet something that neither of them expected happened. The boy who walked through time found himself wounded after a temple he could not quite defeat before it had its revenge, and the boy who thought himself ordinary took it upon himself to care for him himself. And the two began to grow close.

When the boy who thought himself ordinary found himself defending the boy who walked through time from a threat he did not yet know, the boy who walked through time rewarded him with a kiss. Together, they fought through fire and rain and shadows they could not fight, and together, they found themselves in each other’s bodies.

The boy who walked through time took himself to a new temple, fearsome and dark.

The boy who thought himself ordinary returned to what he thought may have been safety - and yet was anything but.

For the king of the desert had many spies.

For fourteen days, the boy who thought himself ordinary was a prisoner, subject to violence and degradation and pain. It was only when the boy who walked through time was reunited with the girl who saw the future that he found himself safe once more, his tormentor dead at his hand, his body shattered and broken and his mind consumed with horror.

He was changed, now, from his ordeal.

And for all three of them, the world fell apart.

The boy who walked through time was returned to his former home, his former time - a gift to return childhood to himself. The girl who saw the future was left alone, the future queen of a land that had been ravaged by war. The boy who thought himself ordinary was forced to push on regardless, despite horror and trauma and the loss of the one he loved.

For the boy who walked through time, it meant falling to another world and returning a new man - albeit one in a boy's form. Waiting for him once he finally returned to the girl who could see the future, he found the boy who thought himself ordinary waiting for him - but a younger version, a version that did not yet know him - free of trauma, but also free of the memories that shared.

He walked away again.

And for the boy who thought himself ordinary, who had no such spectre from the past to soothe his wounds, simply moving on would be his greatest challenge...
"Please stand for Zelda, Chosen Daughter of Nayru, Shining Light of the Hylian People, and your new Queen of Hyrule."

The young woman standing at the altar was resplendent in her garb, gold gleaming at her wrists and arms, settled on her shoulders and around her waist, crossing her pale brow. A deep blue-violet gem sat in a gold setting, wings soaring at her temples - the crown she had just been presented with. Her eyes were closed, violet and white silk draped over her fair skin.

Her eyes opened, and they shone blue. "As your queen," she said softly, "I will forever dedicate my life to my citizens. Our past has been a tragedy - but will do everything in my power to ensure that we will find security, happiness, and peace under my reign."

She bowed deeply, her hands clasped to her chest, and the assembled citizens and nobles returned it in kind.

When the orchestra started, and the prayers began, she descended from the altar, taking her seat in the new throne set at the head of the room. It looked ancient but she knew it to be brand new, the castle around them barely formed, the smell of sawdust still clearly evident in some incomplete wings of the castle.

Nearby, she was being watched.

A young man in blue and grey armour, his face bare and glowing with pride, let a gentle smile touch his lips. His red eyes gazed at his best friend turned monarch, always aware of the crest on his armour that marked him as a servant to the Royal Family, the emblem he wore at his throat to define him as one of the shadow folk.

Her servant. Her protector. Her friend.

Soon enough came his part of the ceremony, and he knelt before her. "Sheik," the young queen breathed, "Survivor of the Sheikah. My protector throughout the war. My friend."

He returned her smile.

"Do you solemnly swear, "she started, her voice solemn, "To pledge loyalty to the Royal Family of Hyrule, to never raise a hand to them, to serve them to the best of your abilities?"

"I do," he told her, and his voice was more serious than it ever had been.

"Do you solemnly swear to preserve the lives and the happiness of Hyrule and its citizens?"

"I do."

Her eyes crinkled in a smile. "And do you solemnly swear to pledge yourself to your Queen, to protect her and serve her in any way that is required?"

"I do," he breathed, gazing up at her.

"Then," she proclaimed, "I name you Sheik, Survivor of the Sheikah, Queensguard to Queen Zelda of Hyrule."

He rose to his feet, bowing deeply at the waist. "Then I, Sheik, Survivor of the Sheikah,
Queensguard to Queen Zelda of Hyrule, accept my service to you," he finished quietly.

Zelda smiled, then reached forward to present him with earrings - small gold hoops, a blue gem strung through each one. "Then take these as a symbol of your loyalty. I thank you," she told him, and her eyes twinkled, "My friend."

Turning to the assembled crowd, Sheik found his new position - slightly behind Zelda, to her left, a watchful eye to be kept on he for the remainder of his life in the castle. His expression was solemn and serious as the speeches began - from Zelda, from a select few nobles, from others in a position to speak at the first coronation in Hyrule since her own father's.

The previous king had had no coronation. He had simply claimed the land and woe betide anyone foolish enough to resist that.

When the ceremony proper ended and the ball began, Sheik retreated to a safe distance, never taking his eye off Zelda. He had no love of dancing or formality, and had he the choice, he would not have been in attendance.

Unless, of course, Zelda had asked him to be there.

A small sigh escaped his lips. Zelda, his oldest friend and his new queen - how would this change things? Barely a month before, she was still a fugitive. Now, Hyrule Castle had been rebuilt. A queen's crown and not a princess's tiara sat upon her forehead.

And the Hero was gone.

Well. That was certainly a good way to ruin his mood. With a sigh, he reached for a glass to pour himself some wine.

When would this end?

By the time the night was approaching the midnight hour, the ball was beginning to wind down. Zelda looked exhausted, now - her eyes were shadowed, her movements beginning to become sluggish. She had, of course, been awake since before dawn - her hair was to be done, her dress formally fitted, the crown delivered.

It had been a long day.

As she gave her official good night, Sheik reached for her arm as they departed the hall. Zelda sagged against him with a sigh, dropping her head to his shoulder before wincing at the armour she encountered there.

"I am definitely glad that this is over," she murmured, and he nodded.

"There will be much to do tomorrow," he cautioned. "You are the Queen of Hyrule, now, and it has been seven years and many months since your family last sat on the throne. But," he hastily conceded, Zelda turning weary eyes on him, "I don't think too many people would begrudge you a lie-in."

She chuckled. "Good - because I intend to have one."

A brief smile crossed his face. "You are definitely entitled to it."
A soft affirmative sound passed her lips. "Of course. But, before that, we may..." Her words trailed off, but her fingers rose to lightly brush the smooth-looking skin beneath his left eye.

He flinched away. "Of course," he echoed, a wary, hunted expression appearing for a flash. It was a reminder he disliked - but tonight, perhaps, he could be rid of it.

Zelda's new chambers were bigger than most of the houses in Kakariko Village and Castle Town just on their own. Large double doors opened in to a sitting room, couches and tables scattered around for nobles to wait in. From there, four doors extended outwards - a study, lined with paintings and maps of Hyrule and far away places, a bathroom, decorated in dark blue and purple tiles, delicate wood carvings, and gold fixtures, and featuring a bath big enough to swim in, and a sun room, each of its two exterior walls lined with windows and the other two covered in a layer of books. These latter two both attached directly to a fourth room - Zelda's own.

Slowly, Zelda inspecting everything she could, the two progressed in. This was not Sheik's first time in the chambers, but it certainly was Zelda's - while the castle had been rebuilt, she had stayed in her old protector's home in Kakariko Village.

"Do you find it acceptable?" he murmured,

Zelda lifted her head from where she was running a finger along the low shelves in her room, laden with little treasures from far away and closer to home, her feet - bare the moment they had walked in to her bedroom - curling in to the plush carpet. "I do," she said with a smile. "Have you seen your own room yet?"

He nodded once, leading her to a barely visible door. This little room, enclosed by all of the others, was accessible only via Zelda's room, and was nearly bare by comparison.

Oh, the same thick, soft carpet covered the floor, and the bed was large and luxuriously soft. But a small chest of drawers, a writing table, and a padded chair were the only other items of furniture there, and the paintings and tapestries that adorned Zelda's walls were absent here.

By choice, at least.

"It is rather small," Zelda said dubiously, pacing from one end to the other. It did not take her many steps.

"It is perfectly adequate for my needs," he shrugged, sitting himself down on the bed. "...Really," he added sheepishly, "This is the most luxurious room I've ever had."

A small, spartan bedroom in Toaru, a corner of a cave, camping out in the open, or a pallet in Impa's former house... briefly, his mind flashed to another place he had once stayed in for a time, and a wince crossed his face.

Zelda frowned at the wince, then let out a sigh. "Then lie down - I will begin."

"Are you alert enough for it?" he asked with a brief frown, and she nodded firmly.

"I am. If this is to succeed, then my tiredness levels will have no bearing on it."

He hesitated, then nodded, stretching out on the new bed, turning to his side - he did not want to lie on his back and be worked over, not again. At least, now, it was surprisingly soft bedding beneath his back, not stone, and a friend standing over him, not an enemy.

"I'm ready," he murmured, and, with a steadying breath, let the glamour dropped.
Almost like liquid flowing and rippling over glass, the illusion passed from his face. First, the scar crossing his lips emerged, then the other, parallel to it, that tore across his left eye. Finally, after the briefest of seeming hesitations, the eye that the scar crossed paled from deep red to something almost close to white, milky-looking and blind.

Sheik did not look at Zelda. His one working eye gazed off at the distance, his expression troubled.

"Please relax," she murmured, "But remember to keep both eyes open until I say so."

He nodded, still not speaking. The illusion took energy to maintain, but hiding his injuries, his... mutilations and disabilities - it was worth it to hide it away.

"Breathe deeply," Zelda instructed softly, and he did, eyes glazed and unfocused. Unbidden, his thoughts drifted to Link - the pure blue of his eyes, the fond smile on his face as Sheik shared a story while he healed from his injuries, the touch of his hands against Sheik's skin.

The uncertain look on his face as they had been torn apart by time.

Well. That wasn't very relaxing. Sheik sighed, and tried again - perhaps their former home in the Boundary between worlds, sweeping caverns of untold mystery. He and Zelda had grown up there, (relatively) happy and (reasonably) content.

Until things had changed. He sighed, holding on to the images, of a precious memory of a birthday spent atop a mountain far from Hyrule, of coming of age ceremonies and stolen treasures from home.

His eye was grow warm.

"Sheik, close your eyes," Zelda breathed, and, obediently, he did.

A hand rested lightly on his cheek, fingertips soft against his eyelid. He could feel Zelda whispering something he could not follow, his mind growing sleepy and sluggish. Curled up on his side with his eyes closed and warmth radiating through him, he could almost let himself drift off.

Abruptly, the fingertips against his eyelid grew hot, then cold, and then back to a comfortable warmth again, and Zelda exhaled. "It's done," she murmured, flatting her hand over the affected eye. "Please open your right eye, okay?"

He did, gazing up at her - she looked positively exhausted. "I can see fine with it," he confirmed, and she nodded.

"Alright - then this will be the test." She lifted her hand. "Open your other eye."

He was not quite prepared for the crushing disappointment when he did. Anything to his left remained stubbornly dark, not a single expansion of his field of view. Zelda caught his expression, and her head bowed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and he shook his head.

"You tried your best," he murmured, pushing himself up. "I should do the inspection - you should go to bed."

She nodded blearily. "I - yes. I think that would be for the best."

Leaning forward to give her a kiss on the cheek, he smiled. "Thank you for trying," he told her
gently, and stood.

The inspections would not take long. He examined every room of Zelda's new chambers - the study, the bathroom, the sun room. The sitting room, most public of the areas, was thoroughly examined. And then he stood, reaching up to rub at his good eye tiredly.

He stopped.

He could still see.

No sudden dimness of vision had taken place when he had closed his good eye - instead, vision swam in to focus in his left. He gaped and opened both eyes wide, and the vision to his left disappeared again.

...Had he imagined it?

No - it was no mere figment of the imagination. With both eyes open, only his right eye could see - but with his right eye closed, vision returned to his left eye, a sort of compensation. No, he could not see to both sides at once - but surely this was better than nothing?

And then he realised that not only could he see the walls, the floor, the carpets and paintings and tapestries, the furniture and decoration, but other things, normally unseen things, as well. The glint of blue around the door, from where he had had wards set up. The network of spidery gold lines on each exterior wall. He peered in to the sun room and found the glass gleaming white, each pane protected.

It was, he realised, expression stunned, like finding the Lens of Truth suddenly set over his eye.

When he returned to Zelda's room, it was with his right eye covered, taking in illusions and protections over her doors and windows. Unerringly, he moved to his side. "Zelda?"

She lifted her head from the pillow, frowning briefly. "Sheik. Is -" Catching sight of which eye he was looking at her with, she did a double take. "Is something wrong?"

"It worked," he said simply, "Just in a different way. If I close my right eye, I can see with it, and... more besides." It was an almost fearful murmur. "You have not just granted me sight again. You have granted me the Eye of Truth."

Zelda fell silent. She had been raised alongside Sheik for seven years, she had heard the same stories from Impa - she knew of the Eye of Truth, a latent Sheikah ability to see the invisible and cut through illusion. "I am not sure whether to be pleased or confused," she admitted, shaking her head. "Sheik, I do not know how this happened."

He shrugged, as confused as she was. "Perhaps it was a latent ability," he suggested, "That you awakened with the spell. This is not a bad thing - I can protect you from the invisible, now."

"I'm glad, then," she murmured, leaning up to kiss his cheek. "I'm still not positive how, but... I'm glad."

"As am I," he told her, and straightened up. "Everything is all clear - I shall retire to bed. Tomorrow - today," he corrected himself with a glance at the clock, "You will begin your duties as the queen of Hyrule - you should sleep."

A nod. "I shall, then," she told him, and laid back down. "Good night, Sheik."
"Good night, Zelda."

"I think I may be starting to hate balls."

Zelda's shoulders were slumped as she returned to Sheik's side after yet another dance. Soon after her coronation, a series of balls and dances had been planned - events meant to lure in eligible young noble men from their neighbouring countries.

The council had declared that now that Zelda was queen, it was time to begin focusing on finding a husband and producing an heir. For a young queen without any living family, it was of vital importance.

For a seventeen-year-old girl, only three months in to her reign, the idea was a horrible one, one she had no desire to follow through with.

"I know the feeling," Sheik muttered, brushing her wrist with his fingers in a gesture of reassurance and commiseration. He had been forced in to his dress uniform, the blue and grey uniform adorned with unnecessary pieces of engraved blue armour. The chest piece, especially, was a hindrance, one that threatened to stab him in the bladder every time he bent over.

The leather armour he usually worn, naturally, had no such problem. But it was also not suited for a ball.

And he could not wear his hair tie. Uneasily, Sheik reached up to touch his hair - it was down to his shoulders, normally, and tied up with a frayed piece of green fabric - a fragment left from an old tunic draped over young shoulders. A memory.

But now it was in a neat blue tie - matching, impersonal, and not his.

He let out a grumble, and Zelda patted his hand. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

A non-committal sound. "A few hours," he murmured, "Better than usual, I suppose." If it was not the insomnia making it impossible to fall asleep - or to get back to sleep once he woke up again - then it was the dreams making sleep something not quite to be desired.

She nodded slowly.

With a sigh, she straightened up - they were being approached, another potential suitor making his way forward. "Queen Zelda," he nodded in acknowledgment, hesitating before reaching for a glass of wine. "This is certainly a..." He hesitated. "A lavish event."

"It is, rather," she said quietly, the formal, impartial mask slipping back over her face. "I hope you are enjoying yourself, Prince Andir?"

"Oh please, call me Andir," the prince said, pulling a face. "I cannot abide formality."

Despite herself, Zelda chuckled. "Andir, then. I would allow you to call me Zelda, but I believe the council may have my head."

He let out a short laugh himself. "Well, we cannot have that," he grinned, then gestured to the doors. "I'm afraid it's rather stuffy in here - would you like to take a walk?"

Zelda considered for half a moment, her expression unreadable, then nodded. "That would be nice.
Shall we?"

There was a light snow falling outside, and Andir offered Zelda his arm, glancing across at Sheik. "You are the queen's protector, correct?" he asked curiously. "It must be some job."

Only careful application of illusion hid the scars from his face, the milky whiteness of his eye, the shadows beneath both. "It certainly is not dull," he murmured, falling silent with a nearly imperceptible nod towards Zelda. Well, he was polite, at least.

The talk was brief, somewhat inconsequential. The weather received a mention, and the latest of politics. Gossip of the latest palace events got a looking in to. It was not particularly outstanding, and yet Andir at least seemed attentive and good-humoured.

For the rest of the ball, even after they returned indoors, he remained close. It seemingly wasn't like the others - power-hungry nobles who merely wanted the title of king, to be second only to Queen Zelda herself (at least, until an heir was born) to rule Hyrule. This seemed more like...

companionship.

After a few dances, the conversation turned again. This time, they learnt more of him - the prince was the fourth son of the Royal Family of Tellura, seemingly destined never to succeed to the crown but instead shuffled off to eligible princesses and queens. It was not something he enjoyed, he admitted - so many of them were vapid, or power-hungry, or simply poor company.

Zelda, he confided to Sheik when the queen was asked for a dance by another young noble, was not quite like them. She did not fit the mould of someone who had spent her entire life being groomed for her role, and Sheik hesitantly mentioned the Seven Year War. A princess in exile, he explained, was not a princess groomed solely for politics. She possessed her own mind, survival instincts, a grim determination to truly set things right. She had not become complacent by peace.

Indeed, he told Sheik, Andir was of the belief that he and Zelda could find something resembling friendship. And, at the very least, a political alliance between Hyrule and Tellura through marriage would be infinitely more pleasant with a friend - or something more.

Grudgingly, Sheik took Zelda aside. "Andir seems relatively benign," he told her quietly. "And he does seem to be more genuinely interested in a friendship then many of the others."

"I've noticed," she murmured, glancing across at him - hastily, he looked away, and she chuckled. "I suppose a friendship is a start - I will extend the offer, if you believe it will be a good idea."

"It is your choice," he pointed out, then pause. "But it certainly is worth a try."

She nodded, adjusting her skirts and striding over to him. That was one thing, Sheik noted, that set her apart from many of the other noble women there - while some glided, and others minced, Zelda simply walked. Too far away to overhear the conversation, Sheik could nonetheless guess its content - more than once, Andir's gaze flickered up to meet Sheik's.

And then, finally, he nodded.

Royal visits, were, in principle, a way to discuss diplomatic matters and issues of political importance. But it also had another, more unofficial purpose - a royal visit to an eligible monarch or heir was often seen as the conclusive final test to see if a pair was compatible for marriage.

When Prince Andir of Tellura arrived at Hyrule Castle for a two week long stay, the rumours began
to spread like wildfire.

Andir was the picture of attentiveness during his two week stay. Rare was the occasion where he would stray from Zelda's side, and when she did, for confidential meetings or more private matters that not even Sheik would intrude upon, it was at Sheik's side that he lingered.

Finally, on the last night of his visit, this came to a head.

"I would have expected you to still be at dinner," Sheik murmured as Andir emerged on to the balcony. He had been uneasy, and Zelda had all but ordered him to get some fresh air - and now he found himself without his charge and jumpy besides.

"It was a little stuffy," the prince conceded, "And I wanted to know why you had left."

"It was a little stuffy," he echoed, and left it at that.

Andir made a thoughtful sound, gazing at the wall thoughtfully. "You know," he finally remarked, "I have enjoyed myself, these past few weeks."

Sheik did not respond verbally, merely giving him a curious look.

"And," he considered, a rather sheepish note entering his voice, "I would... not be opposed to entering an alliance with the queen. It would be... advantageous."

One eyebrow rose. "Is that so?" he asked blandly, and nearly turned away before a touch to his arm made him start violently. "Andir?"

"There are... many things here that appeal," the prince breathed, and leaned in to press his lips to Sheik's.

Sheik's eyes were wide as he managed to duck away. "...I see," he said shakily, and promptly vanished from sight as he disappeared in to the Shadow.

It was a startled, flustered Sheik that managed to return to Zelda's side. Raising her head from the book she had started on, she gave him a questioning look.

"Ah - Andir is not opposed to an alliance," he started, and his voice cracked a little.

With a sigh, she set the book aside. "Is that so?" she murmured, composure written over her face. "I expected as much, to be honest."

"He did spend rather a lot of time with you," Sheik admitted, glancing away.

And Zelda chuckled openly. "Oh, Sheik," she told him fondly, "No - he spent rather a lot of time with you."

A flush crossed his cheeks. The memory of the prince's lips on his rose in his mind suddenly, and he shook his head violently - he was betraying Link's memory like this, surely? This was Zelda's potential future husband - what was he thinking, doing this?

But even he had to admit that the prince was attractive.

"He - may have kissed me," he admitted softly.

Zelda clapped in delight. "Oh, good! He had been considering it for the past week or so." She knew? His surprise probably showed on his face, because she giggled. "Oh, Sheik. I may be the
one who ends up marrying - but I think we all know who he really wants," she chuckled. And then her expression became serious as she rose from her chair, reaching out to pull him in to an embrace.

"Consider it," she murmured, "Even if you do take it slow. It would not do to dwell."

He flinched. Speaking of the past was an unspoken taboo, one she only broke if she thought it to be entirely necessary. "Do - you think so?" he said uncertainly, and she nodded.

"I do." Linking her arm with his, she gave him a smile. "Now, then - I think we have a prince to talk to."

And, leading a still stunned Sheik out of the room, they departed - ready to make new plans for a future with three.
Sheik awakened with a start.

The surface beneath his cheek was coarse wood, his hands immobilised. When had it become so dark? He turned his head, and all he found was dimness - not even the most vague of shapes to interrupt it.

He tried to push himself up and found that he couldn't, unable to move from his position. Where was he? Something cold was forming in the pit of his stomach.

"Ah! Awake, are you?" called a jovial-sounding voice, and the response was immediate - panic, bright and cold, leaving him gasping and struggling and trying to get away, please let him get away...

Sheik awakened with a start.

His pulse was racing, heart beating so fast and so hard he could practically feel it against his ribs. His breathing was ragged, a sheen of sweat covering his skin - curled up in bed, he was shaking.

Another one, then.

It took him another moment or two to calm his breathing, to uncurl his fingers from where they had latched on to his sheets. Unsteadily crossing the floor to the table, he reached for the pitcher there, gulping down a mouthful of water.

Half past four, already. Sleep would not come easily again.

Quietly, he collected his uniform, then disappeared in to the Shadow and walked straight through the wall to the sitting room. It was empty, and he allowed himself back in to the world of light, blinking a little as colour flooded back in.

He'd take the opportunity of the early hour to bathe, at least, then start about on his duties - it was only an hour less sleep, he could cope.

Passing the mirror, he stared balefully at the stranger there, face drawn, shadows beneath his eyes, the faintest hint of stubble visible. And then he shook his head and drew himself a bath.

Zelda and Andir's first anniversary was approaching, wasn't it? That meant dealing more with security, with having to co-ordinate with the guards - he winced, scrubbing harder at his skin than was strictly necessary.

Was it possible to scrub scars away? He dearly wished he could.

His skin was pink by the time he emerged from the bath, drying himself and pulling his uniform
on. With a brief moment of concentration, the illusion swam in to place, hiding his scars, his blinded eye, the shadows beneath his eyes. In the mirror, he pulled back his hair (past his shoulders, by now) with a short scrap of green fabric, his fingers lingering on it for a moment. And then he sighed and left the room, stashing his sleeping pants away before doing his early-morning patrol of Zelda's chambers.

Nothing visible or invisible in the sitting room, nor in the sun room (now dark and silent, the moon already set and the sun yet to rise). Zelda's study yielded a sealed envelope marked with his name, hidden with illusion, that he tucked in to the Shadow, and a few unread letters and correspondence which he carefully examined for signs of poison before setting back, pulling a face at a report that requested at least two more council meetings a week.

Honestly, were they trying to run the young queen ragged?

And the questions had begun to be asked. She had been married for a year - so why was it, then, that she had not yet conceived an heir? Questions were beginning to ask, deeply personal ones asking of her fitness to become a mother.

Sheik shook his head. He knew perfectly well why the Queen had yet to conceive - it was difficult to do so when she had no interest in her husband's body, and when her husband spent most of his evenings in her protector's bed.

It had started quite soon after their marriage. Andir had approached him, and although his reaction was not entirely one to be proud of at the time, eventually, things had become easier. It had taken Zelda specifically asking him to take things slowly, murmured conversations that he refused to listen to - oh, he knew the content, and it was nothing he desired to hear again.

Even now, after a year of intimacy, the wrong touch could still send him in to a blind panic.

But this question... he knew they had, at least, been attempting to do so, for the good of Hyrule if nothing else - Andir pushing past his aversion to intimacy with women, Zelda pushing past her dislike of intimacy, period, and attempting to do what she had married Andir for.

It... was a work in progress, to put it in the kindest possible way, and Andir was always particularly attentive when he and Zelda were done with their latest token attempt.

Still. He did find it frustrating - on Zelda's behalf - to have to field questions about what did did in bed. Of course, the conception of an heir to the throne was not exactly a personal matter, but still...

With her chambers entirely gone over, he returned to the sitting room, nodding to the servants who had come in to clean and prepare for the morning. One nodded back, the other already wrist-deep in cleaning equipment.

Well, there was still some time before Zelda was due to wake. Mindful of the letter he carried, he started for the sun room, lighting a single candle as he settled on the chaise.

Closing his right eye, he peered at the now-visible letter, feeling the familiar tingle behind his left eye as the magic activated. It had been a few months since Zelda had learnt to render letters invisible, a useful way to pass on messages undetected.

He scanned it. Another intelligence mission for the evening, it seemed - Zelda had heard rumours of a possible outbreak of violence against the crown, and she had asked Sheik to go and investigate. A stash of rupees to be used as payment for anyone who could provide them with facts had been hidden away, the location marked on a crude map.
Sheik let out a sign of resignation, then recalled the simple fire spell that Impa had taught him when he had been young and burnt the letter away.

Now, he sat back, gazing out at the windows. Zelda's chambers faced west, so while the sunsets were spectacular, the sunrises were distinguishable only by the gradual increase in light.

Once half past six arrived, Sheik reached up to scrub at his eyes then rose to awaken Zelda and Andir. Silently, he padded, barefoot, to the door to her room, striking the soft morning bell to awaken her gently.

Almost like an echo, the morning bells rippled through the castle, nudging awake those who were not obliged to or unlucky enough to awaken at an obscenely early hour. Half an hour would be allowed before the servants' breakfasts were served, an hour before the nobility and Zelda were to eat, the start of a new day in Hyrule Castle.

Zelda, half curled in a ball on her side of the bed, stirred and let out a sleepy little mumble. "Is it morning already?" she yawned, and he nodded.

"It is, I'm afraid," he chuckled a little, forcing calm over himself, "Did you sleep well?"

"Mm... perfectly adequately." She peered up at him, noting the glamour already in place. "And you?"

"Perfectly adequately," he echoed blandly, smiling as a sleep-rumpled head of dark hair emerged from the blankets. "Good morning, Andir."

Andir yawned and swung his legs out of bed, leaning over to drop a kiss on Zelda's cheek before wandering over to leave Sheik another on the lips. "Morning," he mumbled - the king was certainly not a morning person, Sheik thought as Andir went to splash his face in the basin.

"You have correspondence awaiting," Sheik continued, turning to Zelda, "Although, thankfully, a light load today - there is a meeting with the merchants at ten, and the council meeting this afternoon."

Zelda nodded, running a hand through her rumpled hair before reaching for her crown. "I see," she murmured, "And the evening?"

In other words, had he received her instructions? He nodded briefly, barely perceptibly. "You will have time to be alone this evening, if you wish." Yes - he had received her instructions.

"Very good," she said placidly, rising from the bed. As if on cue, a maid entered, curtseying low.

"Your Majesty," she said humbly, "Your bath awaits."

With a nod of acknowledgment, Zelda followed the maid out of the room, and Sheik let out a sigh. Andir frowned, then approached, wrapping his arms around Sheik's middle (carefully - he had been struck once doing that, catching Sheik unawares) and dropping a kiss on his forehead. "Will you ever tell me what all this sneaking out it about?" he murmured - he had heard this exchange between Zelda and Sheik several times now, and each coincided with Sheik leaving for the evening and (for the king) a night off from intimacy.


"Well," he started awkwardly, "Enjoy yourself and be safe, whatever it is."
Sheik let out a sigh, then nodded. "Of course," he lied, "I will."

He was not enjoying this.

His informant was a brutish man, overly fond of ribald jokes and drinking enough to stun a Moblin. Sheik fought hard to keep his expression neutral, to keep the illusion in place - his skin paler, his eyes and hair brown, the very image of a nondescript Hylian man.

The information he had given Sheik was verging on useless. Just a few tidbits of new information had emerged through the garbage, and he was honestly starting to wonder if he had wasted his time coming here.

Still, he had learnt a few things, and so... "Thank you," he told the man with an almost timid smile, "I very much appreciate it. How can I repay you?"

The man hesitated. "What can you offer me?"

"Anything you like," Sheik offered, bracing himself for the inevitable. Why were all of his informants so uncreative as to always want one thing? It was almost tiresome - the same predictable demands.

Zelda, of course, would be horrified.

"Well..." the man said wonderingly, and then grinned. "Come with me. We can, ah, discuss payments."

With a sigh of resignation, Sheik got to his feet and followed him.

"...Also," the man said a few minutes later, giving Sheik a pat on the head as the Sheikah straightened up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "I hear that Mokar - that idiot over in Kakariko - has been spreading rumours about the queen. You may want to check that out."

"I shall," Sheik nodded, wincing at the taste it left in his mouth. "Thank you for your information."

The man smirked. "Thank you for your payment!"

Sheik made a non-committal sound, and left as fast as he could while still appearing nonchalant.

Information trading was definitely not his favourite game.

Sheik slumped against the side of the tub, ignoring the hot water inside in favour of staring at the wall, and sighed.

If there had been one dark spot to marr the announcement of Zelda's pregnancy, it was the information trading he had had to do afterwards. He ached everywhere, his heart still racing, his breathing still uneven - he had barely made it back with his composure intact before barricading himself in the bathroom to clean himself off.

Well. He had barricaded himself in the bathroom - he still hadn't cleaned himself off. Largely because he...

Once he had finished emptying his stomach, he sat back, reaching weakly for a goblet of water to
get the taste out of his mouth. Only then did he drop himself in to the water, knees drawn up to his chest as he let the water carry away the filth on and in him.

It was just sex. It was just the motion of his body, and never mind the strangers who'd loom over him, who'd curl their fingers in to his hair in an affection of parody. Why did it hurt so much, then?

It had been worse, this evening. The glamours he habitually used to disguise his identity only went as far as sight, not touch, and the fingers roaming over his stomach had traced the rigid lines of a scar hidden there.

Now, he curled his fingernails in to the flesh, a curl of red rising through the water. His breath hitched, and he bit down hard on the inside of his cheek - the physical pain helped, distracting him from the pain that took his heart like a clawed hand.

One nail traced a line down the scar - a diagonal slash that mirrored the one that crossed his blinded eye, slashed across the iris of the Eye of Truth. Unbidden, the words said to him as Ganondorf carved in to his flesh rose in his mind.

"It wasn't the enemy that slaughtered the Sheikah, you know - it was an order from your beloved Hylian Royal Family."

It wasn't true. It couldn't be.

Could it be?

His fingers curled further in to the scarred flesh. Oh, he hated it - a constant reminder that he had not even resisted as his enemy drove his blades in to his flesh.

A constant remember that he was to be despised.

He wanted it gone.

With an exhalation, he reached in to the Shadow and withdrew a knife.

There was no way to remove a scar, to replace it with healthy, clear skin. The scar tissue would never heal, and the image would never fade. Once someone was scarred, this deeply, this purposefully, it would remain.

Unless he blotted the image away, obliterated it with more scar tissue.

The first cut hurt, burnt his skin like fire as it opened up beneath his blade. Red bled out, the same red as his eyes, the eye before he had been blinded, swirling in the water like oil. The bath made it sting as redness escaped, and he pressed his fingers lightly against the wound.

Again. It erased more of the scar, destroyed the image as he split his skin. With a sudden exhalation, he lifted himself from the bath, perched on the rim to let the blood drain freely in to the water.

Again. This time, it obscured the line of the bloody tear.

Again. A slash across the three triangles, each standing for a piece of the Triforce.

Again, and again, and again, he carved in to himself methodically, eyes glazed and face emotionless. This was not harmful - this was simply ridding himself of something that vexed him, erasing it from view.
And if his hand grew shaky and sloppy, and the next cut bit deep in to his abdominal muscles, and the dark red water was taking a distinct chill around his feet, then that simply meant he was doing his job.

Finally, he deemed it to be enough. He could not heal himself, not yet - a potion now meant that it would heal without scarring, rather defeating the purpose. Sheik was shaking as he cupped water in his hands to wash the blood away, biting down on his tongue at the sudden fire in his flesh. He came close to slipping as he turned away, stumbling away from the bath to wrap a towel around his hips - even with his hand clamped over it, the wound still stained the white fabric an obscene red.

There was so much red.

Exhausted, he slumped down against the side of the bath, eyes closing. He had done what he had intended to do - the image of a blinded eye would be unrecognisable, blotted out by a mass of scar tissue.

He chuckled weakly, feeling better than he had in months, and let his head thump back against the tiles.

Sheik wasn't quite sure when consciousness faded around him - only that Zelda sounded frantic and that a bottle of blue potion was being forced against his lips. He swallowed reflexively then gagged, drawing away hastily enough to shake off his precarious sense of balance.

"Wha - what?" he slurred, Zelda's image before him unfocused.

"Sheik, you idiot!" she choked, hugging him fiercely then drawing back to slap him powerfully. He cringed, attempting to curl up on himself - when had his hand slipped from the wound?

But it was already healing, wasn't it? Raising his hand, he could feel dampness, the thick ridges of scar tissue, but no open wounds. Carefully, cautiously, he unfurled, peering down to catch glimpses of blue potion against his skin.

And scars - scars that completely obscured any hint of what might have once been left there.

He smiled, and Zelda let out a hiccuping sob. "Sheik, why?" she whispered, and only now did he spot Andir hovering behind her, worry written all over his face.

"I didn't like them," he said simply, reaching for the blade he had neglected to return to the Shadow before. Zelda's breath caught before it vanished.

"The scar...?" she whispered.

He slid his hand away, showing her the ugly mass of scar tissue. "Covered up."

"Sheik..." she whispered, pulling him, blood and all, in to her arms. And as she began to cry, it started to occur to him that, maybe, he had made a mistake.

Sheik's attempts at mutilation came hand in hand with another particular infliction.

Ever since those darker days, he had been... alright. Functioning. Certainly, he would flinch at loud noises, start away when grabbed. His nights would be haunted by nightmares, his sleep diminished. Single words or phrases could send him in to a dark place, and he would remain shaken for the rest of the day.
But that was middling compared to the crushing depression that hit him when he had least expected it.

When he finally retreated to bed that night, he was asleep within moments. But when he awoke in the small hours of the morning, it was to such a state of despair combined with apathy that he could barely breathe for it.

He hurt. Not just the tightness he could feel in his abdominal muscles when he tried to move - but everywhere, a profound ache that spread down his spine, down his limbs.

But what was the point of doing anything about it? He would endure the pain, because he could not find it in himself to leave the bed, to uncurl his body and stare at anything other than the wall.

When morning bells went at half past six, he continued to remain in bed. A few minutes later, alerted by his lack of ringing Zelda's morning bells, the door opened.

He continued gazing at the wall, expression dull, and did not move when a slim hand landed on his shoulder. "Sheik?" Zelda whispered, and he did not respond. "Sheik, I know you're awake, your eyes are opened. Are..." A pause - he could practically see her bite her lip. "Are you alright?"

With a soft sigh, he lifted one hand to cover hers. But he still did not turn around.

"It's happening to you again, isn't it?" she asked him miserably.

Just once, he nodded. He had felt this months before, this painful depression - it had been the anniversary of Link's awakening in the Temple of Time, and the memories, clearly, had been too much.

She sighed, then tugged him in to a sitting position. Passively, he let her manipulate him, slumping against her a little when she wrapped his arms around his middle.

"I'll help you - Andir and I," she whispered, brushing a feather-light kiss across his cheek. "I promise. You will not be alone."

A promise made in good faith, perhaps, but a promise hard to keep. Sheik did eventually rise for the day, but it was a silent, withdrawn Sheikah that followed Zelda about her day, going through the motions mechanically.

Two nights in to this charade of life, once Zelda was sleeping peacefully in her bed, he slipped out under the cover of the Shadow, settling himself on the castle's roof with his lyre in hand.

Five notes later, and he found himself at Lake Hylia.

Why was he doing this? Tucking the lyre away, he disappeared back in to the Shadow, the world immediately going dim and dark and cool. Instead of blue, star-freckled water lapping at the shore of the island, shapeless black gas swirled and eddied around it. He took a breath, and let himself sink through, heading unerringly for the source of shadow he could practically already see.

The Water Temple, now, was silent and still, its monsters quiet, its mechanisms frozen. Every door laid unlocked save for two - book-ending a room holding still, flat water and a single dead tree.

This deep in the Shadow already, it was no dark reflection waiting for him, but a young man, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, dressed in green. Oh, his expression was not one that he recognised on his original form - the Hero of Time never looked that apathetic, never raised a skeptical eyebrow as he approached.
"Link," Sheik breathed, and stepped close.

Hyrule could not have possibly survived without a Hero. And so a part of Link remained - a darker part, torn free when its originator had been torn from time, reborn in to the closest thing that could hold its form.

This was not the Dark Link that Sheik had once encountered, the mindless, possessive killer that nearly ended his life beneath the waters. This was a part of Link - a darker part, certainly, but still tinged with an undeniable goodness that not even Ganondorf's creation could corrupt.

"Sheik," he returned quietly, the only word that he had said. Raising a hand, he brushed it across Sheik's cheek - then leaned in for a kiss.

Sheik allowed it, his eyes drifting shut.

Link was gone, but this way, he would have some way to remember, some way to hold on. Without his Hero here for Dark Link to be driven to kill, it was almost... peaceful like this.

"Missed you," he whispered as they drew apart, reaching for his hand and leading him to the island. The darker Hero made an affirmative sound, but didn't speak - it was part of the arrangement he had had, the arrangement they had worked out months after Link's departure.

For Dark Link, lingering in the cold bright strange temple, he could feel the warmth of another's skin, find physical contact and physical intimacy.

For Sheik, just for a moment, he could have his Link back.

Neither made a noise as they settled themselves on the sand. Sheik, gazing at the shadow of his Hero, swallowed before reaching for sword belt and belt, gauntlets and boots. The Hero allowed himself to be undressed, pale skin revealed before Sheik's hungry eyes. On one shoulder, he bore the scar of a burn.

Where Sheik's coupling with Link had been warm, affectionate, full of soft gentle reassurances and comments, this was silent, a sadness pervasive over them both. Both knew that they were using the other, and both knew that they were being used - but for just this moment, it was alright. It was to be cherished.

The dark Hero closed his eyes, and Sheik allowed himself to drink in the sight of him - every feature, every mark, every scar that Link had possessed, now replicated before him. A soft, needy sound escaped his throat, the ragged whisper of, "Link..." startlingly loud in the silence of the Shadow realm. A wordless sound of pleasure came from above him, cut off when Sheik pressed his lips to the Hero's.

Later, lying apart but not far away, Sheik stared up at the false ceiling and bit down on his lip. "Do you - remember everything that he does?" he asked uncertainly, not entirely certain why he was breaking his own rule - that it was Link, it was always Link, that reality was the furthest thing from his mind.

The substitute gazed at him uncertainly, then, just once, nodded.

"Then... never mind." Sheik sat up, pulling his clothing back on, the question still so thick on his tongue that he could nearly taste it. It was only when he touched a finger to the cloth that held his hair in place that he sighed, the words spilling out. "Did he love me?" he whispered, and his voice cracked.
Silently, Link's double nodded again.

Sheik nodded in return, unsure whether his heart felt lighter for the knowledge or heavier for the loss. "Thank you," he said simply, and walked away, and did not come back again.
Apathy, to Sheik, was almost worse than depression - feeling nothing may not have hurt as much as feeling bad, but it made him feel like he was not truly alive.

His expression was dull as he stood behind Zelda, keeping his posture upright by sheer force of will. These town meetings were, according to her, essential to keep the population happy, but all he had ever learnt from it was that people were selfish and small-minded, demanding that seven years of war be healed in an instant.

It would be a long process. It would take effort, and yes, there would be hardship until things returned to the way they were in the past. Could they not see that?

He sighed faintly, shutting his right eye just long enough to give the room a scan with his other, checking for invisible threats. Nothing met his gaze, and he opened them again.

Perhaps the others thought that he was crazy, that he had some sort of tic, perhaps. He, Zelda, and Eldir were the only ones who knew the truth of his eye - both its usual state of blindness (hidden by virtue of the glamour) and its other abilities.

Still. It kept his queen safe.

When would this end? The bout of depression that had hit him shortly after the announcement of Zelda's pregnancy was long gone - but here was another, seven months later, that practically grounded him, made him view the world with dull, tired eyes.

He longed to sleep. Sleep, and not dream, and not wake up in a cold sweat after only a scant few hours.

Perhaps it would be better not to wake up at all.

The town meeting ended, and, silently, he ghosted behind Zelda and Andir. His responses to the king had become passive, lately - certainly, he enjoyed his company, but their intimacy was becoming tiresome. He found no pleasure in Andir's touch, found no desire to take an active role in the proceedings.

Zelda was, at least, a good judge of when he was simply too exhausted to function or care. She had glanced at Sheik's drawn face, then had set a hand on her belly. "I think I may go and rest," she murmured to him and to her husband, "Sheik, why don't have some time off?"

He nodded silently, and, when they returned to the Royal chambers, shuffled off to his room.

Off came the boots. The leather armour came next. And, without bothering to strip off the uniform he wore belief, he dropped himself on top of the bed and immediately drifted off to sleep.
“Blood Eye, you're a disgrace.”

"Come here, pet."

"What good are you, if not for this?"

"Are you going to cry and scream again?"

"When the Hero dies, pet... you're mine!"

Sheik awakened with a start.

It was always him, wasn't it? The one who haunted his dreams, the one who disallowed him to sleep peacefully.

Worse than Ganondorf, to his mind - the Captain did not let him rest easily.

What time was it? Nearly time to rise for the evening meal, and yet he remained in bed, eyes half closed as he stared listlessly at the wall. Why should he even bother? What joy would the evening bring?

He had his duties, but surely Zelda would understand?

You are being selfish, a voice that sounded remarkably like Impa's rebuked him, Get up and do what you pledged to do!

But he was so tired.

"And do you solemnly swear to pledge yourself to your Queen, to protect her and serve her in any way that is required?"

The pledge he had made nearly two years ago - he recalled it and flinched as if stung.

Viciously, he bit down on the inside of his cheek, letting out a little shuddering sigh as the pain helped clarify his thoughts. Get up, he demanded to himself, and, finally, begrudgingly, he did.

Now what?

He dressed silently, touched two fingers to the hair tie, and decided that was good enough, exiting in to Zelda's room. She was settled on the lounge, a book in hand, and glanced up as the door clicked shut behind him.

"Good evening," she smiled gently, patting the spot beside her. He moved over mechanically, settling in the spot indicated, and she immediately curled up close to him. "Did you get some sleep?"

He gave a one-armed shrug. "I suppose," he murmured, and she peered at him uncertainly.

"More bad dreams?" she whispered.

Nodding once, he stared hard at a particularly interesting patch of carpet. "Him again," he whispered, and suddenly he had a young queen hugging him tightly. "Oof - Zelda, be careful of your condition."

She nodded contritely, drawing back a little. "I worry about you sometimes," she admitted, gazing up at him. "You don't sleep. Those nightmares... those dark places..." Gently, she cupped a hand
against his cheek, and he looked away. "Is there anything I can do to help you, Sheik?"

He could not meet her gaze. Reluctantly, he gave another half-shrug.

"If there is," she told him seriously, "You know I would do it. In an instant."

"I know," he said softly, "You should not. You have a kingdom to worry about - I would just be an unnecessary distraction."

And, abruptly, he realised that he was. Zelda had a kingdom to rule, a family to raise. She had already done so much for him, and so much that she hadn't needed to - but he should have been the least of her priorities.

Throughout the castle, the dinner bells rippled, and Sheik stood before the protest that was on Zelda's lips could fall. "It's time for dinner," he said stiffly, his face immediately expressionless as a maid peered in to see if Zelda required assistance. "You are expected."

"I know," Zelda sighed, reaching for Sheik's hand to help herself to her feet. "But this is not the last of it - alright?"

He nodded once, then, silently, followed her to dinner. No - this definitely wasn't the last of it.

He was silent all through the meal, poking listlessly at his food. It was tasteless to him, bland and flavourless, although others around him seemed to have no such dissatisfaction with their meal. At any rate, his appetite was not quite there, and he sat silently, watched, and waited.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Zelda casting concerned looks in his direction. This was not the black mood that he was usually in - this was blank and grey and emotionless. Sheik's life had become a series of dreary routines, interspersed with bad dreams that left him wide-eyed and breathless and his heart threatening to leap through his chest, at flinching at loud noises and sudden touches, at the most innocuous of comments sending him back in to the depths of dark memories.

A servant's child eagerly telling her friend about her new pet kitten became the Captain, stroke his hair and murmuring about what a good pet he was being. The sight of a guard uniform had sent him near catatonic - even after Zelda had forced a change of uniform, citing the former guards of dishonouring their position, the very concept made him tremble. He would find himself reaching for something, then snap back upright when the vulnerability of keeping his back open struck him like a physical blow.

How could Zelda have a protector that could not protect himself? She deserved better - someone who did not flinch at shadows. Someone who had not been broken by the war and put back together with sloppy hands.

His continued service to her was an insult.

And yet a selfish part of him craved their closeness. She helped him, he knew that - if by remaining in her service he could remain close, then he would not actively push it away.

But she still deserved someone better than him.

He was quiet, that night, as he went about his duties. He would do his nightly sweep of the queen's chambers. He would need to pay a visit to the garrison to review the duty roster for the next week - it would not do for the queen's protector to be ignorant of who else was protecting her.

And then he could return to his room for another night of sleeplessness and nightmares for the
times he did actually manage to drift off.

Damn his life.

The sweep progressed without mess nor fuss, and while Zelda settled herself in the study to answer some correspondence and go over reports, Sheik started for the garrison, trying to ignore the prickling at the back of his neck. The garrison, for purposes of practicality, were located beneath the ground and near the dungeon cells, and all too frequently, it reminded him of another set of dungeon cells, another garrison filled with rowdy guards and soldiers.

Glamour firmly in place, Sheik firmly steeled himself, then pushed the door open. For a moment, the conversation dipped and then picked up again - almost imperceptible, had he not been anticipating it.

Well, he could ignore them for now. Head down, he started for the table where the duty roster was kept.

"D'you think he's fuckin' the queen?"

Sheik's hands tightened on the paper he held to copy the roster down.

"They spend all that time together. Didn't the princess use to have some old bitch? What happened to her? She had these tits that -"

He bit down on the inside of his cheek. Crudities aside, he really did not want to hear anything about Impa's breasts.

"Nah! Look at him. Bet he's suckin' the king's dick."

It was only speculation. The only ones who knew what the king did in bed were himself, Zelda, and Andir himself.

"I have it on good authority that he goes out to town sometimes to whore himself out."

The pencil nearly snapped in his hand.

The duty roster was only half copied down, but he had the next few days. Without another word, face drawn and pale, he marched out of the room.

But he was not alone.

The lower levels of the castle tended to be crowded at this time of the night, noise ringing down the corridors from the servant quarters. His entire being focused on getting away, Sheik was not aware of quiet footsteps following him until he was suddenly slammed against a wall.

Three things happened at once. The air was forced from his body. His face paled further, his eyes widening in shock. And, suddenly, he was no longer there, but in a cold stone dungeon, slammed against a table, his entire body going rigid.

"Good evening, Sheik," said the guard conversationally, "How are you tonight?"

He tried to respond, and found that he could not.

"I suppose," he continued, "You're wondering why I started this conversation."

Conversation? He had been slammed against a wall, held in place by a solid arm against his chest
and his own terror.

The guard chuckled. "Well, I'm sure you heard the fascinating rumours around," he remarked. "I'm also sure you know all too personally that they're true - I wonder if that's why the queen took so long to conceive?" He tsked. "It must be a terrible thing, to be so unappealing to one's husband that he would prefer to spend himself on his servant."

And then his mouth moved intimately close to Sheik's ear, his breath tickling his skin. "Of course, I do not fault his taste. Which is why I am making you the offer - come and warm my bed every night, and I'll keep your dirty little secret away from prying eyes."

Sheik's eyes widened. Suddenly, he could move again, shoving at the arm that held him in place. "You're mad! Are you honestly trying to blackmail the Queensguard?" he demanded frantically. The guard considered. "Yes," he mused, "I do believe I am." And with no further prompting, he forced his lips to Sheik's.

He could not have struggled - the urge to fight back rose screaming in his mind, but his limbs remained stubbornly still. Frozen in shock and sudden horror, Sheik did the only possible thing he could think of doing.

He bit down. Hard.

The blow that came then was hard enough to nearly knock him off his feet, only the arm pressing cruelly against his chest keeping him upright. The guard spat blood angrily, grabbing a handful of Sheik's hair with his free time and yanking his head back. "You little...!" he growled, then pressed himself hard against the Sheikah.

Feeling hardness press against his hip, Sheik shrunk back further. His movements were not his own. Fear was his overriding emotion. He could not have fought back now if he tried. All too easily, the scene would shift - from being pinned down by the guard in the corridor, to being pinned down by the Captain in the dungeons. Why did no one come? Had no one heard them?

"You let the king stick his dick in your mouth but not my tongue?" he demanded, then paused almost thoughtfully. An unexpected laugh bubbled forth - and, to Sheik's lasting shock, he reached out and unerringly traced the scar that crossed Sheik's lips.

The glamour had slipped? Wide-eyed, Sheik struggled to maintain it.

"Oh, don't worry," the guard told him, his tone almost friendly, like two old friends having a chat. "I was just remembering something - fucking your mouth when that scar was only a day old. Is it still red, or has it faded?"

When it was just a...

Sheik's muscles went slack, and the guard laughed, his hand making its way between their their bodies, dipping between his legs. "I have some rather fond memories of that," he mused, "Spending time with my friends, relieving my tension -" He squeezed, and although every instinct Sheik possessed screamed to flee, his body would not co-operate - "In your lovely body..."

And he kissed him again, this time biting down savagely before Sheik could bite him. "Shall I take you back down to the garrison? How about one more time, for old time's sake?"

Like hitting a trigger, with that, Sheik could move again. His needles, snatched out of the Shadow, lashed out across the guard's face, and when he stumbled back with a howl, the Sheikah
disappeared himself in to the reassuring darkness of the Shadow.

He ran.

He ran until he could distinguish the golden glow that marked Zelda's physical presence in the world of the Shadow. She was alone in her study, and he ran until he collapsed at her feet, re-emerging in to the real world with a choked, dry sob.

She started, immediately jumping to her feet. "Sheik!" Without noticing or caring the papers that she knocked to the thick carpet, Zelda rushed to his side, reaching for him gently. "What happened?"

He could not speak. Instead, he simply shook his head numbly, slumping against her side.

How did his memories still have such power over him? Why could he not forget?

"Sheik, it's okay," she whispered tenderly, cupping his face in her hands and dropping a kiss on his forehead. "Whatever happened, you're safe now. Do you hear me?"

Miserably, he nodded, letting out a shuddering exhale. Still, he could not quite shake the feeling of foreign lips against his, of intrusive memories of his body being used, of the single shocking fact that... "He knows."

Voice so broken it almost startled himself, he closed his eyes. "He knows. The guard. He was there, and he -"

Zelda sat back on her heels, looking solemn. "Sheik," she said gently, "I know this is hard for you. But please..." She bit down on her lip. "Please, we can sort this out, but I need to know what happened."

Sheik's head hung. "The guards were talking - about Andir and myself. One followed me out. He knows, and - he threatened to tell unless I..." His voice choked off. "He was there," he finally whispered, "Before. He was one of them."

"Before...?" Zelda questioned, then her eyes widened as she slapped her hands over her mouth. "We didn't get all of them?"

He shuddered. The day after Zelda had been crowned, the day after he had been sworn in as her protector, she had retrieved the traitors who had turned to Ganondorf during the war from their temporary prison. And they had all been executed.

Clearly, not all of them had been found.

"Tell me who he is," Zelda asked gently, "I will send out my most trusted men to find him. Then..." Now it was her turn to look stricken. "Then, in the morning, he will be dealt with."

Numbly, Sheik nodded, and, while he hid himself again, one of Zelda's most loyal guards was called over. Slumped against her desk, he listened to the brief, hurried conversation and slumped down again only when he had departed.

"Doran is a good man, isn't he?" he said, voice rasping. "He is a good protector to you."

"I suppose so," she murmured, her expression troubled as she helped him to his feet. But Sheik was thinking hard as Zelda lead him back to his own room, talking softly and reassuringly - perhaps Doran, the leader of the most elite of the guards, would be better suited to his position than he was.
She would not have to be alone.

It had all happened so fast.

Doran had returned two hours after he had departed, reporting that the guard was nowhere to be seen. Zelda had nodded then worriedly retreated to bed, leaving Sheik alone with his thoughts.

It had been a restless night. He had laid awake for hours, drifted off only to wake suddenly, sweating and his heart racing, from another dream. Eventually, sheer exhaustion would take him again, and the process would continue. By the time morning arrived, he was exhausted, shaky, the shadows under his eyes clearly visible.

His glamour barely held all through breakfast. He was distracted and exhausted when Zelda met with the nobility, servants milling around as she addressed them. The disappearance of the guard had him stressed, jumping at shadows more badly than usual.

Where was he?

"Oh mighty high families of Hyrule, I have some news for you!"

...There.

Sheik started, glancing around. The voice seemed to be coming from every direction at once, echoing in a way that indicated that magic was clearly involved. But where was he hiding? Even searching the invisible garnered no clues.

"You wonder why our young queen took so long to conceive a child, don't you?" the voice considered, softly simpering. "All those months - a year, even! Perhaps the queen was barren - I remember some of you personally suggesting it. But I..." There was an eruption of laughter. "But I know better."

A pregnant pause. Zelda turned to Doran and hissed, "Find him!" Sheik, for his part, was simply too rooted to the spot to move.

"Actually, at least half the fault lies with the husband," he continued. "Really, it was because he found the queen so physically unappealing that he simply had no desire to spill his seed in to her."

Zelda's face was growing hot, her hands balled in to fists. Andir, for his part, leaped to his feet. "Show yourself, traitor!" he demanded.

His only answer was mocking laughter. "Why? Do you not want me to tell the world that you were fucking the Sheikah instead?"

Every pair of eyes in the room turned on Sheik.

Sheik's eyes were glazed and unfocused, his face pale. Unlike Zelda, whose anger curled like a whip within her, shock rooted him to the spot, face blank and eyes wide as he stared at something only he could see.

Dark memories. Dark words.

"Liar!" Andir roared, but even he glanced back at Sheik, the faintest hint of panic on his face.

"It's true," the guard continued mildly. "A pity, isn't it? A pity that the king finds his queen so
unattractive that he'd choose a shell of a man instead. But then, Sheik, isn't that all you're good for?"

Sheik's eyes closed. Why had they not found him yet?

"You certainly gave no protest to being fucked by the Hero of Time. I don't remember any protests during the war when we brought you back to play," he continued conversationally, even as frantic whispering and murmuring broke out, "In all of those dark rooms with the rest of Ganondorf's men. You don't seem to mind spreading your legs for information." Now, Zelda looked stunned, and Sheik continued staring numbly off in to the distance, unable to do anything else. She had not known what he offered for information, had never even suspected it. "And now you're the king's whore?"

What else was he good for?

He had wanted to be with Link, more than anything, his cravings for the Hero's touch driving him mad. He hadn't fought back, not after they had beaten him in to unconsciousness and taken their enjoyment nonetheless. He had used his body for information.

And he really had taken the position of the king's concubine.

"Because, Sheik," the disembodied voice continued, "I may be going to hang - but I'm taking you and your little girl queen down with me."

And then the illusion broke, the guard strolling in casually through the door.

The reaction was immediate. He was virtually tackled, pinned to the floor and his hands bound. "You are under arrest for high treason," Doran growled, and the guard simply chuckled.

"Okay. It certainly beats serving a little girl who knows nothing of the world, huh?" He aimed a charming smile at Doran, one that disappeared as the soldier struck him hard across the face.

"I'm taking you down to the dungeons myself," he told the guard simply, hauling him to his feet and dragging him away.

An uneasy silence lingered.

"Dismissed," Zelda said softly, and the room could not have emptied fast enough. Sheik took one look at Zelda's stricken face, at Andir's stunned disbelief and anger, and vanished in to the Shadow.

What had he done?

He should have accepted. He should have allowed the guard to perform more indignities upon his body - better that than destroying Zelda's reputation. What would happen to the throne now? Nobles were notoriously power-hungry - did they have a weakness, now? One to exploit, one to rip the crown from Zelda's head?

This was his fault. His own stupid pride and refusal had caused this. If he had agreed... if he had only given in... if he had accepted that, yes, this was all he was good for...

None of this would have happened.

Sheik did not stop until he reached one of the towers, the one dotted with telescopes and abandoned during the day. Carefully, he slid over the side, perched on it and letting his legs dangle freely in to empty air.
He had come here before, had enjoyed the solitude. But this was not just solitude he craved - it was an end to pain, to suffering. He wanted to sleep and not to dream, to no longer have to relive his weaknesses night after night.

He wanted to sleep. And he did not want to wake up again.

Sheik's eyes were dry, his face almost calm as he slipped off, his booted feet half on the stone border beneath, half dangling over the precipice. All he would need to do would be to let go of the column he was clinging to, to take a step out in to the sky.

And then he would be free. He would no longer vex Zelda - in time, she would be relieved that she no longer had to play nursemaid to her former friend's diseased mind. She could find a new protector in Doran, find purpose in her country and her family.

She didn't need him.

Link was gone. Zelda was better off without him. Why did he put himself through this? Why did he let himself suffer when his passing would solve everything?

"You don't need me," he whispered, eyes closed as he put the thoughts he had kept to himself for two long years in to words. "I am a liability. If you mourn me, it will not be for long. I want you to be happy."

"I want you to be happy," returned a shaky voice, and it took him an instant before he realised it wasn't his own. Gentle, bare fingers free of their silk gloves slid over his own. "Sheik, you do not have to do this."

He exhaled. "Yes I do," he murmured, dry-eyed even through Zelda's sobs. "Zelda, don't cry. You don't need me. I destroy everything that I touch." And now, he turned his head, and the sight of her face crumpled in grief and terror made his resolve, for just a moment, waver.

"You need help," she told him miserably, "And hope. You need time and space to recover. Sheik, do you want to make me happy?"

Sheik nodded once.

Zelda let out a shuddering sob. "Then please return to me, and let me try and help you!" she pleaded, "You're my closest and dearest friend. Sheik, please, please don't do this - especially not if you think this will make me happy!"

He looked down again, at the mist that coated the castle grounds so extensively he could not see the bottom of the fall that would most assuredly kill him. And then he looked up at her, at his friend, his princess, his queen. At the girl who had told him, too solemn for ten years old, "If we're going to live side by side for seven years, then you can start by calling me Zelda."

"Zelda," he whispered brokenly, then, tentatively, reached for her hand.

He scrambled back over the barrier almost inelegantly, clinging to the stones as his head fell. For just a moment, he had witnessed freedom beneath.

But, he thought as Zelda clung to him, crying quietly but openly, apologies spilling from her lips, even though that had been robbed from him, he could not leave Zelda to mourn on her own.

"We will find a way," she whispered, and, just for a moment, he could fool himself in to believing her.
Sheik was silent as Zelda led him from the tower, clinging to his arm, murmuring quiet reassurances. They had been met at the foot of the stairs by Andir, his expression pinched and worried - silently, he reached for Sheik's other arm.

No servants interrupted them as the three moved quietly to Zelda's chambers. The sitting room was empty, and Sheik only lifted his head when Zelda and Andir led him to their room, to their bed.

"Rest," Zelda told him gently, gesturing to the bed. "We will stay with you."

"What about your duties?" he murmured, although it was a half-hearted protest at best. "The nobles, they -"

Zelda set her jaw. "They can cope without me. Right now, I am choosing to make you my highest priority."

He shook his head, finally conceding, at least, to stretch out on the bed. "I am not worth the bother."

"That is not your call to make," Zelda told him plainly, and lifted the crown from her head and slid on to the bed beside him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Sleep, alright? I will be right here. I promise."

On the other side of the bed, Andir climbed on as well, stretching out on his other side. "We both will," he told him gently, "You're not alone."

Not alone? He had felt it, terribly so, for too long a time to count.

And although he still did not believe them, he let out a sigh, his eyes half-closed. "I'm sorry," he murmured, voice almost soundless. "I know I've ruined things."

"You haven't," Zelda whispered, and her voice began to fade from his ears as overwhelming sleep began to take over. "Whatever happens, no matter how dark the world gets - Sheik, know that you are loved."

His eyes closed. This time, his sleep was dreamless, and he was all the more grateful for it.

Hours later, when he finally awakened, it was to find his face buried against Zelda's shoulder, soft fingers in his hair and Andir's comforting bulk behind him. For the first time in what felt like too long a time, he had awakened almost peacefully - the bad dreams and dark memories had been present, but muted, kept far away by warmth and security and a gentle touch.

For a long, lingering moment, he remained silent, cuddled up between Zelda and Andir. Why could...
...Because, he reminded himself, his duty would not allow him to. Like a dash of cold water to the face, his content mood disappeared - the events of the morning had swam back in to focus, and suddenly he recalled just how bad a situation he was in.

And now he felt sick. Zelda and Andir's reputations had been destroyed and he had been the one to do it. If only he had given in to the guard - if only he had let him take what he wanted from him.

No revenge would have been taken, and their lives would have progressed as usual. And he would have lost a little more of his integrity, a little more of his freedom and peace of mind...

But Zelda would still be fine.

What was he to do now? No matter how long he stayed in bed with Zelda and Andir, the world outside would continue to try to intrude, to ask questions, judging whether he could fulfill his duties, if he deserved to be around the queen. People would continue to throw dark looks at the royal pair, news of Andir's orientation would make it back to Tellura and he would be cast out from his family - even the unborn child he could feel resting in Zelda's body beside him would face the consequences of his actions.

"Zelda," he murmured, his eyes still closed.

"Mm?" She sounded sleepy, only half-focused.

He hesitated, the hardest words he would ever say stalling at his lips. "Given the circumstances," he said softly, "I believe I am unfit to protect you. If you would release me, then..." He swallowed hard. "Then... I would like to be released of my duty, and Commander Doran installed as Queensguard in my place."

For a long moment, she was silent, and he opened his eyes to find her gazing at him, expression stricken. "Are you sure?" she whispered dubiously, "Because if you believe if is my wish for you to leave, then -"

"It's not," he interrupted quietly. "Zelda, it's not. I am a liability to you - you know that. How can you have a protector who can't even protect himself?" A small, sad smile touched his scarred lips. "I will always remain your friend. But you deserve better - someone who does not need protecting themselves."

She didn't reply immediately. "What will you do?" she finally whispered, and he shrugged.

"I don't know."

Finally, she sat up with a wince, one hand on her belly. Sheik was upright in a second to help her up. "There is... a place I have started," she said quietly. "For those who were injured in the war. Not all injuries are physical ones, and..." Her unbound hair fell before her eyes as she shook her head. "It's in the mountains, in the new territory - the place is quiet, and beautiful, and I have only the best people looking after it."

He glanced away, unable to meet her eyes. "You want to send me away?" he whispered. Set aside like a child's broken toy...

But he was broken, wasn't he?

Zelda nodded silently. "Just for a little while. So you can rest, and recover - the people I have up
there are well-equipped to help those who were injured in the war."

"A hospital," he said quietly.

She nodded once.

Perhaps it would be nice. Perhaps he could rest, free of the guards, free of gossip and rumours and filthy looks in the corridors. There would be no reminders, there - nothing to forcibly drag him back to a place he did not want to be in any longer.

"I'll go," he whispered, and Zelda reached up to embrace him.

"I will visit you every single week," she promised solemnly, and leaned her forehead against his. "Alifha."

_Brother._ A brief smile crossed his lips. "Alifkhata," he murmured back - _sister._ "Thank you."

Perhaps this could be the start of something new - something that would help him find hope.

Their departure from the castle was without ceremony. Night was rapidly falling by the time they set out - Doran had been given a quick, private swearing-in ceremony, and Sheik tried not to feel like he had been cast out when he saw identical earrings hanging from his ears.

His own, the ones granted to him at Zelda's coronation two years earlier, were held safe in a silk pouch. Although he was no longer obligated to wear them, they were still his - mark of his service.

The rest of his belongings were bundled together - a few changes of clothing, the hunting knife his adoptive father had given him and his own Sheikah designed sword, a red pendant of an unknown metal, shaped like the Eye of Truth, and his flute and his lyre. The green tie still remained around his hair. Oh, the weapons would be confiscated at the hospital - but this, he understood, was for his own safety.

A reluctant measure, certainly. But an important one - it had been his own blades he had used to carve in to himself earlier.

Clad in his own boots and items of clothing more casual than he was strictly accustomed to, he was quiet, subdued as Doran helped Zelda in to the carriage, and them himself. They would be leaving from the back of the castle - the hospital, Zelda told him quietly as they started off, was two hour's journey away, past the fields that backed the old castle, up past the foothills, and in to the newly acquired Snowpeaks proper.

"Will you visit often?" he murmured, gazing at the rugs on the carriage's floor.

Zelda nodded, the movement distinguishable as a blonde blur in his peripheral vision. "As often as I can," she said reassuringly, "Once a week, at least. Well..." She sighed. "Until the Doctors say I am unfit to travel - but I will begin visiting again as soon as the little one is big enough!"

He lifted his gaze to her swollen belly, then nodded. "I expect you will be exceptionally busy when the baby comes," he murmured - and that was perfectly understandable. Zelda, naturally, should care more for her child than for him.

"I'll try and come," Andir said suddenly, "When Zelda can't. They can do without me for half a day or so."
He shook his head numbly. It was probably true - Andir, more than anyone, understood that his position was entirely political. And yet... "It would not too much to preserve your or Zelda's reputations," he pointed out.

"Hang our reputations!" the queen burst out angrily, and Sheik started a little at the sudden volume before sighing.

"And what about your child?" he said quietly, and Zelda stopped short, her hands rising to her belly. "Think of your little one. You must..." He exhaled again, his expression clear and resolute. "You must forget me. You must claim no knowledge of..." A gesture. "That."

"But I didn't know it all," she said softly, and he flinched. Well - now it would all come out. "The missions - Sheik, why?"

...The rug was awfully fascinating. "Often," he muttered, "They would agree more readily and give more information if I had more to offer than just money. You could use that knowledge to gain an edge."

"But at your expense," she whispered. "Sheik, it was never my intention to put you in harm's way!" She was kneading her hands together, fingers knotted and her face anxious.

He bit down on his lip, worrying the ridge of scar tissue there. "I did it for your sake," he said quietly. "But I never intended for you to find out. I knew you would... disapprove."

She let out a heavy sigh, unlocking her hands and reaching for one of his. "If I had known," she told him solemnly, "That it had been your choice and one you were happy with, I would not have condemned you. But... were you really happy doing this?"

He didn't answer. Somehow, he didn't think it was necessary.

As the carriage started to rise up through the mountains, he gazed out the window and sighed. Things had become tense - Zelda, beside him, still held on to his hand, but across from him, Andir couldn't quite meet his eye. Doran looked almost uncomfortable, a hand raised to his collar to fidget with the piece that sat over his throat. An unused piece of armour from when Sheik had been fitted for his uniform, it was unadorned, lacking both the Sheikah Eye of Truth and Doran's own family crest.

"I expect there will be activities up there," Zelda piped up optimistically, "I am certain they will have music, Sheik."

He made a non-committal sound, and she fell silent again, her frustration almost a tangible thing.

Sheik was almost relieved when they pulled up to the hospital. It was an old manor house, abandoned after its last set of occupants, now refurbished to help those injured in the war. As Sheik jumped down from the carriage, standing on his own two feet as he stared up at it dubiously, he suddenly felt like a fraud.

He was fine, his blindness aside. He had not lost a limb, nor had he been blinded fully. He had suffered no magical attack, and he could still walk under his own power. With his injuries so invisible, wouldn't he just be another attention-seeker drawing funds and attention from people who needed the help?

Silently, head bowed, he watched and waited as an older woman in sterile white walked over to them, a lantern in her hand - in the time the journey had taken, darkness had fallen entirely. "Your Majesty," she murmured, and curtseyed to Zelda and Andir before straightening up. "And you must
be Sheik. My name is Marell. I hope this place can become a sanctuary for you." She smiled gently, and he gave her the hint of a smile back, small and cautious and more for the sake of politeness than anything else.

Gesturing for them to follow, another staff member in white - did they all wear white here? - strode forward to collect Sheik's meagre belongings. They would be checked over, the blades confiscated, Zelda had explained on the way up - but perhaps that would help. He had relinquished his other knives, the throwing needles, the myriad other weapons he habitually carried.

Perhaps this way, at least, he would be free of the temptation again.

The air inside smelt of cut flowers and clean, fresh linen. It was a soothing smell, he had to admit, and the carpet underfoot was nearly as thick as the carpet in Zelda's chambers, and the paintings that covered the walls were pleasing to the eye, and the candles and lanterns were plentiful and the rooms bright...

But still, he felt as if he had exchanged one prison for another. While some degree of freedom would be allowed - the grounds were extensive, and with good behaviour, longer exhibitions could be arranged - he still had the sinking feeling that he was bound here, that he would not return to the castle any time soon.

His eyes closed. Perhaps, he told himself stubbornly, this would be a good thing - time and space to heal, for - perhaps - the conflict in the castle to be resolved.

He only wished he could believe it.

The room he was led to was up a flight of stairs, small and cozy and comfortable. A small fire was already burning in the fireplace - while it was still summer, the nights in the mountains could still carry a chill, but here, it was cozy.

The bed was, perhaps, a little smaller than his own in the castle, and the floor was not plush carpet but floorboards decorated with plentiful rugs. A small closet and set of drawers awaited his belongings, a nearby shelf holding a scant few books. Near the foot of the bed and near the windows, the white curtains already drawn, a small writing desk and chair sat waiting for him. Through a half-opened door, he caught a glimpse of tiles.

Well. It did feel somewhat like the castle. The window, at least, was a nice touch.

"I hope this suits," Marell said, setting the lantern down on the shelf. "I am sure you are tired - would you like something to eat before retiring for the night?"

Sheik shook his head once - the quick bite he had had before boarding the carriage still felt leaden in his stomach.

"Alright," she said placidly. "Then I will let you say your goodbyes. Sheik, you will find things to sleep in in the top drawer. If I may take my leave, Your Majesty?" She bowed low again.

"You may," Zelda told her, waiting for her to step outside until she moved to sit on the bed, patting the space next to her for Sheik. Andir and Doran lingered awkwardly at the door, exchanging a glance. When he finally sat, she reached for his hand again. "Sheik, will you be alright here?"

He shrugged apathetically. "I suppose we will have to see," he said quietly. The day had long since taken a surreal turn for him - had it really only been this morning that he had been exposed in such a manner, that he had attempted to end his life?
It felt like a lifetime ago.

She gazed at him for another moment, then reached out to pull him in to a hug, her head on his shoulders. After a startled spell, he closed his eyes, relaxing in to the embrace. "I will be up in a few days to see how you are settling in," she told him firmly, "You have my word."

Zelda stepped out to give Andir a moment with a promise to return, and the young king shifted awkwardly. "Sheik, I'm sorry things had to happen this way," he said softly, reaching up to cup Sheik's face with his hand. "But - thank you for being my friend. You've helped me in a way that you don't even realise."

Leaning forward, he pressed a small, chaste kiss against Sheik's lips. "You're welcome," he murmured, fidgeting with the hem of his clothing. "Take care of Zelda, alright?"

"You have my word," he said solemnly, and departed to let Zelda return for a last goodbye.

For what felt like a very long time, silence spun out between them.

"Sheik," she finally murmured, "I'm not sorry for making you come here, because I want you to get the help you need. I want you to be happy again." Her hands were, apparently, fascinating, because she stared down at them. "But I am sorry I never realised how bad it was. I'm sorry you had to suffer needlessly from my ignorance. I wanted to..."

She shook her head, visibly frustrated. "I wanted to believe that everything was alright - that we had won, and Link -" A barely distinguishable flinch from Sheik at the Hero's name - "Had regained the years he had lost, and..."

"I'm fine," he said automatically, then shook his head. "...Well. I'm not." And then he almost looked surprised at himself, at the self-admission. "But I hid it," he continued quietly. "From everyone - including myself. I did not want to admit that I could not handle this on my own."

Until, of course, it was much too late.

Zelda nodded slowly, then reached out to pull him in to a hug. "Then I will ensure that you get the help you need so that you can handle it," she vowed fiercely, and gave him a weak smile. "Or they will be hearing from me!"

The ghost of a smile crossed his face. "I do not doubt it."

It was already late, and Zelda was almost drowsy as Andir and Doran led her back to the carriage. And then he hurried to his bed, drawing aside the curtains to watch them go.

Catching a glimpse of the light through the window, Zelda glanced up. A smile crossed her face, and she raised a hand in a parting wave.

Sheik waved back, then set himself back down and watched as the little lights that marked the lanterns on the carriage faded in to the dark. The curtains were drawn shut, he changed in to the sleeping clothes that Marell had indicated, and he slipped in to bed.

But it would be a long time before he slept. For the first time in a very long time, he was totally alone.

"No, Shia, we do not pull hair."
Sheik chuckled and winced at roughly the same time, reaching up to detach a four-month-old infant's fingers from where it had caught his hair in a death grip. Zelda sighed, adjusting her grip on her son while she attempted to distract him from sending Sheik prematurely bald, hiding a smile on her face. "I am sorry," she told Sheik apologetically, bouncing the little boy on her knee. "It's quite alright," he told her with a pained smile, finally detaching the child and sitting back just out of reach. (Perhaps having learnt her lesson, Zelda's own hair was back in a tidy braid, the wispy curls that fell in front of her ears pinned back.) "He has... a very strong grip."

"Yes, he does," Zelda said resignedly. This, at least, looked like a battle she had fought many a time.

Smiling briefly, his expression fell solemn again as he focused on Zelda. "And all is well at the castle?" he inquired almost cautiously - the building had been haunting his dreams lately, forcing him to wander through endless corridors.

But it was probably better than some of the other dreams he could have been having, though - that, at least, was an improvement.

"Well enough," the young queen murmured, looking briefly discomforted. "The preparations for the end-of-year ball are going nicely. It has been very... quiet."

Well. 'Quiet' was probably better than 'utterly destabilised and full of controversy'. "Except around Shia, I suppose," he said, voice falsely bright.

She chuckled. "Except around Shia," she confirmed - four-month-old infants could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be called 'quiet'. Finally, though, she simply came out with it - the question had been on her lips for much of the visit, it seemed. "Sheik, will you be able to come to the ball?"

He fell silent, gazing out the window for a long moment. The sky was clear today, although the remnants of snow laid upon shadowed flanks. It was, at least, a more restful view than the first one he had been assigned to - gazing out at the castle, at the mirror-smooth lake.

After the Water Temple, Sheik had had little desire to see mirror-smooth lakes. He had requested a change in room on his very first morning.

"I don't know," he finally said softly, "I am not sure if I would be wel--" He cut himself off before the word 'welcome' could come out, awkwardly finishing with, "...Well enough. And..."

"What is it?" Zelda frowned.

An exhalation. Then, in a rush, he said, "I found something. They let me in to the mountains sometimes - and can you leave Shia with Andir for an hour or so?"

Zelda frowned thoughtfully, glancing down at the now sleepy child. "I did feed him just before we arrived," she said dubiously, "I suppose so."

After a brief detour to visit Marell and be signed out, Sheik reached for Zelda's hand, squeezing it gently and reassuringly as they started out the door. Two pairs of boots crunched against the snow as they walked, Sheik silent and contemplative.

He had only found it two weeks before, but already, it plagued his mind. During Zelda's last visit, he had thought of saying practically nothing else, but now the time actually had come, and he had no idea how to let her know of his intentions.
It would be running away again - not death, not this time, but just as permanent. And like death, there would be no coming back.

"I found it a few weeks ago," he murmured as they began to approach. "By accident, really - I rubbed my eye and it popped in to view." Closing his right eye, he pointed.

"What is it?" Zelda sounded fascinated.

In lieu of an immediate answer, he simply led her forward - up to the grey rock wall. Zelda flinched back as they approached seemingly solid granite, then, seeing Sheik already part of the way through, followed him in.

It was a cave - but not merely a simple, natural phenomenon. This type of cave was one they both knew intimately well, one that they had called home for seven years - a Boundary between worlds, an escape from Hyrule in to the unknown.

"A Boundary," she whispered, and he nodded once.

"Would you think less of me," he said softly, "If I told you I was considering going through it?"

Her eyes widened. "But you know the consequences of that!" she exclaimed, sounding dismayed. "Sheik, these can sometimes be one way only, you have know way of knowing if -" And here, she stopped, her voice falling to a whisper. "If you ever came back again. That was what you were intending, wasn't it?"

Sheik stared hard at the wall. "I do not think I will ever get better so long as I'm here," he told her sadly. "Hyrule has too many memories. I cannot look at the castle without remembering what happened when another castle stood in its place. I can't visit the lake or Kakariko Village without remembering what took place there. So long as I am in its boundaries, it will haunt me."

"What if you leave, though," she said pleadingly, "And you find that you're still not happy? How could you ever come back? Here, at least I am here to be with you!"

And he turned, setting his hands on her shoulders. "You have a kingdom to rule," he whispered. "You have a son to care for. Zelda, I love you. You are my closest friend. But I have to take the chance."

She sniffled once, reaching up to wipe at her eyes with a gloved hand, and nodded. "Then... when will you leave?" Her voice sounded like a child's - timid and unsure.

"Next week?" he suggested tiredly. "I want to set things in order, first. If anyone asks, too. I want you to tell them something much like the truth. Tell them that I ended my life here - it may as well be true."

"Sheik," she whispered, and buried her face against his shoulder. "If it makes you happy, I'll let you go. But I will miss you until the end of my days."

A sad smile crossed his face. "And I'll miss you. A lot. If it wasn't for you, I would not be alive today - I could not have taken this chance."

A quiet 'heh' sounded from the vicinity of his shoulder, and Zelda drew back, her eyes red-rimmed. "I'll send you off with belongings and money," she promised, and reached for his hand. "But we can do that later, alright? For now, let's just make the most of what time is left."

He nodded, and followed her out from the Boundary. Freedom was so close he could taste it - but
for now, for her sake, he'd wait.
Sheik had not worn his uniform for some time, but now, he carried it with him - bundled in the pack that Zelda had given to him, several sets of travelling clothing and a few favourite books adding to it as well. He had been given his blades back (and had sworn a solemn promise to Zelda to only use them for their intended purpose), hidden away in the Shadow along with his lyre.

A sturdy cloak over his shoulders, the collar high enough to draw over his face, a piece of added security. A blanket had been rolled up and used to fill the rest of the pack. A wallet full of rupees and a few pieces of gold - who knew what this new land would hold? - sat at his hip, and his hair was tied back with the green scrap of fabric.

At the entrance to the Boundary, he lingered, Zelda and Andir at his side to see him off.

"Be safe," Andir murmured, shifting little Shia in to one arm and reaching forward to squeeze his hand. "Be happy." He set a light kiss on Sheik's lips, then drew back, his expression pinched and drawn.

And now it was Zelda's turn. For the first time since he had first found the Boundary, Sheik wavered - indescribable sadness was written on her face, nine and a half years of friendship, of siblings unrelated by blood, coming to an end now.

And yet he could not possibly stay. He couldn't. The world had changed around him, and he had remained caught in the past - he had fought to keep Hyrule safe, but it was not being kept for him.

"I love you," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead and the little Sheikah flute that he had first learnt songs of power on in to her hands. "Never forget that. You are the reason I have this opportunity to start my life over again."

"Then make the most of it," she whispered, her hands closing around it - a last remnant from a woman who had been like a mother to her, as well. "Be happy, Sheik, and live a wonderful life."

The ghost of a smile crossed his face. "I will." At least, he hoped he would. "Thank you, Zelda."

And, pulling her in to one last hug, he took a steeling breath then turned and walked away.

Unlike the Boundary he had spent his adolescence in, this one lacked the stark black and white. Instead, its walls were polished and crystalline, sending glinting reflections sparkling over the walls and leaving faint moving spots as he lifted the lantern aloft.

Five minutes in to walking, the lantern became unnecessary - the crystals in the walls seemed to radiate a light all on their own, casting his face in a faint pink glow. Roses? The colour seemed curiously reminiscent of the roses that would often be delivered to Zelda's chambers when visited by nobles and dignitaries.

Pale pink for romance, wasn't it? He knew it was no romance between her and Andir - but still, he hoped they would be happy together. Even in friendship, they could be great together.

The Boundary was moving deeper. Already, he could pick up on some of the distortions that these sort of environments produced - when he glanced back to judge his distance, he found the path stretching away in to the distance, certainly longer than anything he recalled walking.

And when he looked ahead, things that had seemed to be a long trek away were merely a brief
stroll.

Was the Boundary urging him on, then? He continued undeterred - perhaps it realised, too, that he needed this, needed this new beginning.

Hours after he began walking, he was still within its walls, and he settled down to have a brief lunch of bread and cheese. A strange calm had emerged by now - this was the right thing to do, the unknown before him and bad memories of the past behind him. He could hardly turn back - that would mean admitting failure, admitting that the future frightened him more than the past.

And he was not afraid.

With a goal in mind, the apathy that had gripped him for the past two and a half years was able to lift somewhat. He had something to work towards now - the discovery of a new place, a potential home. Perhaps he would find someone else that he would love as deeply as he loved Link, to find happiness and fulfillment in someone else's arms.

Or perhaps he would find friendship, friendship that perhaps did not surpass but at least equaled the one he shared with Zelda. A confidant, a partner in crime, perhaps - he remembered a Boundary somewhat like this one, of a small princess giggling as the two of them set up a prank to help lighten up their older protector and guardian.

He almost chuckled. They had been fond memories, ones he could look back at and use to heal the sting of that which would come later.

Still - time was passing even as he sat and ate and waited. Eventually, he rose to his feet again, forever walking onwards.

Eventually, he found what he was seeking - the end of the line. A yawning chasm gaped before him, and he hesitated briefly, settling on the edge and peering down.

He knew from their earlier adventures that Boundaries required a leap of faith. Perhaps, then, this would be his.

At the bottom, he would find either a new life, or an end to his own. Either way, he would no longer be a part of life in Hyrule. No one would ever learn of his fate, of what had become of the sad strange Sheikah that had haunted the palace walls.

Serenely, he closed his eyes. And he pushed off the edge, his fate unknown - but whatever it was, he would meet it.

Water, as it turned out. He plunged feet first in to water so clear and clean it almost glowed blue, emerging with a startled gasp. This was not how he had planned to find a new type of happiness, and he dragged himself from the pond shivering, coughing.

Water! Why did it have to be that, of all things? All too easily, he could imagine hands pushing him beneath the surface, and he shuddered, dragging him away from the shore and collapsing in a heap as soon as his feet were free.

And suddenly, he was dry again, the sudden plunge fading away as if it had never happened.

Sheik glanced back, and found no pond to break his fall. Only mosses and a few hardy ferns, stretching towards the gaps in the ceiling to what little light they could garner, broke the starkness of clear clean bare stone.
He stood, dusted himself off, and began to walk again.

The Boundary was fast becoming a cave, now. The walls were ordinary limestone, a few stalagmites and stalactites clinging tenaciously to the ceilings and floors. Somewhere nearby, he could hear dripping water, a faint splash - even without the mysterious pond, there was still water to be found.

At one pool, he stopped, taking a mouthful of it. It soothed his parched throat, and he stood with clearer eyes.

Eventually, he found the end of it - a gap that emerged out in to the mountains. And here, too, was more water - rain, falling swiftly and steadily in a downpour that seemed almost like a physical, solid wall. Thunder rumbled from somewhere in the distance, and then again, further away.

Had he missed a storm? Stealing out of the cave, he peered up, then nodded.

This was not Hyrule, nor Toaru, nor any of the lands he had travelled to when he had left home for the first time. (Second, a little voice reminded him - Hyrule was his home.)

And even the rain was beautiful.

Ducking back in to the cave to check through his bag of belongings, he shouldered it again, drawing the hood of the cloak over his head. Then, protected from the rain somewhat, he exhaled and took his first proper step out in to a new world.

Immediately, the rain began to soak in to him. His feet squelched as he found the path down the mountain, glancing back to find that the entrance had obscured itself against the rock face again, and the pounding of water on his hood was definitely obscuring his hearing.

It was, perhaps, a little beautiful.

The mist obscured the land, now, but bit by bit, it was beginning to be revealed as he walked. He could see the foothills by now, mist drifting amidst them like a cloud brought down to the land, and the faintest hint of trees could scarcely be distinguished.

But there were definitely trees he could see.

Beneath their cover, after another hour of walking and careful climbing, he found water dripping on his upturned face, a faint smile crossing his lips. Here, he did not bother with the glamour - there were none around to see him, to remark about the scars or his strange whitened eye.

It was just him and the trees, right now.

Link would have liked this.

He pressed on. By now, the mist was thinning, but the mud was beginning to become a problem - more than once, his feet had begun to slide on the hill, and it had only taken Sheikah agility to stop him from an undignified fall and a rather unappealing coating of mud. When he emerged out in to the mountain plains, he paused, collecting his bearings.

Directly ahead, he could see the ocean - here, a grey the colour of slate and topped with white. Between it and the mountains was a vast plain, fringed and dotted here and there with stands of trees. To his left, a rather taller mountain stood, watching over a line of mountains.

A brief smile crossed his face at the sight. If it were not for relatively minor differences in the lay
of the land, trees where there should have been plains, lakes where there should have been trees, it seemed to be almost like Toaru.

Now, too, he could make out towns, linked up by roads both muddy and paved. The nearest was perhaps two hour's walk - close enough to reach by nightfall, and even less to reach the path there.

Well - he would simply start off in that direction. He had still not seen any sign of life, other than the occasional peep from a bird, the rustle of something in the grass that he could not make out.

By the time he reached the town, Sheik was soaked and the novelty had definitely worn out. Tiredly, he reached up to scrub at his face, taking a steadying breath before drawing the glamour back over his skin.

There - he was presentable again. Straightening his cloak, he drew back his shoulders and moved to the nearest inn.

Unlike the quiet, broken only by the wind, distant thunder, and the sound of the rain, the inn was bustling with activity and noise, cheerful conversation as people took shelter from the rain outside. And, quite unlike the garrison, there was no pointed pause as he entered, no quiet sniggers and false attempts at being subtle during gossip.

They seemed Hylian, at least - certainly, the ears were long and tapered, shaped near enough to his own. And there were also others with his hair and skin colour - eye colour, perhaps not, but he wouldn't stand out too much.

The innkeeper, glancing up as he approached, gave the Sheikah a welcoming nod. "Good afternoon," she said with a smile, "Welcome to the Wayside Inn. Are you new in these parts?"

"New to this land," Sheik said neutrally - he would, he realised, have to think fast in order to prevent awkward questions. "I have been exploring - I recently came over the mountains."

The innkeeper whistled, impressed. "Not bad," she told him, an appraising note in her voice. "They're pretty rough territory - let me book you in, and I can give you a run-down on Mecestia, alright?"

The town or the land? He wasn't precisely sure, but nodded in gratitude nonetheless. "That would be greatly appreciated, thank you." Pausing for a moment, he asked almost sheepishly, "Er, do you take rupees here?"

"Rupees?" the innkeeper frowned, making a thoughtful sound before nodding. "We certainly can. There does tend to be a bit of passage between here and Holodrum, and that's what they use there."

Holodrum? The name was definitely foreign to him, although perhaps ringing the faintest of bells. "Thank you. Er, is there a way where I may earn some extra money for myself?" he asked carefully. "I am strong enough for menial labour..." If nothing else, near-obsessive working out to remain strong enough to protect Zelda was paying off.

Chuckling, the innkeeper nodded. "How are you in the kitchen? We could use an extra hand on busy nights," she said, giving him a careful once-over. "Just for preparing the ingredients and cleaning up, really. Have you ever gutted a fish?"

"Ah -"

She laughed outright at what he was sure was a rather taken-aback expression. "I'll put you to chopping vegetables," she smiled, reaching for a key. "Thirty rupees a night, and you can either
work to pay for it, or you can pay up front and I'll pay you back. What's your choice?"

"The latter, for now," he said, sliding across one hundred and fifty rupees - enough, at least, to orient himself. He had enough from Zelda, at least, to support himself for a decent amount of time, both in food and lodging, but local currency would be more of a help than barely accepted rupees.

"Right!" she grinned, taking the rupees and jotting down the amount he had paid, a number, and - "Ah, my apologies! In all this talk about business, I forgot to ask - what's your name?"

Oh - he had rather forgotten, hadn't he? "Sheik," he told her, and the woman carefully wrote down, Sheik in the note pad.

He resisted the urge to correct her. That, at least, would probably be counter-productive, given that he was attempting to seek employment.

Taking a key from a box beneath the desk, she stepped out from around it, giving Sheik a friendly nod. "Right - your room is this way."

This was feeling disturbingly reminiscent of the hospital, he thought suddenly. The same willingness to help, the same friendly older woman showing him his new place. She even looked somewhat like Marell. "You don't have a sister, do you?" he asked curiously as he followed her up the stairs.

"Hm? Nope - just four brothers!"

Just a coincidence, he supposed, chuckling a little to himself as he made his way up to the room. Once more, he had exchanged something rather pleasant for something rather more spartan - the same motley collection of furniture was in the room, but the only rug was thin, and the bed not nearly as soft as the one that he had had in the mountains.

Still, it was a room free of reminders, now. Taking the key from the innkeeper, he gave her a nod of acknowledgment as she started back down the stairs, setting his pack down and letting the glamour slip away.

Well - first things first, he would unpack.

It took him less than two minutes to set the clothes in the drawers, the books on the shelf, his wallet hidden under a few items of clothing, and his cloak hanging on the hook on the door. The lyre he withdrew from the Shadow, settling on the bed with it in his arms.

He had not been inspired to play music for quite some time, but now... now, perhaps he could make it sing once more. Closing his eyes, he plucked a few notes.

Well. It was a start, at least. With a sigh, he returned it, one treasure that he would not be displaying openly.

And, come to think of it... he paused, then slid the pendant bearing the Eye of Truth out of his tunic. For a moment, he gazed at it, the red eye innocuous in his palm - and then it, too, joined the lyre and his blades in the Shadow.

This land was still an unknown quantity, and the Sheikah received enough suspicious looks in Hyrule. If they were disliked there, where they were largely known, how would they be received here? With superstition, perhaps? Hostility? He was glad he had chosen not to wear the Eye on his clothing.
Pendant hidden, his formal uniform joined them as well, the Shadows hiding anything that would mark him as something out of the ordinary. He would wear no mark of his people - either way, it would hardly be appropriate for someone who had broken his oath to his queen to still bear their emblem. With Impa gone, and with his own presence from Hyrule ended, it would be best to end things there.

The last of the Sheikah had finally disappeared from beneath the Hyrulean sky.

Exhaling heavily, he laid himself back on the bed. The thought was... troubling, somewhat, as if he had betrayed his heritage by turning his back on his queen and his duties and his people.

But no - they had been only lingering fragments for too long a time. Wouldn't it be best to let go of the Sheikah, and to let go of Sheik and everything that that entailed with it?

Sheik's eyes closed as he rolled over in bed, drawing the blankets up. Perhaps, tonight, he would dream and be free of the nightmares, free of his old life, free of being Sheik, Survivor of the Sheikah.

"Hey, Sheik! Asleep at the cutting board?"

Sheik started violently, the carrot he had been staring at blankly dropping from his hand. What had he been doing...? Right. Chopping vegetables for the stew.

"Sorry, Cora," he murmured sheepishly to the innkeeper, picking up the carrot and his knife again. "I think I need an early night tonight."

She gave him a critical look, then nodded. "Probably for the best. You've been tired a lot recently, haven't you?"

He nodded wordlessly, bending his head over the cutting board and focusing on slicing the carrot into thin slices. His mood had been a little improved, at least. He had not yet suffered another crippling episode of darkness and apathy and exhaustion. But still, he jumped at sudden noises, sudden touches. The wrong words still triggered memories. His nights were still sleepless, the bad dreams muted but certainly not absent.

What, exactly, had changed?

He had exchanged one dreary life for another. Sheik was silent as he prepared the vegetables, and once his duties in the kitchen had come to an end, he leaned against the door, closed his eyes, and sighed.

Cora stared at him curiously - he could feel her watching from across the floor. "I'm sorry," he murmured, eyes still shut, "I have not been sleeping well lately."

"So I can see," she murmured, stepping closer - he could tell from the sound of her booted footsteps against the flagged floor. "Sheik, may I have a word?"

Opening his eyes suddenly, he nodded, following her quietly out the door and in to her private office. And there he lingered, gaze not quite focused on anything, but rather staring off in to the middle distance. "I'm sorry I have been distracted as of late."

Cora let out a heavy sigh. "You have been rather distracted lately," she agreed quietly, "But I think it's a little more than that. Why do you hide your scars?"
Suddenly, his attention snapped to the fore, wide-eyed and raising a hand to cover his left eye. 
"...What?"

She smiled a little sadly. "Your concentration slips sometimes," the innkeeper explained softly, 
"And so does your illusion. It's never really for more than a minute or so, but..." With a shrug, she 
reached for a ledger, fiddling with it as she spoke. "It's enough."

Gazing at the floor, still holding the glamour up stubbornly, he gave a helpless shrug. "I was 
weak," he answered softly, "They shame me."

"I think you're a little too willing to shame yourself," she suggested instead, her lips pursed. "I have 
scars. Kibar the chef has scars. Why are yours even more shameful than anyone else's?"

"Because it was during a war," Sheik said, and suddenly, the words would not stop. "I was 
captured due to my own carelessness and complacency. I fought back at first, but eventually I just -
stopped. And I didn't even try to fight back when these injuries were inflicted upon me!"

His voice had raised. Eyes closing again, he fought down the bile that had threatened to rise, to 
calm the frantic racing of his heart.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Cora said evenly, "But you're not the first one to be hurt in a war. And if 
you came here to try and find a way to escape your past..." She shrugged. "Well, you carry it with 
you, don't you? Can you let it go yourself?"

He was silent for a long spell. "I don't know," he finally admitted softly. "My past has attempted to 
keep me from a future for two and a half years now."

Cora nodded, crossing the floor and reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. "I suggest you try and 
find a way to make peace with it," she told him softly. "Otherwise, you won't have a future."

Miserably, he nodded, and took his leave.

It had taken several hours of sitting up on the roof before he had come to a sort of solution. The air 
was damp, the promise of rain on the wind - Mecestia, he had learnt, was perhaps overly fond of 
fog and mist and rain.

He wanted to see more. At the inn, he had found a way to pause his life, to put it on hold while he 
deliberated on what to do next. And this was not helping - indeed, it was actively harming any 
chance he had at being happy.

While at the inn, he would remain as he was. Already, he felt the urge to start moving again, to 
walk and find what the next road would bring. Perhaps he would find an answer there - he would 
not find an answer lingering in a kitchen, slicing carrots and cabbage for the evening stew.

When he returned to his room, he found that every item he packed in to his bag made his heart feel 
lighter. He could not settle here - he was searching for something, and that something had not yet 
shown itself.

What it was, he could not say.

His bags packed, his clothes for the next morning - it was nearing evening, now, and he wanted 
just one more night in a place that had been some comfort for him - laid out, he exhaled and started 
out the door.
Tomorrow, the road would take him to unknown parts, to help him find something he wasn’t entirely sure existed. But as for tonight, there were carrots to chop.
When Sheik had been twelve, he had sat by the sea and read a letter that turned his world upside down.

Nine and a half years later, he sat by the sea and stared out at the waves, hearing the pound and boom as they crashed down on the shore and against the cliffs that lined them, and wondered if he had made a mistake.

It had been a long time since he had been the child staring incredulously at a letter from a virtual legend. He had crossed the continent, spent seven years hiding and growing and learning, practically every moment spent in preparation for his task.

To guide the Hero of Time. It had taken only a scant handful of months to fulfill his duty - and the end result had been a lover gained and a lover lost again, scars, blindness, marked irreversibly and his mind shattered.

He had spent two and a half years in limbo, going through the motions, victim to the nightmares and memories every night. But now...

Now, the sea could wash those memories clean.

Sheik enjoyed the sea. While clear, flat, calm water now had the power to terrify, the power and violence in the waves were a violence he could understand, a power he accepted he could not resist against and thus felt no shame in acknowledging that it was the superior of the two.

How had he ever managed to return to the Water Temple? He had dreamt about it before, that place - of the clear surface of the water reflecting not growth, but suffocation; of his throat tight and his lungs bursting as he struggled against dark fingers.

He had returned, and found no ill memories there - nothing save for a shadow and a memory of someone he loved. But away from whatever the dark side of the Hero had become, slowly but surely, the dreams were beginning to return.

Eyes open, mouth closed, struggling to breath. The surface had been so clear and calm it had almost mocked and insulted him - the ocean was violent, but so to was it alive, with passion.

The sea would not allow itself to be a victim.

Then could he do the same? Would he allow himself to be powerfully alive, violently passionate? He would give anything to feel something other than despair, or pessimism, or apathy, or fear. The last time he had been happy, truly happy, had been lying in Link's arms, warm with the afterglow, the Shadow Temple still an abstract thought they they could deal with when they came to it.

And he missed Link. Three Goddesses, he missed Link - the way his blue eyes had lit up when he approached to teach him a song, the easy companionship as Link healed and strengthened himself.
after his injuries in the Fire Temple, picnics in the grass and a warm body against his, his breathing soft and even and peaceful.

It had not all been positive. He knew that even now, the little part of his mind that refused to let him see the positive not allowing itself to be silenced even now.

Link had thought that he had went back on his word. Sheik had sworn that he would be there after the Temple - when he hadn't, Link had suspected him of lying. And that could not have been further from the truth - was he being tortured when Link emerged from the Shadow Temple, fighting down his screams as he clamped his mouth shut to prevent Link's location from spilling forth? Or perhaps it had been late at night, and the guards had their hands on him already. Maybe he had been forgotten in his cell, gazing blankly at the ceiling and wondering when Link would come to find him.

He hadn't known. But neither had he looked. And Sheik had found himself relieved when Zelda had sent him home.

But now... now, although that judgment was still for the best, he resented it. Link had had a second chance - a chance to live a peaceful, normal life, free of the scars of war.

What would he be doing now? Perhaps, seven years and some after returning to his youth, he had settled down. Married, perhaps. To Malon, maybe - the ranch girl always had had a soft spot for him.

He had probably forgotten Sheik already. What was a handful of months when he had a lifetime stretching ahead of him? It was selfish to believe that Link was as miserable as he was, that he would lie awake at night, missing Sheik like Sheik missed him.

Where ever he was, Sheik hoped he was happy. Mixed feelings on Link's return to his own time notwithstanding, he did love Link. And he wanted the ones he loved to find happiness.

Zelda would be able to move on, now. She could rule Hyrule knowing that he had found his own way - for better or for worse, whatever came next was action and not a reaction, a proactive move and not a reactive one.

And Link would be able to regain the years he had lost. He remembered a conversation, long ago in the loft of Impa's house - "I've lost seven years of my life. And now I have to be a Hero that will save Hyrule..." he had said.

Now, he had those years back, a chance to forge his own path instead of being forced along one by destiny. Not a Kokiri any more, no - those days were behind him.

A future was ahead of him. It was bright, and laden with promise, and it was Link's for the taking.

Perhaps he could have a future as well - one that he forged on his own, finding his own path.

And perhaps he could shape one himself. He would find a path, or form one from his own wandering feet, and it would take him to places he could not predict.

They would find their own way apart from each other, but they would walk together.

Gazing out at the waves, a genuine smile crossed Sheik's face. Somehow, the idea was a comforting one to him - of himself and his Hero, forging their own paths, following their own tracks, side by side with only time standing between them.
When he stood to make his way along the beach, the crash of waves sending up a sea spray that tingled on his skin and deposited droplets in his hair that shone like gems, he imagined that the set of footprints he left along the sand was echoed by another.

Six weeks in to his stay in Mecestia, and Sheik had found himself in an odd place.

Oh, the apathy had returned, that smothering sensation of feeling nothing. But while it did mute the highs, so too did it mute the lows, leaving him feeling comfortable and calm.

Was he going through the motions again? Oh, quite possibly. He found an existence of sorts travelling from town to town, doing bits and pieces of menial work in exchange for a few bits of cash, enough for food, staples that were not fish or rabbits or wild berries. Sometimes, in bad weather, he would splurge and have a roof over his head, but when the nights were clear, a blanket to roll himself up in, his pack used as a pillow, and a quiet, safe patch in the plains would do him fine.

But still, not all was entirely improved. His music still fled from his fingers, the motions as he plucked the strings technically perfect but lacking any sign of life. At night, his dreams would be plagued with dark memories - and that was only when sleep actually took him. He had still yet to feel happy - content, certainly, mildly pleased about some successful venture, of course.

But true happiness? That was something that still yet eluded him.

It was a quiet, thoughtful Sheik who returned to the cave he had recently found and had been staying in after another day of working in the nearest village. The day was cloudy, with intermittent drizzle, and he was grateful for the shelter, for not having to sleep out in the field that night. A bed at the inn was, unfortunately, impractical - he was low on money, his lack of restful nights making him sleepy and distracted during the day.

But he had food - a freshly-caught fish, a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese from the village, a few pieces of fruit picked from a nearby apple tree. Over a small fire, he roasted the fish and toasted the bread, sitting back with a satisfied little noise when he judged his stomach to be full.

And then, the little fire still flickering away at the entrance to the cave, he curled up in his blanket, set his head on his pack, and attempted sleep again.

Thunder. There was thunder in the air - no, not thunder, not a storm. It was the boom and crash of cannons, a siege against the castle well underway. Where was Zelda?

He found himself running, dodging heavy projectiles and a storm of arrows and the crash of masonry shaken free from its foundations, her name caught in his panicked throat. Where was she?

There - standing atop the highest tower, dressed in white and gazing out at the approaching battle with an apathy that he more frequently knew was visible on his own face. Again, he tried to scream her name - but no words would allow themselves to be torn free.

And where was Link?

There - carving through their enemies with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. His face
was blank, emotionless - the Hero looked as if he was chiseled from stone as he cut through faceless enemies.

It was starting to rain. Sheik lifted his face to feel moisture against his skin -

- and started awake as a wash of sea water soaked through his blanket.

He was up in an instant, grabbing his belongings and hurling them in to the Shadow where they would be safe. The food was a loss, the fire already extinguished, but perhaps he could preserve a few things and get out with his life still intact...

Another boom, and another wave slammed against the cliff face hard enough to send a sheet of water inside the little cave. Beyond it, too, he could see rain so heavy it looked like a solid wall of iron, periodically lit up by flashes of lightning and cracks of near simultaneous thunder.

While he had been sleeping, a storm had come in.

One hand shielding his eyes from the rain, his belongings safe and secure in the Shadow, Sheik hurried to the mouth of the cave, feeling the way his heart began to race as he surveyed his position.

The sea was churning like a cauldron, practically black and white from the choppy waves. Every handful of heartbeats, a storm surge would send waves crashing up metres high, far up enough that his little cave was in imminent danger of being flooded. Somehow, he would have to get away from the cliff face, get to safety...

One hand against the cliff face for stability, he hurried as swiftly as he could along the path that he knew led up to the top of the cliff faces. The metre wide gap he jumped without a problem, the part wide enough only for one foot before the other was navigated swiftly.

But when the storm surge caught him against a bare face of wall with the force of a Moblin club to the head, the only place left to go was down.

Sheik's eyes were open as he plunged in to the water, another wave slamming down on top of him. Although the salt made them sting and smart, and although the water was so icy it was stealing what little breath he still had in his lungs, he was helpless now - adrift beneath the surface, watching as it surged and thundered above him.

And he found himself recalling another time that the surface of the water swam before his eyes. He recalled a shadowed boot sweeping his legs from beneath him like the storm waves had done. He remembered dark hands around his throat, tenderly protecting him from frigid air as surely as the crashing surf did. He remembered struggling, and the shadow that reached out to caress him unrelenting.

His lungs were burning. Sheik needed air, and fast.

But here also was oblivion. Beneath him was darkness, calm and still and unaffected by the storm. Above him was violence, a return to pain, a return to that strange content apathy. Where was he going? Where did he need to be? Where did he want to be?

Seven and a half months ago, he had made a choice to step back, to rob death of his soul for a handful of months instead.

Now, all he would have to do would be to close his eyes and let the choice be taken out of his own hands. All he would have to do is let go...
His eyes closed. In the dark, the water almost seemed to cradle him. Did he still need air? He could not be sure. His lungs no longer hurt. Could he breathe in...?

Through the darkness, a hand reached for his - pale and delicate and smooth, the hand of a girl who soothed away the nightmares.

And beside it, another - fair and calloused and strong, fingers that wrapped around his reassuringly, hands that allowed him to sleep undisturbed.

And his eyes opened again.

Link and Zelda would not want him to die.

The process to make himself kick upwards, reaching up to the surface was almost one physically painful, his comfortable cocoon ripped away with the decision to fight for his right to live. Gasping, his head broke the surface and he dragged in a lungful of air before being slammed beneath it again, but now he had the urge to fight within him.

With a groan of pain that sent water flooding in to his mouth, he found himself slammed against something hard and almost lost his hard-earned lungful of air. But he clung to it, and clung hard - the rock he had just been bodily tossed against was jutting out of the water, and out of the water was a vast improvement, right now, to being in it.

Hand over hand, he pulled himself up, his shoulder screaming at him in agony. But his reward was finding air again, drawing in a deep lungful that sent him coughing and spluttering and choking. He could taste bile in his throat and he could not bring himself to care, because the rush of air had left him breathless and dizzy and laughing.

This time, when he latched on to a handhold on the cliff and began to haul himself up to safety, he did not let the wave drag him away.

The rain still poured down. But Sheik, sprawled flat on his back on the grassy verge that overlooked the beach, could not bring himself to care.

His arrival in relative safety had been swiftly followed by a collapse, the adrenaline of the escape from the water suddenly draining away and leaving him gasping in pain. His shoulder, the one pulled from its socket when Bongo Bongo had hurled him head first down a flight of stairs, had never entirely been strong again, and when he had been slammed against the rock, it had jarred itself out again.

And so Sheik had pulled his cloak from the Shadow and bit down hard on it, grabbed his upper arm, and forced it back in to the socket himself.

And now he laid there, on his back and his eyes closed as the rain soaked him to the bone. The exact products of his attempt to push his own arm back in place puddled beside his head, and he had turned away from it - when he could move, he would get away from the smell of it, would find something to wash the taste out of his mouth.

Feebly, he coughed again, managing to roll away from the bad smell. Was it usual for his chest to hurt this much after nearly drowning? The last time, he had been rather distracted by his broken ribs, and he wasn't entirely positive how his lungs on their own were standing up to the abuse.

Coughing a few more times, he finally managed to push himself in to a sitting position, soaked
bangs hanging in his face and his hair raggedly loose, damp against the bottoms of his shoulder blades. He should tie it up again, pull it -

He stopped.

His hair had been tied up.

With bleary eyes, he stared out at the sea, feeling his giddy relief slipping away as quickly as ice melting on a summer day. The little green scrap of cloth, a fragment from Link’s tunic, a minor thing that meant so much to him...

Was somewhere out there, caught in the pounding surf.

And Sheik bowed his head, watching as the only tangible remnant he had of the Hero was washed out to sea.

The sea had made him ill.

When the storm had died down and Sheik had regained feeling in his legs, he had dragged his way down to the sand, scanning rock and reef for the elusive scrap of green. None had been found, and he had pulled himself back up, walking wearily, path weaving, until he found a hollow protected from the rain and the wind.

It was also well and truly far from the waves.

His spare clothing, safe in the bag that he had shoved in to the Shadow, was at least mostly dry. His old ones hung outside on a tree branch to dry, Sheik sat himself down - and then drew back his hair in one hand, reached for a knife, and before he could think about what he was doing, sliced upwards.

Free of a tie for the first time since Link had departed, cut for the first time in a handful of years, his hair sprang free and he stared at the handful of blonde hair. The tie was gone, and he could not bear the thought of a substitute.

Better to cut it short, slice it back, let it fall free around his face than try to replace memories of him.

Sheik opened his hand and let the breeze carry the fine strands away, watching them get caught on grass and salt bush before finally escaping its terrestrial boundaries. And then he had thrown himself down, shivering a little from the lack of a dry blanket, and had fallen asleep almost immediately.

It had been his own coughing that had woken him up. Coughing, and the feeling like no matter how deeply or rapidly he breathed in, he was rapidly being starved of air. A symptom of the near drowning? He did not know how it could make him feel like he was still beneath the waves, but that was all he could compare it to.

Wearily, he had stumbled to his feet, collecting his now-dry clothing and blanket and collapsing in his little hideaway again with them. His shoulder still ached, and now his chest felt as if a giant hand had caught it, squeezing like a vice, rendering him breathless and sore.

Eventually, he had pulled himself to his feet, making his way to the nearest village. Too exhausted and sore and breathless to work, he bought as much food as he could without the risk of it going
bad (sadly, he thought of his wedge of cheese, now washed out to sea) and dragged it back to his little hollow.

Enough for a week, perhaps, he evaluated as he sat himself down again. He could just stomach a bite of bread and a small piece of fruit, carefully propped up against the wall of the hollow, before he had to stretch out again on the blanket, utterly exhausted.

And he was still coughing.

The fever emerged that evening, waking him from his sleep as the blankets suddenly became unbearably hot. Every muscle ached, and he gazed blankly, eyes glazed, out from his disrupted cocoon.

Had he become ill, then? Had the cold and the lack of air done something to him? He could not be sure. Nothing like this had happened the first time his life had nearly been stolen away under the surface of the water, but he had been exposed to a Fairy Fountain only hours afterwards.

Oh, he wished for one to be here now. The ache in his shoulder had not yet faded. He was still coughing, still struggling to draw air in through his uncooperative lungs, his skin burning from the fever.

He would even settle for a potion, and he had avoided red potion like the plague after being force-fed it for two weeks.

Anything just to feel better.

With the fever came fever dreams. When he closed his eyes again, his usual insomnia nowhere in sight, it had been strange and disturbing dreams that had chased restfulness from him. These were nothing like his usual nightmares, but something strange and inexplicable, landscapes shifting like oil paint running down a canvas.

Colours would bleed together. Shapes would change form before his very eyes. Once, a waterfall turned crimson red as he watched, the metallic tang of blood replacing the peaceful scent of fresh water on river stone.

And here, even friends and loved ones changed their form before him, his dreams morbid. Zelda's joyous face as she tilted her head back and laughed, a child once more, had transformed in to the Captain's appearance, laughing almost hysterically as he reached out to pull Sheik in to an embrace.

When his dream self had lashed out, it had been Zelda whose bloody form laid at his feet.

He imagined himself caught in a maze, during one night where sleep came in twenty minute bursts with feverish wakefulness in between. Just when he had thought he had found an end to it, he would wake again - and when sleep returned, he found himself at the very beginning again.

He was sure that the maze was shifting. Every wall looked the same - featureless yellow that would not allow him to be free.

The walls blinked at him, just once, and he found himself crumpled before the Gerudo king again. And then he had blinked again, and the maze returned to consume him whole.

Sometimes, the dreams would be pleasant ones. He dreamt of drifting waves of grass as he laid back in a Hyrule Field written in white. White grass, white flowers, white leaves in the white trees shading him from the white sun. White clouds (well - they, at least, were to be expected) drifted in a white sky, and he found that when he looked down at his own hands, they, too, were as bleached
and as pale as snow.

Free of colour, certainly. But colour included the blood he had seen dripping from his reflection's eyes in an earlier dream, and the plain of calm, pure white was soothing to his soul.

And sometimes, he would dream of a gentle hand against his forehead, of something cool and refreshingly damp being pressed against his skin. He dreamt of clean water to soothe his throat, ragged from coughing, he dreamt of being kept warm and safe at night.

Between snatches of nightmare and horror, and calm and quiet, he could almost imagine he could hear a voice, soft and reassuringly familiar but one he could not place. It would be alright, the voice told him quietly, he was recovering well. It would just take time, and he would regain his strength as surely as breathing.

And songs. Always, there were songs.

It became easier every night. The passage of time was virtually meaningless to Sheik, but still, he was aware of the moon rising every evening.

And on the day his fever broke, moonlight shining in to the little hollow, he realised he was not alone.

He had stirred, feeling stronger and more clear-headed than he had in days, reaching out blindly to wrap himself further in the blankets. And there he had encountered resistance - some weight holding it down, something heavy behind him preventing movement.

It moved, and he automatically drew away.

"It's okay!" the weight behind him said hastily, "It's only me!" There was a heavy pause. "...Sheik. Are you okay?"

And he could not turn around. Turning around meant confronting the fact that he had conjured up a phantom from the past, the cruelest hallucination of all. "Are you real?" he asked softly through a ragged throat, gazing out at the moon. "Or am I imagining things again?"

His choice was made for him - whoever it was behind him stood, stepping over him to kneel before Sheik's prone form, blue eyes alive with hope.

"I'm real, Sheik," Link whispered, an ecstatic smile slowly spreading across the Hylian's face, "I'm back."
Sheik was, needless to say, in a mild state of shock.

"...How?" he croaked, doubling over as another coughing fit took him. "We - you were sent back -"

Link nodded slowly, reaching out to help Sheik in to a sitting position. "I'm not really sure myself," he said dubiously, "But I've been here for two months - I heard that there was a Sheikah in some of the towns a few weeks ago, and I've been looking ever since."

Link had been here, in Mecestia, and Sheik hadn't even realised? For a moment, he stared up at Link with uncertain eyes - then stopped himself and properly looked.

He was older, now - the way he moved, the way he spoke, the shape of his face and, especially, the look in his eyes spoke of someone who had spent years having to fight. Oh, at first glance, he looked much the same as he had in Hyrule - the same blonde bangs hung in blue eyes, a little longer than he remembered but not by much. The hat was still there, albeit patched and re-sized for an adult and not a child, and the green tunic was similar save for the slightly different collar.

But the boots propped up against the wall lacked the flaps his old ones had. It was brown pants he wore now, not white leggings, and the high-collared shirt was off-white and thick. A new belt sat around his hips, and, near the boots, Sheik could spot a new set of gauntlets, an unfamiliar sword belt holding an unfamiliar sword.

"How long has it been?" he whispered, and Link hesitated.

"Since when? Since I arrived here, or...?"

"Since the Temple of Time," he said softly.

And Link glanced away again, doubt written all over his face. "Nine and a half years," he finally said softly, "I grew up to that age again, and - that was two and a half years ago. And you?"

Nine and a half years? Sheik gazed at him almost disbelievingly, then nodded once. "Two and a half. It seems that we have caught up with each other."

Himself and his Hero, forging their own paths, following their own tracks, side by side with only time standing between them. But no longer would time stand between them - now, they were together again.

Link made a soft, wondering sound - and before Sheik could even move, he found himself being caught up in a hug, stiffening in surprise before he forced himself to relax his muscles. This was Link. This was Link. He was here, and he was alive, and he was warm and solid in his arms and...

A sound much like a little choked sob escaped his lips as he clung back to the Hero, dropping his head to Link's shoulder. "I missed you," he said raggedly, his throat not happy with him after all the
coughing, "I - so much." Why had he had to leave? Link clearly had missed him too, if the arms around him, the slight tremble he could feel in his muscles, were any indication.

"Me too," Link whispered unsteadily, "I - Three Goddesses, Sheik. I've been dreaming about you every night for nearly a decade."

"Then why did you go back?" he asked quietly, drawing back from the embrace, and Link looked as if he had been struck.

"I thought..." He sounded like a child again - uncertain, lost, the boy in a man's body he had first seen in the Temple of Time. "I thought..." His voice softened. "I thought you didn't want to see me any more."

And he hadn't. He had still been hurt by Link - at the fact that Link thought that he would go back on his word, that he would have put Zelda in danger rather than face him himself.

And he also realised that that did not matter. Link had been an adult in mind, certainly, but he had lacked so much experience in life that he still viewed the way people reacted to one another with the black and white starkness of a child.

But pushing him away had been the last thing he had wanted to do.

He had done this, hadn't he? If he had opened his eyes, truly seen things from Link's perspective, then perhaps...

Perhaps, he might not have been so alone for the last two and a half years.

"I didn't," he admitted softly, and Link's face fell. "I was... angry. Resentful. I had given you my word that I would stay, but you still thought otherwise. You believed I would have preferred to put Zelda in danger rather than face you. When I was alone during the night, I... I hated you a little for not coming to find me. But..." He exhaled. "But I realise now that you couldn't have known. Did it occur to you, at all, that I could have been captured?"

Slowly, Link shook his head. "I never saw any of - of his men anywhere aside from temples," he said, subdued. "The ones I saw in the field and things were just mindless monsters. I just..." Visible frustration was written on his face. "I just didn't think it could happen."

Sheik nodded once, gazing at the floor of the hollow. "I forgive you," he whispered. "And I'm sorry I made you think that I wanted you to leave." The smile he gave Link was weak, a little unsteady. "Three Goddesses, there's been so many times over the past two and a half years where I would have given anything to see you again."

Link didn't answer immediately, simply reached out for his hand, enclosing it in both of his own. "Now that I've found you again," he said quietly, "I'd like to stay. I'd really like to stay, because I - I still love you and I don't think I've stopped ever since and when I found you I was so happy I nearly - um, I nearly cried. But that's - if you don't want me to, then I'll go. It's your choice."

Then he'd go?

After all this time, after two and a half years and - Three Goddesses, it had been nearly a decade for Link. And yet he had still had made the offer - for his own comfort and reassurances.

"You're not going anywhere," Sheik whispered, lifting his hands to cup Link's face and drawing him down for their first kiss in far, far too long.
Drifting off with a warm body curled up besides his was pleasant in a way that he hadn't experienced since the night in the fairy fountain.

Waking up bathed in sweat, eyes wide and panicked, heart racing so fast he could swear it was about to jump out of his chest, gasping raggedly for air was not.

It had been no specific memory that had plagued his sleep this time, but a highly unpleasant soup of imagery and impression. The Captain pinning him down against the table, a mouth that reeked of foul things whispering fouler words in to his ear. Shadowed hands around his throat and hate in Link's double's eyes - or perhaps it was the Hero himself. Suffocating darkness as the water sealed over him, powerless to save himself even if he wanted to, unable to resist the overwhelming urge that drew him deeper and deeper in to the depths.

He had dreamt of standing atop the sky tower in the castle, and this time, he hadn't reached for Zelda's hand.

Hitting the bottom came simultaneously with starting awake, instinctively cringing away from the arms that held him in place. Link, never a heavy sleeper, jumped, reaching automatically for the sword he kept nearly.

Pausing with his hand halfway to the blade, he sighed, pulling away to give Sheik some space. "Another bad dream?" he murmured, and, still half-dazed from the shock of falling and awakening, Sheik nodded. Link made an unhappy noise. "Have you been having them all this time? I thought it was just the fever, but..."

For a moment, Sheik considered lying, if only to spare Link's feelings. But finally, he grudgingly admitted, "Every night since my capture - aside from those nights when I do not sleep at all."

This time, Sheik did not resist when Link pulled him in to his arms. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked almost pleadingly. "I hate this - not sleeping hurts."

He shook his head, and Link exhaled shakily. "We've tried," Sheik explained quietly, "At many different times, with many different techniques and methods. Zelda tried potions designed to send someone in to a deep sleep - they're dangerous, actually, but even they did not work. At the hospital, they asked me to keep a diary, writing of beautiful and happy things before I went to bed every night. It still did not work. I consider myself fortunate if I only have one or two nightmares a night."

"Only one or two a --" Link shook his head hard, nuzzling the top of Sheik's head reassuringly. "I have bad dreams too, but... that sounds terrible."

"I'm used to it," Sheik sighed, then glanced over his shoulder to the entrance of the hollow, coughing a little at the movement. "It's still dark. You should go back to sleep."

Blue eyes, almost luminescent in the half light, gazed at him uncertainly. "What about you?"

For Link's sake, he offered him a half-hearted smile. "I will attempt to sleep - but I cannot promise anything."

A heavy sigh, and then Link nodded. "Okay. But if you do have another dream, you know I'll be right here, right?"

"I do," Sheik said quietly, and closed his eyes.
Beside him, Link did the same, and for a few long, silent moments, it seemed as if he had drifted off as well. But barely ten minutes had passed before a sleepy, "...Hey, Sheik?" emerged from the dozing Hero.

"...Mm?"

"I don't think I can get back to sleep now," he admitted, his eyes opening. "I keep thinking about stuff too much - like when you said you went to a hospital. What happened after I left?"

Sheik didn't answer immediately, his eyes still closed. Link nudged at him uncertainly. "Sheik?"

"After you left," he started quietly, "Zelda and I returned to Impa's house while the castle and town was being rebuilt. A month later, she had her coronation and I was sworn in as her personal protector. Then she had to search for a suitor - several months later, she met Prince Andir of Tellura. The two got on well enough, and they married. A year later, she fell pregnant - when I left Hyrule, Prince Shia was four months old."

Link frowned deeply. "That's nice and all, about Zelda - but that doesn't explain what you were doing. Why were you in a hospital?"

Unexpectedly, Sheik's eyes flashed. "Because I tried to throw myself off the tallest tower in the castle and after she convinced me to not do it, Zelda thought that a hospital would be the safest place for me to be."

Link's eyes widened in utter shock. Had it not been for the starkness of his admission, it would have almost been comical.

"You tried to..." And suddenly, Sheik was practically being smothered in a hug. "Promise me," the Hylian demanded, his voice shaken and determined and desperate all at once, "Please just promise me that you'll never try to hurt yourself again!"

Sheik exhaled. "I will try," he murmured, but the words 'I promise' did not cross his lips. The urge for harm could be overwhelming, sometimes. And he did not want to break another promise to Link.

But then, perhaps that promise could be what kept him from harming himself again...

Another exhalation. "I promise," he finally said, voice small and reluctant. "But I cannot promise that I will succeed."

"You will," Link said firmly. "You're a strong person, Sheik."

Sheik only laughed, turning away so he wouldn't have to see the hurt on Link's face. "I wish I could believe you."

Link was silent for a moment, and then, quietly, said, "We can help each other not hurt ourselves and be strong together. Okay?"

In the half light, Sheik's eyes widened considerably, twisting around to stare at Link. "You?" he whispered, utterly unable to picture the Hero of Time deliberately harming himself.

"Me," Link admitted with a sad smile, "Sort of. It - sometimes, when I fought monsters or -" A hesitation. "Or people, I wouldn't try as hard. I'd let them hit me deliberately, because... I messed up. I deserved to be punished."
"You do not deserve that," Sheik nearly growled, reaching for his wrists, "You have done nothing to deserve punishment!"

"And you've done nothing to warrant throwing yourself off a tower," Link pointed out quietly, and Sheik closed his eyes.

This was not a discussion he wanted with Link. He had not wanted his dark deeds to be brought to the front, and he had not wanted to learn that Link had felt as wretched as he had.

Deliberately failing to avoid the blow was as much self-destruction as carving in to himself with a blade was.

"Then I promise," he finally said, "Not to harm myself if you do not harm yourself either."

"Thank you," Link murmured, leaning in for a chaste kiss. "I've been... self-destructive, I suppose."

Oh, Sheik knew that all too well. "As have I," he said softly, "In too many ways to count."

Link didn't respond to that verbally, simply reaching out to draw Sheik closer. "We'll be okay," he whispered fiercely, "You and me. Okay?"

"Okay," he murmured back, lifting his head to press a kiss to Link's forehead. "What happened when you returned?"

The Hylian made a thoughtful sound. "I woke up before Ganondorf ever took over," he murmured quietly, making himself comfortable on their makeshift bed. "A few days before. So I went back to the castle - Zelda was there, and she also remembered everything."

Sheik, briefly, looked alarmed. Then she also knew...?

Link apparently did not notice, because he continued on with nary a pause. "We knew what was going to happen, so we made plans to stop Ganondorf before he could kill the king. And when that was done, I left."

"Where did you go?" he whispered.

"A place called Termina. I had Epona back, but Navi..." He winced. "She left. So I went to the Lost Woods to try and find her. Instead, I got robbed. There was a Skull Kid, and he had a mask... he took Epona and the ocarina. I found this weird tunnel - it was really strange, and kept twisting and turning in weird ways. I got cursed." Briefly, the Hero shuddered.

A curse? Sheik lifted a hand to Link's cheek. "And what happened?" he prompted.

"I was turned in to a Deku," Link continued thoughtfully. "And ended up going through these tunnels -"

"A Boundary," Sheik said suddenly, and Link gave him a curious look. "I will explain later."

He nodded. "Okay. I went through the tunnels with one of the fairies with him, Tatl, and I ended up in a place called Clock Town in Termina. The moon was huge in the sky - it was falling. On the third day, I got up to Skull Kid and got my ocarina back, and I remembered the Song of Time. I played it... and then I woke up three days earlier, the same time I arrived, and was changed back to normal by the Happy Mask Salesman."

That was definitely a displeased look on his face, there.
"I had to save everyone - the moon was going to fall in three days, and I had to go to four temples and awaken four giants." Reaching up, he rubbed his eyes again. "With the Song of Time, I could go backwards - I had to do it over and over again, and I had to help everyone there - Romani and Cremia, and Anju and Kafei, and... everyone. It took me... weeks, I think. Nearly months, I lost track after a while. And I had to do the same thing over and over and over."

"Deja vu," Sheik murmured, and Link nodded emphatically.

"Yeah, exactly. I met other people - a Goron ghost, and a dying Zora. The Deku whose form I had been cursed in to was a little Deku boy that Majora killed - the mask that Skull Kid had." He looked pensive for a moment, his gaze distant. "And I could heal their spirits - it turned them in to masks, and I could become a Goron or a Zora or a Deku. I looked almost exactly like them."

Sheik frowned thoughtfully. "You took on their forms?"

He nodded. "Everyone thought I was them, except the Dekus - the Gorons thought I was Darmani, their hero, and the Zoras thought I was Mikau. And when I left, they..." Link exhaled heavily. "I let them believe that - that their loved ones had come back. And..." Biting down on his lip, he steeled himself and continued. "And when I left, they lost them all over again."

"But it was a forgone conclusion," Sheik pointed out. "They had already lost them - that was not going to change if you had remained. You could not have lived three simultaneous lives."

"I guess," Link said quietly, then shook his head fiercely. "But I did it. I awakened the giants. I stopped the moon from falling. And I stopped Majora." Was that a glance at his bag? "I and got to see the fourth day for the first time - the Carnival of Time happened." A smile drifted across his face. "I stayed there for nearly two years, you know - the transformation masks, I gave back so they'd have something to remember them. I kept a few, though - some of the nicer ones."

Sheik made a neutral sound. "I suppose it would have been pleasant to stay a while - to see the fruits of your labours."

He chuckled. "Something like that. I stayed at Romani Ranch for a while - did you know that Romani and her sister Cremia looked exactly like Malon, both when she was a kid and when she grew up? I helped look after the cows for a while."

A smile crossed Sheik's face. "I must admit," he said thoughtfully, "I do have trouble seeing you as a farmer." Link's feet seemed destined to wander, he thought, and he could not see him happily staying in one place.

"So do I," Link agreed, "Which is why I left. I managed to get back to Hyrule - I can't even remember how - and I went back to the castle. When I did..."

Now, suddenly, he looked self-conscious.

"When I did," he mumbled, definitely not meeting Sheik's eyes, "Zelda had - well, she - the timeline there was kind of... different. Stuff that happened that you and me know never happened. And she had sent away for, um... you."

Sheik went still.

If they had changed the timeline, then of course he would still be present. He would have still been in Toaru, wouldn't he? But now Link had faced another version of himself, younger, innocent, free of trauma... "What happened then?" he asked, his voice so bitter he surprised even himself.
"Nothing," Link said emphatically. "She told me later that - well, she had asked the other you to come back because... because she missed him, and because she... thought I might as well. But he wasn't you!" His voice had raised, become passionate. "He wasn't you. He didn't even know me! Nothing we shared was there, and - and that's all I had left, memories, and he didn't even have those."

His voice had caught, misery written on his face. Impulsively, Sheik pressed his lips to Link's. "But he would have been - better," he said quietly, his voice dull. "Not... a self-destructive mess."

"I don't care," Link said with a wild shake of his head. "I'm gonna help you recover from that, okay? But he would have never had our memories. He never would have remembered looking after me in Impa's house or kissing at the lake or the Fairy Fountain."

His gaze softened. Now, he reached for Sheik again, pressing their foreheads together, closing his eyes. "I couldn't stand it any more," he finally admitted softly. "So I left again - this time, for real. I went back to Termina, and I travelled from there for a while - I saw what was on their borders, past the mountains and going north. When I found another portal, I took that as well. And..." He smiled crookedly. "I've been doing that for six years. I was looking for happiness again. I didn't think I'd actually find it here."

He had found happiness? Sheik nodded slowly, mind wracked to try and work out what he had found - and then Link ran a hand down his cheek, and he paused in sudden realisation.

Oh.

"I was looking for something as well," he finally said, the words tumbling out. "But I don't know what. I had resigned myself to never seeing you again - that I'd be lonely. And I wanted something to... take that away, I suppose." He shook his head, a smile touching his lips. "But I didn't think that even in my wildest dreams, I'd ever find you again."

"Yeah," Link whispered, and Sheik glanced at his face to find that the Hylian was nearly asleep again. "I had hoped, but I didn't know, and..." He exhaled, his eyes fluttering closed.

Sheik did not speak. He was gazing at Link's face, taking in every detail of it - the dark gold of his eyelashes against tanned cheeks, the slightest hint of the last of a sunburn peeling from his nose, the faint scar beneath one eye, the way his chapped lips were ever so slightly parted.

Quietly, he leaned in, pressing his lips to Link's own, and they curved against his in a smile.

"Love you a whole lot," Link murmured sleepily, and then the slow rise and fall of his chest told Sheik that he had drifted off to sleep again.

Sheik resisted the urge to chuckle at the proclamation - clumsily worded, certainly, and definitely lacking in eloquence, but heartfelt nonetheless. Instead, he simply drew the blankets up close, folding himself in to Link's arms.

"I love you too," he whispered, feeling the unease from the nightmare utterly gone. Even their conversation earlier, Link's revelation of his own self-destructive tendencies, could not shake him like this - he could not help but have faith that, perhaps, things were beginning to be okay.

It had been a long time coming - two and a half years for himself, nine and a half for Link, divided by time and space but finally brought back together. When Sheik closed his eyes and finally let exhaustion claim him again, it was to rest, to peaceful dreams, and to an easy awakening for the first time in a very, very long while.
"And what about dinner?"

"Settled." Link flashed Sheik a grin from where he was crouched in front of a drawer, picking through items of clothing. "I talked to the guy at the markets - he said that if I carried some boxes for him, he'd provide a cooked fish, some bread, and some vegetables."

Sheik nodded, legs crossed as he sat on the end of one of the beds. Link had insisted on them moving to an inn as soon as he was well enough to walk - the hollow, he argued, was definitely not enough protection for someone who was still quite ill.

Sheik had had very little problem with that - although money was becoming a problem. They did odd jobs where they could, and Link had inflicted his superior skills in slicing things in helping to prepare meals in the kitchen, but still - it was problematic, sometimes, not knowing where the next meal would come from, whether they would continue to have a roof over their heads or be back out in the open.

Stifling a cough in his hand, he got to his feet. "I received an offer today," he said quietly, "A public performance. They saw me with the lyre."

"Did you accept?" Link asked curiously, "Maybe we can do a duet?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "I did not." For a moment, he worried at his lip. "I find it... difficult to play, sometimes. It used to be a joy, but now there is no pleasure in it."

For just a moment, Link looked terribly sad.

Then he nodded, standing as well and moving to wrap his arms around Sheik's waist. "You don't have to push yourself," he murmured, then smiled briefly. "But when you can play again, you owe me a duet, okay?"

"Of course," Sheik said with a brief chuckle, pulling away. "You should head off to the markets before it gets dark - and I need to speak to the innkeeper."

Denied of his cuddles, Link sulked for a moment before nodding, reaching for his boots. "Okay. We'll head down together, alright?"

Downstairs, the evening crowd was already starting to pile in, the drinking already started for the night. Sheik stuck close to Link as they made their way to the front desk, Link giving his hand a quick squeeze before starting out for the markets with a wave. Almost immediately, he was swallowed up by the crowd, a bulky figure in a cloak blocking his view of the Hylian leaving.

Sheik frowned briefly, then turned back to the innkeeper - it was time, at least, to try and convince him to give them a little more work.
By the time Link returned, Sheik was on edge, practically edging up the stairs to escape the press of people. There were simply too many people here for his liking, if he was strictly honest with himself, and when Link emerged out of a swarm of drinkers ready to empty their wallets on alcohol, he nearly went limp from relief.

There were too many cloaked people. He could not find a point of reference - he did not know who was and was not there.

"Did you get everything?" he asked Link quietly as he came within earshot.

"Uh huh. And a bit of extra money for doing a good job!" the Hylian grinned, handing over a few wrapped parcels. "Can you go get everything set for dinner? I'll get us some drinks."

Sheik nodded absently, hurrying away up the stairs, fighting off the prickly feeling of being watched. Of course there were people around - some of them were bound to be looking his way.

Still, he was on edge as he set the little table up, slicing the bread and setting out a pat of butter, rinsing the vegetables, setting the fish out. As he stretched over the table to set a knife and fork next to Link's place, he barely took notice of the door as it opened.

And then there were hands resting on his hips, a solid body behind his, and he could feel heavy iron around his wrists and his ankles and rough wood abrading his chest and stomach and a mocking, laughing voice telling him exactly what he was going to do to him.

Blindly, he lashed out, found that his wrists were unbound, and sprang away, eyes wide as every muscle screamed escape, run, please don't hurt me please not again. Folding himself in to the nearest corner, he drew his legs up, wrapped his arms around his head, cringing away from every touch.

He would not let them hurt him like that again.

Someone hurried close, reaching for him - he distantly saw the hand approaching, looming like a nightmare come to life. "Stay away!" he blurted out desperately, trying to force himself further in to the corner, "Get away from me!"

The hand drew away immediately. "Sheik?" came a quiet, unexpectedly pleading voice - not the jeering voice of the Captain, nor the bark of some of his men, nor the wheedling, manipulative machinations of Ganondorf. "Are you - what happened? What's the matter?"

Another trick. Link could not be here, in this hell that he had found himself in. All too readily, he could imagine Link pushing through the Shadow Temple, lost, tormented by spirits that would not rest. A different sort of torture, certainly.

But he could not possibly be here. He was -

- kneeling before him, concern written all over his face, blue eyes wide.

"It's a trick," he croaked in a voice so broken it startled even himself, shoving the phantom away. "Leave me alone!"

And, slowly, the phantom began to slip away, although it lingered on the edges of his consciousness, watching and tormenting him from afar.

Sheik tucked his head in to his arms, shaking, fighting back the sobbing that was bubbling up. He would not cry, would not show weakness - if anyone came near him, he'd kill them before they
could hurt him again.

But no one did. Even the phantom stayed away, watching him with sad blue eyes from a far corner of the room.

And eventually, slowly, his awareness of his surroundings began to shift.

This was not cold stone beneath him, but worn floorboards. No uneven stone lined the walls, but plaster. No dripping water could be heard, but instead the snap and crackle and pop of the fire. A cheery rug sat inches from his feet, and he stared at it in abject confusion.

Had they decorated the room he had been so tormented in?

Or - and here was something unbelievable - was he free of it again?

"...Where," he started softly, his voice a soft rasp, "Where... am I?"

"Our room at the inn in Mecestia," his phantom said softly, rising from his position on one of the beds but keeping well back. "Don't you remember, Sheik?"

Didn't he remember...?

"Link?" he said dubiously, finally lifting his head. A room at the inn, indeed - a cozy fire burnt at the far end of the room, bright rugs covering the worn floor. Two beds, one looking like it had not been slept with, sat against the walls, and a table was already set for dinner, one fork lying forlornly on the ground.

And, hovering uncertainly between the bed and himself, stood Link, a few bloody lines scored along one cheek, Sheik's throwing needles clattered on the ground.

"What happened?" he whispered, and, finally sensing it was safe, Link moved in.

"I'm going to take you to the bed, okay?" he murmured, "Don't be startled." And Sheik was forced to grab on to the front of Link's tunic as the Hylian bodily lifted him from his corner, depositing him on one of the beds and stroking his hair soothingly. "I -" He shook his head, looking bothered. "What did happen?"

Sheik was silent for a moment, raising a hand to Link's cheek. "I made you bleed," he whispered, and his eyes widened in sudden horror. "I'm sorry!"

Link cringed. "It's not your fault, something happened, I'm sorry I scared you!" he said earnestly, catching Sheik's hand and dropping a kiss on the palm. "I - you were getting dinner together, and - and I thought I'd surprise you and give you a kiss, but - those needles came out of nowhere and you ran in to the corner and yelled at me to stay away..."

Pulling his hand back, Sheik curled in on himself, eyes prickling. "When -" he started, and his voice broke. He felt drained, strung out, his muscles limp and trembling from the adrenaline shock. Three Goddesses, his head was starting to hurt. "When you - did that, I thought that - that you were them."

"Who are 'them'?" Link asked, genuinely puzzled.

Sheik laughed, verging on slight hysteria. "That is a terribly ungrammatical sentence," he managed to choke out, laughing hard enough that the air was stolen from his lungs, "You don't say... say that... that..."
And suddenly, like a switch being unexpectedly flipped, his hysterical laughter dissolved into hysterical weeping, every wracking sob shaking his body violently, his stomach clenching up, his chest aching like his heart had been caught in a vice, so violent and unexpected that his body threatened to expel the little lunch he had managed to force down.

"Sheik!" Link exclaimed in sudden shock, dragging him in to his arms. "Sheik - it's okay, they're gone, you're safe!"

"They raped me!" he practically screamed, barely conscious of the way Link's eyes widened in abject horror. "They used me as - as their plaything! They... they..." He swiped at his eyes almost violently, voice barely coherent through his frantic sobbing. "I walked into a trap. He scarred me, blinded me, tortured me for two weeks to try and find your and Zelda's locations... and for every night I didn't tell him what he wanted, he threw me to the guards for their nightly entertainment. And if it meant he never found you and you got rid of him, it would have been worth it... but the memories won't leave me be!"

And then he simply buried his face against Link's chest and let the tears fall for the first time since the first night they had dragged him away to be used.

By the time he managed to drag air in to his lungs again, by the time the uncontrollable urge to scream and sob and fight against everything that had held him back for two and a half years had subsided, he found himself dimly aware of two things - the first was that Link's tunic was soaked, and the second was that so was his hair. Lifting his head tentatively, he found Link's eyes to be red rimmed, the blue almost shocking against them, his nose runny and his cheeks streaked with his own tears. He looked distinctly mussed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I got your tunic wet."

Link let out a choked little laugh. "It should dry. I'm sorry I got your hair wet."

For a moment, there was silence.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Link finally whispered. "Afterwards. You - flinched a lot, but you still..." A flush crept across his cheek. "That last night?"

Sheik let out a little sigh. "I did not want to ruin what we had," he said quietly, his voice hoarse. "Every moment we had was precious. I could not waste it on myself. And - I wanted you to make me forget the hurt."

He nodded slowly. "Since I came back," he said softly, gazing at his feet, "We haven't been..." A vague hand gesture. "Together. But if you don't want to because it makes you remember bad things, then that's okay."

For a moment, Sheik hesitated. And then he tilted his face upwards, brushing the faintest of kisses across his lips. "I haven't been chaste, Link," he quietly admitted. "Zelda's husband - we did sleep together. But it was definitely not a romance - I do not love him," he hastily added, seeing Link's face fall. Perhaps, then, it would not be a good idea to mention what had happened on some of his intelligence missions. "But that was..." He shrugged. "It was bodily motion. Truly, it was just sex. I haven't been truly intimate with anyone since your last night."

With a sigh, he glanced away, gazing at the tangle of limbs the two of them made together. "What are you saying?" Link asked quietly, and he shrugged with one shoulder.

"I am saying that I have not trusted my heart as well as my body with anyone since you," he said
softly. "And I will need to relearn how to do so. Will you be patient?"

Link nodded immediately and emphatically. "Of course. We can take as long as you need to, okay?" He kissed him again, a light one pressed against his cheek.

Sheik chuckled a little, turning the desperate clinging in to a more comfortable embrace. "Whatever did I do to deserve you?" he asked in genuine wonderment. "Thank you, Link."

Offering the Sheikah a smile, Link shrugged. "Just - I remember what it's like being alone and not feeling like there was anyone there for you. And I don't want you to ever have to feel like there's no one there."

"Understood," Sheik murmured - Link had been alone too, he remembered, and for far longer. What had nearly a decade of near isolation done to him? He exhaled, then straightened up. "We should eat."

Link's head lifted, like a puppy that had suddenly spotted something beloved to play with. "Okay. I'm starving!" he grinned, helping Sheik to his feet and standing himself.

"I don't doubt it," Sheik said lightly, inhaling and then exhaling deeply, expelling the last of his panic and hysteria out. Oh, he still felt as if his legs were made of jelly - but he was, at least, feeling a little more steady on his feet. "Let us have the meal before you pass out, then."

It would not be perfect. It was not a total recovery, and even the shock of actually telling someone what had happened still had not totally worn off. It had been the first time he had said those words, hadn't he?

Zelda had been told under no uncertain circumstances what had been done to him by the Captain. Andir and Marell, at the hospital, had been told by Zelda with his own blessings - to not give the whole truth, but as much as was necessary. Andir had already done much to dispel terror every time he had been touched, and Marell had, much to his surprise, been able to get him to at least acknowledge what had happened - to himself, if not to anyone else.

But Link was someone else. And he felt just that little bit stronger for being able to say it - even if it had been half screamed, in the midst of hysterics.

...Three Goddesses, he hoped no one in the inn had heard it.

With that morbid thought in mind, he took his seat, reaching for the bread and giving Link a quick smile as he caught his eye.

They had both been damaged, were still damaged. But perhaps, together, they could help heal each other.

Link and Sheik's stay in Mecestia was fast approaching a close.

They had paid their bill to the inn, finally settled for every night they had stayed there, and had earned enough to stock up on a good two week's worth of food for the journey ahead. While Link had stayed in the village to work and to gather belongings and to make some last minute savings, Sheik had scouted ahead - the discovery of another Boundary, through a seaside passage near the southern border, had prompted the idea of a move.

Sheik had suggested, almost cautiously, a change in scenery.
And Link had readily agreed - he had entered Mecestia from a neighbouring land, and had not yet mapped out the apparent network of Boundaries that stretched from Hyrule to Termina to everywhere in between.

"So," Sheik was explaining as they shouldered their packs the morning of their departure, "As far as we know, there are three Boundaries in Hyrule. The one in the Lost Woods, as you learnt, leads to the land of Termina -"

"Where I couldn't find any others, so I just walked over the borders," Link nodded.

Sheik made a confirming noise. "Indeed - it appears they may be rarer in some lands than others. Hyrule also has the one in the Snowpeak Mountains to the north, leading here, and the ones that Zelda and I lived in with Impa for seven years, near Gerudo Valley."

"And you don't know where that one leads to?" Link asked curiously, tromping down the stairs of the inn with wild abandon.

He shook his head. "We never ventured too far in. Impa told us that it was hazardous - that Boundaries were relatively easy in one direction, but nearly impossible in others. How did you leave Termina for Hyrule?"

Link grunted. "With great difficulty," he muttered, and left it at that.

Sheik glanced at him curiously, but did not raise the issue any further.

"Then," he continued, "Mecestia has two - the one in the mountains leading back to Hyrule, and the one on the coast. Which leads to..." He shrugged. "Well. We shall see."

Link chuckled, raising a hand to the man at the markets that he had worked for as they passed through it. The man nodded back in acknowledgment, giving Sheik a curious look and another nod. "It can be an adventure. I didn't know what I'd find the first time I went through on purpose - and you didn't either, right?"

Another affirming sound from Sheik. "It was a mystery to me." For a moment, his voice softened. "I could no longer stand it in Hyrule, Link. Everywhere I turned, there were reminders. I would look at Kakariko Village and remember the place where I had said my farewells to Impa, or where the creature in the well assaulted us, or where I had been captured..." A hint of a smile crossed his lips. "Not all of them were negative memories. It is unusual when a graveyard becomes a place of comfort and fond memory..."

With a startled laugh, Link ducked his head, cheeks stained pink.

"But," Sheik continued, his voice becoming somber again, "By and large, the associations I had with that place were negative ones. Especially in the castle, where I would constantly be exposed to others, where I constantly had to deal with - with guards." Even the word sent a flash of revulsion over his face. "The hospital helped - it was what gave me the idea to leave and find new grounds where I was not constantly surrounded by memories."

"And it paid off?" Link queried, reaching for Sheik's hand and swinging it gently.

Sheik smiled fondly at him - if nothing else, Link's sheer cheerful, optimistic presence was helping him smile again, even if the healing process would take more time. "Oh yes."

"Good," Link said lightly, "I'm glad I left too." He gave Sheik a sidelong look, though. "Do you ever miss it, though?"
Sheik didn't answer immediately - they had reached the barrier between the paved village road and the dirt road that led the rest of the way down to the coast. They would follow that for a spell, but eventually they would cross grassland and fields of salt bush, free from the paths that crisscrossed the rest of Mecestia, on their way to the Boundary by the sea.

He glanced back once, then nodded thoughtfully. "There are... elements of it that I miss," he said softly. "I already miss Zelda, and I suspect I always will - she was my closest friend from the time I was twelve years old, and nearly ten years of friendship and family are not easily forgotten. And I do miss places - I miss the valley, sometimes, and I enjoyed the lake - for what it's worth." Broken ribs and a near-drowning aside, the lake was pleasant enough.

...And that was another thing he could not bring himself to tell Link. Not now - perhaps not ever. His affair with Link's own shadow was a secret he would definitely keep to himself.

They had agreed to be honest with each other. That did not include the admission that he had been so lonely, so desperate to see him again, that he had resorted to a living shadow - or, perhaps, a reflection? - that had attempted to kill the both of them once upon a time.

On the other hand... "There are many places in Hyrule that I would like to see again," he admitted to himself, "I enjoyed my brief visit to the forest - I would not be opposed to seeing more of it."

"I miss it too," Link said plainly. "I know no one really liked me there except Saria, but it was my home."

Reaching out for Link's hand, Sheik gave it a squeeze.

The conversation dropped in to companionable silence as they set out through the plain lands. Here, the sea breeze was obvious, bringing the smell of salt and promise with it. What laid across the waters? Sheik gazed out at them - perhaps, one day, he would find out.

As they left the path, the occasional foot traffic of other travellers thinned out. For a time, a horse and wagon kept behind them, then even that veered off in to another direction, and they found themselves alone again. Sheik reached for Link's hand again, and this time, he did not let go.

The Boundary, Sheik knew, was accessible only via a narrow gap in the ground, a skylight that dropped in to a tube leading far beneath the ground. The end of it, at the cliff face, allowed light in - but the angle was far too sheer, undercut beneath them, and too narrow for a grown man and a pack besides.

At the gap, they stopped, pausing for a brief lunch in the sunshine. And then Sheik unwrapped a length of rope, fastening it to a nearby rock.

Link clambered down, and Sheik tossed the packs down for him, then untied the rope and let himself drop. Feet thumping lightly against the stone, Sheik caught Link's arm, murmuring a, "Let's wait a moment" before they set off so that his eyes could, at least, adjust.

This Boundary, it seemed, joined up with a natural cave system like the other, for there was nothing uncanny about it until they had walked a good ten minutes. There, between one step and another, the walls transformed themselves - once solid grey, now a translucent blue that almost reminded him of the Ice Caverns.

It was, at least, distinctly warmer than the chilly caverns, and lacking Ice Keese and Freezards besides.

Beside Sheik, Link was gazing up at it in wonder, taking in every detail.
"This one is beautiful," he murmured, running a hand along the wall and leaving a trail of yellow behind his wandering fingers. "The one between Hyrule and Termina is weird - there's a lot of gaps that you kind of have to be a Deku to get through." A sad smile crossed his face. "When I decided to leave the first time, I had the Deku Mask, so I could get back the same way afterwards. After that, though, I went to see the Deku Butler. I gave him back the mask - it was his son's memory, you know. But I can't get back through there any more."

"So you've said," Sheik murmured. "I imagine he was grateful to have something to remember him by. Would you return to Termina, if you found another way?"

Link's expression turned thoughtful. "For a visit, maybe. It's very strange."

Again, the conversation faltered, this time through the concentration required to navigate the maze-like structure. Strange echos and unexplained sounds were everywhere. Once, Sheik nearly lost Link amongst it, and only an urgent shout prevented the Hero from taking a wrong path that would have ended in a rather sheer drop. By the time the translucent blue rock began fading back in to grey, Sheik was well and truly relieved to be through it.

"One last leap of faith," he murmured to Link, then took his hand and leaped.

They landed amidst soft sand, and Sheik exhaled before standing. "I suppose we're here," he murmured, drawing unconsciously closer to Link.

The Hero nodded, glancing around almost warily before moving his mouth close to the Sheikah's ear. "We're here," he said softly, then took a steadying breath. "And I think we're being followed."
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets

It had been a cautious pair that had finally emerged out of the cave system and in to a dry, almost arid environment. Sheik glanced down at the ground and frowned thoughtfully to himself - parched and rocky, they would, at least, leave very few footprints.

Save for the parts that were swept over with sand or dust. In those, they would have to tread carefully.

Link's observation had triggered a cautious side in him, the part of his mind usually focused on working overtime to protect Zelda and keep her safe from her enemies - how was Commander Doran doing now? He couldn't help but wonder - busily active, unable to be silenced as he and Link softly discussed how to avoid detection.

He had only realised it in the Boundary itself, at the sound of echoing footsteps that did not belong to either of them, although cautiousness had already laid in during their stay in Mecestia - he was sure he had seen a half familiar face around there, at the inn, in the markets, and perhaps even earlier than that. Murmuring in hushed voices over a brief evening meal, it had been Sheik's idea to take shifts - one would watch while the other slept.

Still unable to find sleep as easily as exhausted Hylians, Sheik had volunteered to take the first watch. And now, settled beneath a cliff face and shaded from the moon by a spindly desert tree, he sat with his back to the small fire and watched.

His senses, sharp even for a Sheikah, were working in overdrive now. Both the visible and the invisible got a careful once-over, head turning like an owl to scan the entirety of their surroundings.

This was an environment he was quite unused to. The desert he had once crossed on his own, the one stretching from Toaru to Hyrule, had been sandy, nearly featureless other than some very distant mountains. But these... the landscape was alive with red rock formations, towering pinnacles swept by the wind and abraded by dust and sand in to twisting structures.

The ground, intermittently rock and sand and dust and gravel, was dotted everywhere with vegetation - not the lush vegetation he knew intimately from the fields of Hyrule, nor the dampness of Mecestia's coasts, but desert plants - small, thin trees with small, narrow leaves, low spreading bushes snagging on their clothing as they had made their way onwards to this little camping spot. Alarmingy, there were even a collection of round, stout plants covered in wicked spines - Sheik was unerringly reminded of Leevers, and watched them suspiciously until he confirmed for himself that they were not, in fact, mobile.

Still - this place was disconcerting. He was glad they had filled their collection of water skins to their fullest extent back in Mecestia, for he had not seen water since, and they needed what they could find until they reached a settlement, quite frankly. It seemed that streams and rivers were few and far between in this place, the air hot and dry.

Well - dry, at least. With the sun set, the temperature was dropping rapidly, and Sheik found himself claiming one of the blankets to wrap around his shoulders. Once or twice, he found himself shivering - perhaps it would be wise to feed the fire a little, boost the low flames that they had only used thus far for illumination.

With a sigh, he glanced back at Link. Even with his ears less sharp than a Hylian's, he still couldn't hear anything other than the sound of night birds and animals, and his Sheikah eyes could see
nothing out of the ordinary - or, at least, nothing that suggested that they were being followed.

Quickly, he gathered fuel, never straying far from the camp site. Dry branches and leaves bundled in his hands, a few shattered pieces of desert timber piled on top, he returned, kneeling by the fire to poke it in to further brightness and heat.

There. Sitting back on his heels, he glanced at the sleeping Hero - he had not stirred from his slumber yet.

He exhaled, then, properly looking at his face. After so many days slipping in to weeks together, sleeping side by side, he knew every pale sun-kissed freckle, every thin scar and every soft scrape of stubble where the first attempts at facial hair were attempting to emerge. But the expression there - no, that was not familiar.

Link's face twisted in the flickering light from the flames, his forehead creased in worry. The quiet of disconsolate murmurs escaped his parted lips, sounding soft and miserable.

A bad dream?

For a moment, Sheik wavered. Perhaps it would be best to leave him be, to let the nightmare come to its natural conclusion and release the Hero back in to slumber. He knew from grim experience that waking amidst a dark dream meant that would dwell on it for the remainder of the day.

And yet, he couldn't just leave him there.

Exhaling, Sheik silently made his way over, bending low to murmur in Link's ear, voice so soft it was virtually inaudible.

"Sleep peacefully, Hero," he whispered, his voice soothing, gentle. "You are safe and happy and loved. Nothing ill can harm you, for I will not allow it to." Cautiously, softly, he reached out, running light fingers through Link's hair.

Link made a soft sound, almost sounding confused. What had happened to the nightmares, to dark thoughts and darker imaginings?

"Rest well," Sheik continued, not stopping his soft stroking of the Hero's hair. "I'll protect you tonight. Nothing bad will ever happen to you, I swear it. Whatever happens, it will be alright."

With a soft murmur, Link exhaled and rolled over, his expression calm once more.

Sheik let a smile cross his face, gazing down at the now peaceful Hero. "Sleep well," he murmured, dropping a feather light kiss in Link's hair. "I love you."

The sleepy mumble that fell from Link's lips was almost - almost - an answer.

Gazing down at him for another long moment, Sheik finally stood, making his way back to the fire to stand guard over one he would not allow harm to touch.

The next day was scorching hot even before the sun had fully risen.

Sheik stirred from his bedroll, lifting his head to blinking sleepily at Link and shaking off the last of a bad dream. Link's words the day before had, regretfully, prompted it - shadowy figures chasing after them, once that revealed themselves to be figures out of the worst of his nightmares.
But, always, they had been muted, far and distant. A bright light stood between him and his nightmares - and he had no doubts on who, exactly, was being represented there.

"Good morning," Link said with a smile. The fire had been extinguished, no longer necessary in the heat and light of the early morning, and he looked well-rested and peaceful. "Did you sleep well?"

"As well as could be expected," Sheik murmured, dusting himself off. He was not a fan of this heat. "...Mrph. Perhaps we should travel during night instead, so long as we are here."

Link reached for one of the water skins, tossing it across to him. "Yeah, that might be a good idea," he said with a thoughtful frown. "I did find water, though - there's a little water hole in that hollow there. I didn't see it during the day, it must have evaporated in the sun."

Drinking gratefully, Sheik nodded, heading over to refill what he had already drunk from the indicated hollow. There was not a great deal left, he noted critically. "Have you found any sign of habitation?" he called over his shoulder - both a genuine question to see if there were any towns or villages within walking distance, and a hidden one, beneath it all, to test if Link's hypothesis that they were being followed was correct.

"I haven't seen a thing," Link said with a shake of the head and a knowing look. That answered both questions, then.

"I see. We shall have to keep a careful eye out, then," he murmured, returning to the camp site. "Perhaps we should head off."

Link nodded. "We can follow the road - someone had to make it, right?" He gestured - nearby was a broad, dry stretch extending off in to the distance, worn and smooth. Sheik could, briefly, imagine feet polishing the sand with each step.

"Mm - it may well lead to a settlement." Stretching, he stepped out for a moment, scanning it in both directions. "We will walk until it is too hot to do so," he decided, "And take shelter for the hottest part of the day before resuming our path."

"Sounds good," Link grinned, handing Sheik a piece of bread and some fruit. "Do you want to eat here, or get started right away?"

Biting down on the bread, Sheik chewed thoughtfully, then reached for his pack. "The sooner we leave, the better," he decided, "It will be exceptionally hot soon, I believe. The Gerudo desert was always at its hottest in the afternoon - if we can get far before that, it would be for the best."

"Right!" Link shouldered his own, dusting himself off as he stood. The grit of the desert was getting everywhere, it seemed. "All the water skins are full, so let's go."

Sheik nodded, and they set off again.

It was only midday when Link called them to a halt, the Hylian's face flushed pink and slicked with sweat. "Can we stop?" he pleaded, "Just until it cools down. It's so hot right now!"

Still looking reasonably cool and unbothered, but honestly and secretly glad that it had been Link who had caved first, Sheik came to a halt. "Of course - but we should find proper shelter," he murmured, scanning their immediate environment.

There - a small copse of those thin, angular trees. "There?" he suggested, "It is, at least, shaded."
"Sounds good to me," Link smiled, heading over with indecent speed to flop beneath the branches. "Ugh - even in the shade, it's still really hot."

"That cannot be prevented, I'm afraid," Sheik murmured, spreading a blanket out before folding it in half - while it was still far too hot to cover themselves with it, he did not want to lie directly on the dusty ground. "But by conserving movement, we will also conserve water."

Link nodded, sighing a little as he stretched out on the blanket. "Okay. We don't know when we'll next find water, right?"

"Right," he murmured back, lying himself down - a healthy distance from Link. (Cuddling up was all well and good, but not when it was this obscenely hot.) "It would be best to go sparingly with it."

"Yeah," Link murmured drowsily - the heat, it seemed, was getting to him. "Filled 'em all up this morning, but..."

Sheik nodded, still rather more alert than the sleepy Hero. "But we have not seen any since, yes," he agreed, "We may, with some luck, find some more later tonight."

Sheikah were, at least, good at finding water in unexpected places. Once the sky darkened, they could search more freely, avoiding the crippling heat of the day. With some hope, it'd be enough to refill their water skins, to drink freely - and to bathe, that would be a nice idea.

While Link drifted off, his eyelids fluttering for a moment before settling shut, Sheik propped himself up against a tree, determined to keep watch while the Hero dozed.

Their pursuer had not been seen or heard since, but still, Sheik was cautious. Perhaps they had not made it out of the Boundary? But they could not be certain - and so he remained alert.

Or, at least, as alert as he could with the sun beating down on them through the thin trees. All was still and silent, the inhabitants of the desert just as reluctant to move during the day as he and Link were, only the buzz of insects breaking the relentless wall of heat pressing in on him and keeping him from straying far.

Sheik's eyelids twitched, slid shut and then snapped open again. His head nodded forward once, noting with half a thought that the air, at least, was a little less dry than it had been earlier. Perhaps it would be alright if he just... drifted off...

When he awoke with a start two hours later, it was straight in to a nightmare.

The thing that had awakened him had been eight feet of torrential brown water slamming him hard against a tree. Sheik choked as water filled his mouth, grabbing on to the tree he had just unceremoniously been thrown in to, dragging himself up before his panicked mind could succumb to fear.

What met his eyes when he shook mud from them, still clinging to the flimsy branches, was the sight of the 'road' they had been sleeping next to filled with rushing, filthy water, the shape of the land becoming abundantly clear now that the dried river bed had revealed himself. Where had it come from? He had seen no rain, and the only clouds were far off and distant in the mountains. The wall of water had taken him completely by surprise.
Coughing and choking, Sheik clung to the tree, the sudden thought that he was glad he had kept his lyre and blades in the Shadow popping in to his head.

And yet...

"Link!" he called frantically, "Link!"

Where was he? He could not find the Hero, and could not let go lest he be swept away. But he could not see him anywhere - not in one of the other trees, not on the bank.

"Link!"

Was that movement? No - just another piece of debris being hurtled down the stream. It collided with something, wavered, and then was diverted around it, even as Sheik looked around frantically.

...What had it collided with?

A sudden sick surge of terror almost drove his fingernails in to the bark. If Link was down there, then he would have to try and find him - there was simply no other option. But to willingly throw himself in to the storm surge, to allow himself to plunge in to that airless, suffocating miasma...

If he let go, he could be swept away. But if he did not...

If he did not, then Link's death could be on his hands.

He did not hesitate. Sheik let go, every muscle screaming as he fought to keep from being swept away. Latching on to another branch buried in the water, he felt his way to the obstruction, reached down, and encountered something struggling.

Link.

Gulping down one last lungful of air, he grabbed hold, a fistful of sodden fabric his guide as he felt his way downwards. Lungs aching, he encountered an arm, the strap of a sword belt - a blanket wrapped around a struggling body, it and the sword belt strap holding its captive tangled amidst unyielding bushes.

A knife flashed in to existence in his hand.

The sword belt was tough, thick leather, and Sheik's knife was meant for softer targets. He sawed frantically, tearing away the blanket as he threatened to entangle them both, and Link was not moving any more by the time he was finally free.

And then the torrent did take them both, Sheik clinging to Link for dear life as his lungs neared their bursting point. Was that a branch? He grabbed at it, and it snapped in his hand. Was that rock they had been thrown against? One arm firmly wrapped around Link's waist, he latched on, attempting to scramble up one-handed.

His head broke the water, and so did Link's.

Like a couple of drowned rats, they clung to the rock, Sheik wincing as Link's head thumped hard against the stone as he struggled to draw them up higher. Had they reached the shore? Almost, almost - it took one leap, and water closed over his head again, but this time, he could claw his way back up.

And then he collapsed beside Link, coughing and choking and gasping for hair, spitting out dirty
Link still was not moving, his face pale, lips tinged blue.

Panic made him roll the Hero on to his back, pressing down hard on his chest to expel what water he could. Dirty water dribbled from the corner of his mouth, and Sheik took a deep breath, sealed his mouth over Link's, and breathed in hard.

Still, there was nothing.

Cursing and swearing to himself, Sheik continued. Failure, here, was not an option - he had to get Link breathing again, he had to force air in to his unresponsive lungs, he had to get the water out. One breath later, and a chain reaction of sorts hit - Link gasped raggedly, his body seizing up as he curled in on his side and expelled more filthy brown water than Sheik would have believed it possible for one man to inhale.

His heart was beating again - racing like a runaway horse, but beating. He was breathing, coughing up more water, expelling the water he had swallowed, dragging in ragged, frantic gasps. The awful blue tinge to his lips was beginning to fade, his face still pale but colour slowly reasserting itself.

Slowly, his eyes began to open, unfocused and fluttering before they cleared, alighting on the Sheikah practically collapsed beside him.

"Shei--" Link stopped there, another fit of coughing expelling more water. "Ow - ow, ow..."

"Relax," Sheik croaked, his own voice hoarse and ragged. "You nearly drowned - don't speak yet."

Link nodded dazedly, rubbing at his chest and shoulder where the sword belt had cut in to him. "...My sword?" he asked suddenly.

That... was probably a good question. "I had to cut the sword belt," Sheik explained quietly, "It was holding you down."

"Oh." One hand dropped to his hip, where the Ocarina of Time was kept in its own bundle. That, at least, was safe, Link holding it up to drain the chamber with water. "It's - okay. It's just my Kokiri Sword - I got it reforged in Ter- Termina. It's just a regular one..."

But still, he looked miserable.

"When the waters recede," Sheik said softly, glancing at the torrent, "We will search for it. It still may remain tangled there - we need to regain as much as our property as we can."

...Ah. The food and the water skins. That was probably a dead loss.

"When the waters recede," Sheik said softly, glancing at the torrent, "We will search for it. It still may remain tangled there - we need to regain as much as our property as we can."

...Ah. The food and the water skins. That was probably a dead loss.

Link started. "My pack?"

"We can look for it," Sheik said dubiously, glancing out at the water. Could they even find it? "I did carry some items within the Shadows - but our food and water probably is a loss."

Already struggling to get back up, Link collapsed again against the stone. "No, I have to find it," he said weakly, "There's something in there that's very important - no one can get their hands on it!"

"What is it?" Sheik asked with a frown, squeezing water out of his bangs, running a hand through his hair - he still was not used to it being this short.

Link hesitated, working on slowly pushing himself up again. "A mask," he said suddenly, voice
soft and hesitant, "That turns anyone who wears it in to a god of war."

Oh.

Well.

It probably would not to do have that get lost, then.

"As soon as the waters recede, we will search for it," Sheik promised him quietly. "It will not remain lost - you have my word." A mask that turned the wearer in to a god of war... "Have you worn it?" he asked suddenly.

Focused on wringing his tunic out, Link didn't answer immediately. "I had to fight Majora," he finally said, looking incredibly interested in pulling his boots off and emptying them of water. "Majora had enough power to pull down a moon to crash on to the world. Only a god could have the sort of power you'd need to beat it."

Link as a god of war... for a brief moment, discomfort flashed across Sheik's face. He knew Link had been forced to fight for Hyrule, for Termina, for the other worlds he had visited, and the scars that lined his body spoke volumes for it.

But to become, literally, a fierce and ferocious deity...

"We will find it," he affirmed again, and sat back to wait for the waters to recede.

The search had been going well. Sheik's pack had been found a little downstream, caught on one of those strange spiky plants. The bread inside had been reduced to mush, but the fruit, perhaps, would still be edible.

Link's pack, it seemed, had been torn open. A spare tunic was the first item they had found, tangled around a low branch, and then the pack itself, still containing about half its contents. Another mask had was a few paces away, the bright yellow rabbit ears indicating that it probably wasn't the god mask that Link had mentioned, another round mask bearing a scribbled design on its front lying within a few steps of that.

The sword Link carried, complete with broken strap, was close by to the battered shield, a bow and a few arrows (but, regretfully, no quiver) caught in another bush. Hanging from a tree branch was something yellow and orange that Link told him was a Terminan hookshot, and Sheik gave it a skeptical look before crouching to retrieve, of all things, the Mask of Truth.

Frowning at the mask - did Link know what it was that he carried? - Sheik shook his head, continuing to scan the ground for their belongings. Was that a water skin? He tucked it away, spotting something white at the same time that Link exclaimed, hurrying forward.

"There -" And suddenly he stopped short, a pair of booted feet stepping out directly behind the the mask, delicately lifting it from the mud.

Sheik looked up - and suddenly halted dead in his tracks, feeling as if he had been punched in the stomach, his face going pale as he saw exactly who it was gazing in fascination at the war god's mask.

The man lifted his head, locking eyes with Sheik. "Hello, pet," the Captain of the Guard said, and smiled.
Sheik remained frozen to the spot.

"That's... what I called you once, wasn't it?" the Captain asked slowly, giving Sheik a slow, deliberate once-over, like a butcher appraising a particularly tasty cut of meat. "I don't remember everything - but I remember calling you that."

Drawing his blade, Sheik skittered back a few steps, and the Captain looked briefly alarmed. "Did I do something wrong?" he asked, raising his hands in surrender. "I still don't remember... most of what happened. If I've done anything to hurt you - I'm sorry, but I still don't understand."

"Neither do I," Link said, voice sounding utterly bewildered, from behind. "What's going on, and who are you? Were you the one following us?"

Still holding his hands up, the Captain nodded once. "I - was," he admitted, then hastily added, "But I had good reason to do so! The moment I saw you in - I think it was Berilian - something triggered in me. Memories from... I have reason to believe it was another life." He shook his head, looking almost visibly frustrated.

Link glanced at his lover, still practically paralysed, his eyes wide, and set a comforting hand on the small of his back. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," the Captain said slowly, "I remembered someone who - was not me. I remembered serving a king. I remember my -" His voice caught. "I remember my wife and children being threatened by a man in black armour. And I remembered him." He nodded to Sheik. "And a girl - I remember, well, touching his cheek and calling him 'pet', and... I remember being very fond of him." Unexpectedly, his cheeks coloured as he turned to face Sheik directly. "Amongst other things. If I hurt you - I'm sorry, but I don't remember."

And, without warning, something snapped within Sheik.

How dare his tormenter be here, alive and well? How dare he use that filthy affectionate nickname without the faintest hint of guile, and in front of his lover, no less? How dare he murmur to him quietly, fondly? How dare he stand there before him?

"You're a filthy liar!" he screamed, and raised his blade aloft to strike down at him.

The Captain's eyes widened in alarm, taking a hasty step back. "I'm not lying!" he said urgently, and Sheik's only verbal response was a growl.

Link glanced between the two, taking a steadying breath and resting his fingertips on Sheik's shoulder, lowering his head to murmur directly in to the Sheikah's ear, barely audible over the roar of his heart beat. "Sheik, we don't know if he is lying or not," he whispered, "He looks pretty sincere - don't let go of your blade, but let me talk to him first, okay?"
Sheik exhaled, the blade nearly dropping from his numb fingers as he slowly, reluctantly, lowered the blade. But he still did not look away from the man's face, mismatched eyes narrowed in hatred and rage.

Both Link and the Captain breathed a quiet sigh of relief, and Link stepped forward, broken sword belt still in his hand. "Please give me the mask," he said quietly, and the Captain handed it over without a second thought.

That, at least, was a good sign, then.

"I seem to have upset your friend," he told Link softly, giving Sheik a sidelong glance. "And I don't blame him. I remember being affectionate, but..." Chuckling weakly, he shifted a little. "From his reaction, I don't think it ended well."

Sheik let out another growl. All too easily, he could remember that foul voice in his ear - "Gentlemen! Our entertainment for the night has arrived!" "Lord Ganondorf might have left you to rot, Sheikah, but I still want to hear your screams." "Do you know what I managed to do to your pet servant?" "When my Lord kills your little Hero, I get to keep the Blood Eye as my personal pet."

His stomach clenched. "Mercy! Please have mercy!" the Captain had begged. He had refused. And then he had died at Sheik's blade.

Sheik dropped to his knees.

Link glanced at him, seemingly wavering between confronting the Captain and comforting his lover. Finally, he settled for both, setting a soft hand on Sheik's shoulder as he knelt beside him, gazing up at him in consternation. "But Berilian was two years ago. Have you really been following me all that time?"

The Captain, at least, had the good grace to look ashamed. "I had wanted to talk to you," he admitted, "And one day, I saw you exploring some caves. It was a delicate question - so I followed you. And I found myself somewhere else." He shook his head, letting out a sigh. "And now it's not just my double memories. Now, I need to find out how to get home - I couldn't get back the way I followed you through to. When I saw your friend, though, more memories hit me, and..."

He shrugged, taking a seat on a dusty rock. "Well, you see my dilemma. I'm stranded here now. I tried to make a life for myself in the places I followed you to, but - if you know how to get home, please." His voice was almost desperate now, genuine pleading in his eyes. "Please, just tell me how to get back to my wife and daughters."

Link exhaled, the puff of air ruffling Sheik's hair. "I don't know how," he said quietly, and the Captain's face fell. "You should have talked to me after we left Berilian - I might have been able to help you better there. But those things that we go through between worlds - they're called Boundaries - they're practically one-way unless you're really determined."

"I am!" the Captain burst out, immediately softening his voice and expression at the outburst. "I am. My youngest would be four, now - she probably doesn't even remember her Papa."

For a moment, Link's face twisted in sympathy, and Sheik curled his hands in to fists. How dare Link sympathise with this man? Couldn't he see that he was lying? He was not to be trusted!

"Link," he burst out suddenly, and the Hylian glanced down in surprise. "A word, please."

Link nodded solemnly, helping Sheik to his feet. "Ah - we need to discuss something," he told the
Captain over his shoulder, following Sheik a far enough distance that they would be out of earshot. "What's the matter?"

"Kill that man," Sheik said bluntly, and Link blanched.

"What, but - he just wanted to get back home, and he doesn't even know why he remembers you - do you know who he is?" he asked curiously, glancing back. "I mean, he seems pretty harmless--"

"He's Ganondorf's Captain of the Guard," Sheik said with a calmness he did not feel, his stomach clenching, muscles shaking. "He was the one who took so much pleasure in my 'punishments'."

Link went white. "He was the one who - who did that to you?" he hissed, and Sheik nodded.

He had been a mocking voice in his ear - "Look at me when I talk to you, Sheikah whore." It had been his hands twisted in his hair, those fingernails digging in to his hips, leaving bruises that ringed his wrists and ankles, upper arms and throat, mottled and dark against his hips and inside his thighs.

It was his laughter that Sheik heard, the sheer pleasure he took from seeing Sheik humiliated and in pain, taking the blade to his flesh only to heal it and do it all over again. He had been the one to slam in to him, biting down on his lip so hard that Sheik tasted blood, a malignant hiss of, "You're mine, pet!" - Sheik exhaled hard, palms digging half crescents in to his palms.

"Please just kill him," he whispered raggedly, and Link lifted one hand to pull him in to a gentle kiss.

"I want to," he admitted, "But - it might not even be him. He said he didn't remember properly - what if he's from the timeline I got sent back to? He would have never done those things - Zelda said that some memories could have leaked across."

"If it's him," Sheik snapped, "Then he still has the potential to do that. We must kill him!"

Link's jaw set, and slowly, the idea that maybe he had said the wrong thing set in. "But he hasn't done anything wrong yet," he explained quietly, calmly, although there was a brittle quality to his voice. "And people can change. Sheik, he had the potential to do those things when he was around Ganondorf and others like him, right? But he's not now - and he said that his wife and kids were threatened. Maybe he was being manipulated to do those things."

"And if he's manipulating us, and he slits our throats in the middle of the night?" Sheik growled softly, "Or worse?"

There was uncertainty on Link's face, and he glanced down to fiddle with his clothing. "If you're right," he whispered, "Then you have every right in the world to hate me. But - Sheik, I can't kill someone based on something they haven't done. If he's from the other timeline, then he's not him - any more than the Sheik still in the Hyrule that got fixed is you."

Sheik exhaled. "I will hold you accountable for anything he does," he said quietly, and Link nodded emphatically.

"Okay. Thank you," he said with a smile and a squeeze to Sheik's shoulder. "Although... if he does end up being untrustworthy, I'll help you hold him down while you kill him. I promise!"

He chuckled weakly. "And thank you in return. Link..." He hesitated briefly. "You will - have to do the talking, I'm afraid. I do not think I could bring myself to have a civil conversation with someone that looks like... that."
"Understandable," Link nodded with a wince. "Okay." And, giving Sheik's hand a reassuring squeeze, he started back towards the Captain.  

What to say? The sliver of Link's face that Sheik could see was, briefly, contorted. "If you really are determined - where are you trying to get to, Hyrule?"

He nodded once. "I was travelling in Berilian when I saw you," he admitted, "It was like a blow over the head. I didn't expect to get trapped."

Link pursed his lips thoughtfully."Okay. If you can go back to the Boundary we went through yesterday, you should be able to get to Mecestia. From there, there's a Boundary in the mountains that goes back to Hyrule. But both will be really difficult."

The Captain physically relaxed. "Alright. I don't mind a hardship - not if it means getting back to my girls."

Sheik remained silent. Was inflicting this man upon Hyrule once more really worth it? Would it be his own time he would return to - or to Sheik's, leaving Zelda to deal with the man herself?  

"In the mean time," he continued, and Sheik grew tense again. "That flood - if you lost your food and drink, I have enough to spare. And I did some scouting while you were sleeping - there's a settlement half a day away where you can restock." He gave Sheik a placating look. "If your friend will allow it."

Sheik nodded once, brisk and unwilling. He did not want this man anywhere near them - but it was true that he and Link did need to eat.

"Once we get to the settlement," he said evenly, gratified that, at least, he could keep the tremble out of his voice, "You're leaving. Until then, we will accept your assistance."

The Captain shrugged. "That sounds fine to me. And..." His gaze softened. "Whatever I did to you in this other life - I'm sorry."

Sheik stiffened, and turned away, and while Link sheepishly apologised, he promptly turned on his heel and began to walk.

With an audible sigh, Link hurried to catch up with him, the afternoon walk quiet and terse. They had, at least, managed to recover quite a few of their belongings, and the heat and dryness at least served to dry their saturated clothing, but the lack of water skins was taking quite a toll on the two of them, and a few hours after dark fell, they were forced to stop.

And the fact that Sheik was now obliged to walk side by side with his abuser was definitely affecting his mood. Even Link had picked up on it, sticking close and keeping between the two of them whenever possible.

"We can rest here," the Captain told them calmly as he caught up, leading them to a sheltered spot well away from what they knew now was a dried river bed. "I don't know about you, but I need food and a drink and a rest before we continue."

"Fine," Link conceded grudgingly, his own actions towards the Captain worsened by Sheik's diminishing mood. "What do you have?"

Digging through his own pack, the Captain produced a few items to eat. "Bread," he narrated as he laid everything out, "Hard cheese... herbed dried fish... which I am beginning to wish I hadn't brought because I am sick to death of fish... and fruit to finish off."
The Captain may have been sick of fish, but Link and Sheik had no such reservations. Link tucked in immediately, and while Sheik had hesitated, even he could not deny that his stomach was growling.

Was it the residual heat of the day that was making him weary, or was it his now full stomach? The Captain was yawning, and Link, beside him, was nodding off. Sheik blinked slowly - he would fight off the tiredness, he decided fuzzily, and keep an eye on things...

Link murmured a good night, curling up in one of the blankets they had actually managed to salvage beside Sheik, and his eyes closed. On the other side of the fire, the Captain stretched, then propped himself up against the rock and let his eyes fall shut as well.

For what felt like a very, very long time, all was silent.

Perhaps, he thought drowsily as his own eyelids began to slip shut, perhaps it would be alright to close his eyes... just for a moment...

Waking up with a foul-smelling cloth jammed in his mouth and something heavy pinning him to the dusty ground was not Sheik's ideal way to leave the land of sleep.

In a half second flat, he was awake and alert, struggling wildly against the weight against him, attempting to shy away from the cloth so that he could bite his attacker. "Get away from me!" he tried to demand, the words coming out muffled and barely audible.

"Oh, shut up," the Captain told him flippanlty, lowering his mouth to Sheik's ear. "Guess what, pet? I have a secret - I remember *everything*!"

Sheik froze. He could not have fought if he tried - every muscle had locked in place.

Two and a half years, and the battle, and the hospital, and escaping to an entirely new world - he still had not escaped this man, found himself instantly returned to Ganondorf's castle, alone, afraid, and assaulted.

He could practically feel the scrape of wood beneath his hips, the sting of cold metal around his wrists, and pain, never-ending, never-yielding pain as they used him as they wished. Alarmingly, his vision blurred suddenly.

"Good boy," the Captain cooed, patting him on the head. "Now, shall we play a game?" One fingertip stroked a pattern down his cheekbone, a gross parody of affection.

Feeling disgust bubble up through his body, Sheik managed to turn his head - only to find Link there, his eyes wide and frantic, another gag around his mouth, his arms tied behind his back and his ankles knotted. He let out a muffled shout - Sheik was sure it was his name - and struggled hard, trying hard to reach the sword a few metres away from him.

But Sheik, unfortunately, had more pressing concerns - namely, the fact that the gag was being secured around his face, his shoulders practically pulled out of their sockets, the one that he had dislocated back in Hyrule screaming in protest, as his wrists were roughly knotted behind his back. "Alright, Blood Eye," the Captain said calmly, the old slur stinging hard, "We're going to play a game. You're going to be a good boy and let me fuck you - or I'll get myself a taste of your pretty little Hero instead."

And Sheik immediately fell still, silent, the struggle fleeing from his limbs.
Link let out another stifled shout, redoubling his efforts. "Oh, shut up, Hero," the Captain sighed, "You'll probably get your turn later. Still..." He patted Sheik's backside affectionately, and the Sheikah went red. "I've already had this one - quite a bit, actually, although never in this time. What do you say to spicing things up a bit?"

Whatever his idea of spicing things up was, Sheik could not tell, tied face down on the ground - but whatever it was managed to at least elicit a yell of alarm from Link.

The Captain chuckled, and abruptly Sheik found himself being rolled over, shoulder twinging hard in pain as his weight pressed down on them. And Sheik found out exactly what had worried Link so much - in his hand was a white painted mask.

"'A mask that turns anyone who wears it in to a god of war.' Isn't that how you described it, Hero?" he asked conversationally, holding the mask up and studying it thoughtfully. "I wonder, pet, what it'd be like for you - being fucked by a god of war."

And, ignoring Sheik's wild struggling and Link's yell of anguish and fear, he held the mask aloft and slowly, delicately, slid it on to his face.

The scream that ripped from the mask's wooden mouth was unearthly, shattering, enough to send night birds flapping from the trees. Blinding white poured from the behind the mask as wide, shattered eyes stared out in something very much like pain.

The war god that was left standing there at the end was not the same Captain that had shared his dinner with them.

Towering nine feet tall, muscled enough to rip trees out by the roots, clad in armour, the Captain's face was alive with malice, his hair shockingly white, his eyes blank and white, blue and red paint obscenely bright on his skin. He raised the sword he held in his hand, almost as large as him and twisted in a double helix, and slammed it in to the ground with a scream of triumph.

The god of war lived once more.

Moving faster than Sheik could have imagined possible, a large hand reached for the front of his tunic and hauled him off the ground, holding him aloft with no more struggle than a child would pick up a small kitten. "Well, Blood Eye," he told him, voice devoid of all emotion but malice, "This is a bit of a troublesome position you're in."

This was nothing like the castle.

And with that thought, something else occurred to him - the castle could not dampen his magic now.

Sheik laughed, wildly, almost crazily, because out of the corner of his eye, he could see Link inching away, wriggling closer and closer to where his sword laid. Within the minute, Link could be free of his bonds.

"You don't get it, do you?" he shouted down at the Captain turned war god. "This isn't the castle! We would have left you alone - but you've picked the wrong people to mess with! Because, guess what?" And he gave the Captain a wide, feral grin. "I have a secret as well!"

"Is that so?" the Captain said flatly, "We shall see about that!" And he released his grip, the Sheikah crashing to the ground beneath him, having only enough time to tuck himself in to a crouch so as not to shatter both ankles. He would be up in a second, and then -
But the war god moved faster than he had ever anticipated. The single second he needed never materialised - instead, it was crushing weight against his ribs and stomach that greeted him, nine feet of war god kneeling over him and on top of him. Sheik screamed as he felt ribs crack - and then began to laugh, rasping and choking and practically devoid of oxygen, as he caught sight of the ropes around Link's arms sawed free.

"Guess what?" he gasped hoarsely, and spat in the war god's face. "You lose!"

And he promptly disappeared in to the Shadow, free of his bonds and scrambling away from the huge dark blot that represented the war god behind the Captain. Rematerialising, he yanked the ropes off Link's ankles and reached for his own blade, the two standing side by side, armed and dangerous and quietly, furiously angry.

"Do you remember your promise?" he asked Link quietly.

"I do," the Hero said grimly, holding aloft sword and shield - and then springing forward with a war cry that would have put the god to shame. "Hyahh!"

And the battle was on.

It was short, intense - even with the Captain's mortal knowledge fueling his moves, the war god's power was immense, the sword capable of sending either one of them flying. Sheik was battered and bruised, his ribs aching and stabbing, the wounds he had received (from glancing blows - a direct blow would have probably sliced him in half) burning furiously. Dizzily, he reached for the nearest tree to guide him back to his feet.

Link was not doing much better, breath coming in short ragged gasps as he attempted to use his smaller size and agility against the giant. But, it seemed, fate was not without a sense of humour - for, a short distance away, Link stopped. And a smile crossed his face.

"You don't get it, do you?" he said quietly. "I know that the god is capable of so much more - you don't even have its true magic."

"It's enough for the likes of you!" he screamed, and drew the sword up high.

"This is not a war!" Link screamed suddenly, standing his ground - to the giant, he must have seemed like a small and determined insect, one that would be squashed the instant it ceased to amuse him. "You have no purpose here, Fierce Deity!"

And the Captain...

Stopped.

"I know you!" Link shouted, and he threw his weapons down. "We were one, for a time, when we had to fight a war against the enemies of the whole world! But this is not a war and you are not needed!"

Something was happening, now. Muscle tremors ran down the Captain's new arms, the huge sword clattering from his hands. The mask, his eyes, were beginning to glow, bathing the area in brilliant white light. Sheik let out a hiss of pain, shielding himself from it - and yet Link stood there undeterred.

"The war is over, war god," Link said quietly, "And you are no longer necessary."
The mask dropped to the ground. The Captain dropped to his knees. And Link dropped down to grab his sword, the blade a hair away from slitting his throat. "I hope you've learnt your lesson," he told him, a distinct growl in his voice.

The Captain laughed almost hysterically. "Possessive little shit, aren't you?"

A muscle in Link's face twitched. "You had a chance to survive," he said quietly, not glancing away even as Sheik slowly got to his feet, retrieving his blade and stepping in close.

"You could have just left," Sheik continued. "Gone back to Hyrule and to your family. But now..."

"Now," Link said quietly, "You'll learn what happens when you hurt the one I love."

And he drew back the sword and swung with all his strength.

Link's eyes closed, then. The blood-covered sword dropped from his hand. And he fell to his knees, face drawn and pale. "It's over," he murmured, and Sheik practically collapsed next to him.

"It is," he murmured, and exhaled shakily. Both timelines free of that man - he let out a laugh that was closer to a sob and buried his face against Link's shoulder.

Eventually, though, he straightened up, ribs twinging, brushing a kiss across Link's cheek. "Let's go," he said simply, reaching for Link's hand.

Silently, the Hero took it. "On to the next destination," he murmured, and an exhausted smile crossed his face.

"On to see where the road will take us," Sheik answered in return, and smiled back.
"I do not believe this is Hyrule, Link."

Link laughed a little, dusting himself off. The Boundary, this time, had deposited the two in a long rocky tube, shaped like an immense well, sand slipping down the sides. "What gave it away? The complete quiet, maybe?"

It was terribly silent. Anywhere in Hyrule, there would be noise - the wind in the trees or amidst the dunes in the Gerudo desert, the sound of birds. Now, the only sound was the faintest trickle of sand slipping down the side, the sound of their breathing, amplified to a roar.

"Can we climb up it?" Sheik queried, pacing around the edges looking for ways up. It did not seem easy, unfortunately - should worst come to worst, he would use the Shadows to boost himself up, to dangle a rope down for Link.

"I don't think we have to," Link said thoughtfully, poking curiously around at something Sheik could not see. "I found a gap - it's pretty narrow, but we can fit through it."

Hurrying to join Link at the gap, he peered through it. "Mm - and I think it gets lighter at the other end. It may lead to another exit."

"Well - let's go!" Link grinned, and hoisted his pack high.

This had become a new routine for the two of them, ever since the encounter in the desert. Boundaries were not hard to find, especially with lazy days spent exploring, learning the lay of more lands than they could count.

Once, nestled in a cozy mountain village startlingly reminiscent of Kakariko, Sheik had murmured a quiet desire to see Hyrule again - and thus an unofficial quest had begun, to find a way back to the impossible, to find an elusive Boundary that would lead them back to Hyrule.

And, in the process, to learn more about the world than they had believed possible.

Four months and six lands later, and they had found themselves here, exploring a consistently widening cave passage that had grown darker - and then, steadily, lighter and lighter.

But it was not sunlight that illuminated the path before them.

"Look at that!" Link laughed in amazement, crouching to poke at a twisted mushroom, glowing brightly enough to tinge Link's features a cool blue green. "Do you think it's magic?"

"Perhaps," Sheik murmured, examining another mushroom growing nearby. "It doesn't feel as if it is infused with magic, however."

"Well," Link said confidently, "It's pretty interesting anyway." Plucking one up, he examined it critically, then started off again, glowing mushroom lighting his hand up.

But within minutes, it had already seemed to dim - or perhaps it was the corridor brightening, more mushrooms cropping up here and there, glowing lichens, luminescent crystals a slight hazard as they pushed their way through. They did, at least, manage to keep clear of those - the tunnel had widened enough to accommodate the two of them side by side and still have room to spare.
And still, the quality of light was changing. "Unless these things can emulate sunlight," Sheik started cautiously, "I believe we are reaching an end."

"Yeah, it looks like it," Link murmured, striding forward a few steps to try and work out exactly what was ahead of them. "We haven't really been going upwards, though, so if it's flat, we should still be underground at the same level as the bottom of the well thing..." And he stopped - they had turned a bend, now, and actual daylight and an end to the tunnel was in plain view. "Ha!"

Hurrying onwards, Sheik followed Link out, emerging in to a wide natural amphitheatre, open to the sky and comfortably, reassuringly green. In the middle, a natural garden had formed, more of the dry weather plants he had seen in the desert, but also more lush vegetation, thick green moss enough to sleep on undisturbed, a few small trees (at least one willow, stooped over to dip its green fingers in to a little creek that bubbled up nearby, a few elegantly spreading ones, draped with something thick and white that draped down like the beards of old men, at least one apple tree), a collection of wildflowers...

And mushrooms. A lot more mushrooms.

"Do you think this place likes its mushrooms?" Link murmured, hurrying forward to taste the clear water while Sheik continued his survey.

The amphitheatre was not, unlike their entry point, devoid of handholds and grips. Instead, the rock faces were mottled and intended - some of the hollows looked big enough for shelter, while others served as handholds and footholds, and flat surfaces to pause for a while abounded. "I'm going to climb up," he told Link, passing him his water skins, "Will you refill these?"

Link murmured an affirmative, and Sheik turned to face the walls and start his way up.

It was not too bad a trip, he found to his relief - even Link could manage it perfectly well, even without Sheikah agility. Within minutes, he had emerged out in to a dense rainforest, a vast lake visible through the trees.

And beyond that...

Scrub, thin scraggly desert plants, and sand. As far as the eye could see.

Sheik exhaled, taking a couple of circuits around simply to confirm that it was true. They had found themselves, then, in a cave surrounded by an oasis surrounded by a desert, and gaps where the ground opened up indicated that it was quite the extensive system.

Well. The caves had fresh water, at least one type of food, and something that could pass for shelter - it would work as a base while they looked for another Boundary. Sighing, he made his way back down, jumping here and there where ledges provided a faster way down than the way up had been.

"What did you find?" Link called as soon as he was in earshot, and Sheik shrugged.

"There is a forest up there," he explained as he picked his way through the vegetation - Link had set up a camp of sorts, settled beneath the willow tree on a thick swathe of moss. "And a large lake. However, it is completely surrounded by sand - I could not see anything beyond it."

Link made a thoughtful sound. "I guess we should stick to the caves, huh? The water is good - and I've found apples, blackberries, and wild carrots. Also..." He waved an arm behind him. "There's another tunnel back there. I didn't go down there, but there may be a lot more to the place."
"It's certainly a good start," Sheik murmured, reaching for an apple and polishing it on his tunic. "It does not look like there is any habitation here, though - if we are to survive, it must be on our own, and our food must be collected or caught by us."

...He would not have minded collecting a few more of those apples. They were definitely good.

With another glance up at the sky, he frowned. Without a point of reference, he could not tell what direction it was moving in - but it was distinctly lower than it had been when they had first arrived.

Link followed his gaze up. "Maybe we should do that tomorrow," he said, sounding a little dubious, "I don't think I want to explore a new place in the dark, and we don't know how much moonlight there will be."

"There are also those mushrooms," Sheik pointed out, but he nodded. "But yes, exploring in the morning would be the better option."

And those were excellent blackberries, by the by.

The little meal finished, the two packed up and started off to explore the rim of the amphitheatre. A few looked likely, and one would have been perfect - had it not overlooked a sheer drop with very little safe way inside. Finally, Sheik settled on one near to the ground, a little damp but the thick coating of moss that covered the ground good enough compensation.

To protect themselves from the damp, Sheik collected whole armfuls of the white lichen hanging from the trees, squashing it in to a shape roughly like that of a mattress and draping two of their blankets on top (having learnt their lesson from the flood, they now carried several). Link stepped on, dropped to his knees, patted it experimentally, and flopped down on his side, and proclaimed it a job well done.

By the time they had set up camp for the evening, night was beginning to fall, and movement was beginning to stir amidst the greenery - Link had spotted a rabbit and had had his bow out before the smallest word was said, and the smell of cooking meat had definitely made Sheik's stomach sit up and take notice. Between that and the wild carrots, roasted on sharpened sticks over the fire, the dinner was almost better than most of the ones that had eaten at inns all over the world.

And when they had settled in for bed at night, Sheik found himself falling asleep without any trouble at all.

The next morning had been given over to exploration. Sheik had risen with the sun, exploring the little garden in the middle of the amphitheatre and collecting more berries, a handful more of the apples (tiny, but deliciously sweet), and handfuls of edible greens. And were those tea leaves? Intrigued, he stared at them for a moment before shaking his head and turning away to bring breakfast back.

They had eaten and packed up their belongings, leaving the thick white lichen over the moss. Perhaps, Sheik suggested as he rolled up the blankets, they could return here the next night, provided that nothing exceptionally tempting laid ahead.

And then they had set out again.

The tunnel that Link had spotted the day before proved to lead to another chamber, this one dark and only open to the sky at one end, a tower of huge, solid bracket mushrooms providing a path up. But that laid at one end of the chamber - the rest continued on, lit up with luminescent crystals and more mushrooms than Sheik could count, rivulets of pure, clean water winding their way between
thickets of fungi.

Two exits extended off from this darker chamber. In one, an underground lake spread out, waterfalls pouring down the edges from what Sheik assumed was the larger lake above. But the one that stood just at the other end was one that was more peculiar than practically anything he had seen on his travels so far.

Almost perfectly circular, the black walls studded with small white gems gleaming with a sort of inner light, another three chambers branched off from here. But it was the contents of the room itself which caught Sheik and Link's attention - inside, stood a perfectly circular patch of forest, divided (as far as they could tell) in to four equal distances, a skylight in the cave's roof sending slanting sunlight illuminating the tops of the trees.

Closest to them was a forest in autumn, red and gold leaves drifting to the forest floor in an invisible breeze. Link glanced at Sheik, and then started for the autumnal forest.

And then his eyes widened comically in astonishment. "Sheik - it's sunset in here!"

"What?" Sheik frowned, and followed him in - only to prove that, yes, Link's assessment had been correct. As soon as he had crossed the threshold, the quality of light had shifted - now, it resembled nothing less than a pleasant forest at the end of an autumn day, the light low and slanted and golden.

Here, too, there was fruit and vegetables to be found - in huge quantities and variety, including some that would never be found side by side. Sheik found himself staring at an enormous collection of beans in at least six different varieties, wild spinach spreading underfoot, tomatoes heavy and red as they hung over lettuce and cabbage, pumpkins and squash settled at the feet of apple and chestnut trees.

"I think we have just found dinner," he observed, and Link laughed, reaching for an orange and peeling it with his knife.

"Uh huh - hey, this is really good!" He cut out a segment, handing it across to Sheik.

It was. Sheik made a content sound, wandering further inside until he spotted something rather peculiar. "Link?"

In a direct, straight line, radiating out from what he assumed was the centre, was snow.

Thick and smooth, it laid on the ground, snowflakes drifting through the air and disappearing as soon as it hit the division between the orange and red of autumn and the grey and white of winter. This time, it was Sheik who stepped across first, blinking as he found himself in a forest in the middle of the night, stars visible above his head.

Stars? Inside a cave?

"Look - they look like fairies," Link murmured in wonder as he stepped through as well, pointing up at the trees. They were bare, but for little glimmering sparks of blue light, flitting from one branch to another. By fortuitous chance, one flittered close enough to see.

"Insects," Sheik confirmed quietly.

Link let out a short, truly amused laugh. "Does everything in here glow?"

"So it'd seem," Sheik chuckled, and gestured - amidst the snow-covered bushes and dark, bare
branches, flowers and small hard berries could be seen, gleaming white. "Mushrooms, crystals, insects, and now flowers and berries, it appears."

Link started. "And the sky," he murmured, gesturing upwards - above them, green flickered and curled around the stars.

Their exploration continued. Beyond the snow laid another forest, this time resembling a clear spring dawn coloured in soft pinks and golds and yellows. This time, it was the flowers that dominated - covering nearly every available surface, purple wisteria dripping down before them.

Still, here and there, fruit could be found, and a few varieties of vegetables - Link finally gave in to his urges and tugged a bright red tomato off the vine, so plump it almost seemed to glow (much like the mushrooms, Sheik supposed) with an inner light. Link bit in to it with a groan of contentment, and started collecting them in his pack.

Sheik, for his part, had found a mandarin and peeled it contentedly, stashing a few and some other vegetables aside in his own pack. "Do you suppose the food will remain when we leave this place?" he asked curiously, covering his right eye for a moment to scan the environment. "I do not think it is illusion, or if it is, it's one too good to detect. But I cannot begin to explain how this developed naturally - or the sky."

Through the trees, he could see the first rays of sunrise beginning to shine in.

"It's worth a try, right?" Link pointed out, collecting a mandarin as he gestured. "There's another change there. And we've had autumn, winter, and spring, and sunset, the middle of the night, and sunrise, right? That's got to be summer in the middle of the day."

"That does make sense," Sheik grudgingly admitted, finishing off another segment of his mandarin and dropping the seeds behind a flower-covered bush. "I suppose we shall find out."

The next change was not just summer, and was not merely the height of the day. Swelteringly hot, Sheik pulled his cloak off, and Link did the same and his tunic and undershirt as well. "Wow," he laughed, "This is like the tropics!"

It was rather like the rainforest they had found themselves in two lands ago, the air alive with the sound of insects and chattering birds. Movement was visible up in the canopies, thick enough to shade them from much of the light coming in, and flowers, bright and big and colourful, were dripping from the trees.

Here, the food was limited just to fruit - but oh, what a variety of fruit was there. Sheik found a wide-necked bottle in his pack that had once held a type of potion and began to fill it with berries - strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, cherries, currants, blackberries. Handfuls of grapes were deposited in a metal tin that they had once purchased a meal in, and a few scattered plums and apricots joined them.

Examining a round yellow fruit the size of his hand, Link glanced up rapturously. "Let's move in here!"

Sheik chuckled. "I believe we may get ill if we lived entirely off fruit. But, look." He held the remainder of the mandarin up. "They can, at least, pass from season to season."

Link nodded, collecting a few of the large yellow fruit and tucking them in his pack. "Okay. In that case, I want to get some more from the autumn forest."

By the time they finally managed to pull themselves away from the miraculous forest (food
conveniently remaining), Sheik was in a mood to explore more. "We should see the other passages," he said with a nod to the others, "But let's take this back first."

"Yeah, okay," Link laughed - he had taken his knife to the large yellow fruit and sliced off a piece of it. "Taste this!"

His arms full of fruit and vegetables, Sheik was forced to simply open his mouth and let Link deposit the golden flesh inside. "Sweet," he murmured as he licked a drop of nectar of his bottom lip.

Link glanced away, a little pink around the edges.

Two of the three caves promised nothing of great interest. One, closest to the winter forest, sloped down sharply, and ice began to emerge on the walls. When the ground became too slick to continue without making return nearly impossible, they turned back, Sheik unerringly reminded of the Ice Caverns.

The other, opposite to where they had initially emerged and closest to the forest in spring, sloped upwards in marked contrast to the proto Ice Cavern's downward descent. Here, it met with the forest, vegetation spilling downwards. Here, more animals could be found, rustling in the undergrowth, and a quick shot from Link netted them... well, something that looked vaguely like a rather small pig.

The third of the caves, closest to the summer forest, was, it seemed, inaccessible, a solid wall of rock blocking their path. Somehow, he had the feeling that that was where the Boundary would be found, where they could find their next path onwards.

But still, Sheik found himself unopposed to staying for a little while longer, walking side by side amidst the glowing crystals of the caves with Link. He found himself enjoying preparing the meal with him, the smell of roasting meat filling the little hollow.

This place that they had found themselves in felt pleasant. It felt like somewhere where he could begin to allow himself to heal.

And so he did. Eventually, the nightmares began to cease. Oh, they had not disappeared entirely - he would not be that fortunate. But soon, they moved from 'debilitating' to 'a minor anguish', and he began to rediscover what it felt like to be well-rested.

Soon, the hateful words that the Captain had hissed in his ear began to fade. Where once it would send him in to memories, now words only became reminders for part of the time. Link could attempt to wheedle Sheik in to keeping a very young rabbit for a pet without Sheik remembering the Captain's hand curled in his hair and whispering just what he would do when he was his.

Link could catch Sheik around the waist and drop a playful kiss on his shoulder, and Sheik would only start when he was truly caught by surprise.

Eventually, even the most intimate of touches became familiar, safe, good. Where he had shied away from touch before, with Link, he learnt to embrace it once more. Even Link's hands on his hips, tenderness in his eyes as he whispered promises in to his ear, became something he came to claim once again.

The Captain, Ganondorf, the guards - whatever they had done - now, he found himself untouchable.

With Link, he could truly let his life begin again.
Four months after their arrival in the caves, the rocks had fallen in.

A hand pressed against them at the right time letting them crumble like sand, and Sheik had been left standing there in astonishment, blinking down at what had once been an impassable barrier.

And beyond it, stretching and curving and twisting onwards, stark white rock piercing the darkness.

Sheik gazed at it, one hand on the true rock of the real world. Beyond that, he had a feeling he knew what he'd find.

"Link," he told the Hero without taking his eyes off the white stone, "Collect our things."

Beyond that, he knew, was Hyrule.

When they reached a vast yawning chasm dotted with white islands like mushroom stalks emerging from the dark, he smiled. "Once," he told Link as they leaped from platform to platform, the Shadow urging and guiding them on, "When I was twelve years old, I came here on my own. The platforms stretched far, and I was left stranded on one. It wasn't until Impa noted my disappearance that she came for me - and then the platforms moved close enough together for me to simply step across."

And here, now, was the room he had lived in for seven years, scattered pillars edging the sides as if tossed there by giants. There was no sign of habitation, now - no sign that three people had hidden from that which wanted them dead for nearly a decade.

When they emerged out in to the sun, Zora River bright and shining in the valley below, Sheik breathed in deep and gazed out at the land he hadn't seen for half a year.

"Well," he said softly, "We're home."

From the valley to the castle, it was a walk of several hours, and the more Sheik saw, the more he remembered. He had grown subdued - this was Hyrule again, but to which one had they returned to? Was it Link's time, the time he had chosen to leave, the time with his doppelganger in it, or was it perhaps to the time that he remembered, a world left with seven years of war and returning to a Queen and not a Princess?

The valley walls and grassy plain spoke of nothing to them.

When Castle Town swam in to sight, he stopped. Here, then, was his answer - a Castle Town he did not know, similarly expanded upon like the one he had departed six months earlier, but in different ways, the buildings laid out differently, the expansion in to the field greater. Cliff walls had been bombed down. The field stretched onwards.

"I don't know this Castle Town," he admitted quietly, and Link frowned.

"Neither do I. But I think I recognise some of it - it's just... bigger than I remembered. I think..." He hesitated. "I think this is the one I came from. They must have done a lot in six years, huh?"

Sheik nodded thoughtfully, and followed Link up the bridge and in to the town.

Now, he could see more similarities. Link made a sound in confirmation when he saw the fountain - "I remember when that opened," he told Sheik softly, stepping up to the castle.
The guards took one look at the pair of them, then another, then snapped off a salute and let them pass.

"That was strange," Link murmured as they continued on, a guard stopping them near the gates. "We're here to see Zelda," he told him, forgetting her title in his haste to explain, "Is she here?"

"Of course," the guard said with a half-bow, "I will take you to her."

And he did, leading them straight through the Great Hall of the castle and out to a courtyard. Now, recognition lit up in Link's eyes - evidently, he remembered the sculpted gardens well. With another salute, the guard gestured to a small, hidden courtyard, and Link grinned.

"Thanks!" he told him, grabbing Sheik's hand and hurrying through to see Zelda once more.

But what met their eyes was like nothing they could have possibly expected.
Sheik had left the Hyrule he knew nine and a half years after Ganondorf had first taken over.

Link had left his Hyrule after three years, and in the past seven years spent travelling, he and Sheik had caught up with each other, their timelines running in parallel.

But here, it seemed, time had other things on its mind - because the Zelda here was not the thirteen-year-old that Link had said goodbye to. She was not even the twenty-year-old that they had expected.

Nearing thirty, now, Zelda slowly climbed to her feet, her eyes wide and astonished. "Link...?" she whispered, and then her gaze landed on Sheik and her eyes grew, if possible, almost wider.

Behind her stood another Sheik - a good ten years older than his counterpart, his face free of scars, his long hair in a ponytail that hung almost to the small of the back. He was gazing back at the younger Sheik in undisguised shock, his forehead creasing.

"What is this?" he whispered.

Link shook himself off, taking a step towards the princess - it was still her own tiara that sat on her forehead, not the crown of a queen, and Sheik dizzily thought that not being murdered tended to do wonders for the king's life. "Zelda, we -" he started uncertainly, "I mean, why are you so old?"

Both Sheiks shot him a glare.

"Why are you so young?" she countered with a half desperate sounding laugh. "Three Goddesses. Link, I haven't seen you in fifteen years."

The Hero frowned. "But - it was only seven."

"Not here," she said softly, and turned her gaze on Sheik.

For a moment, Sheik felt himself trapped beyond that piercing blue stare, glancing away as she raised a hand to his cheek, touching the scars beneath his eye lightly. "Sheik, how can you be here?" she whispered, glancing back at his older self. "Both of you, simultaneously?"

"Will someone kindly explain what is going on?" the older Sheik asked quietly, and Zelda, suddenly, looked guilty.

"I - yes, of course," she murmured, turning back to him and reaching for his hand. He offered it immediately, and she gestured for Link and the younger Sheik to follow them. "Please - we have much to discuss."

The four of them, settled down in the courtyard, stared across at each other uncertainly.
"It began," Zelda started softly, "Eighteen years ago. A great threat began to emerge from the desert, and I began to have dreams that showed the future..."

By the end of the tale, the older Sheik looked stunned. "I had no idea," he murmured, and Zelda shook her head.

"No one else did, either," she explained quietly. "I remembered, as I was the one to send Link back to this time. Link remembered, as he was the one directly affected. Impa knows what we told her eighteen years ago." She nodded across to Link, who reached out to squeeze the younger Sheik's hand lightly. "But aside from that, the seven-year war was... an unknown element."

"Then you don't know," the younger Sheik murmured to the elder, "You never lived through it?"

"I did not," he confirmed quietly, "But - thank you for keeping her safe in that time."

His scarred lips quirked in a smile. "If you truly are me, then you know that I would do anything to keep her safe."

"I do know, yes," came the soft reply, and the glance he gave to Zelda was not exactly one limited to professional protectiveness.

Zelda raised a hand, and Link and both Sheikah glanced at her. "There is one thing, however, that someone will have to explain to me, now," she said with a frown, turning to the younger, "Sheik, how can you be here? Like this? Even when I returned Link to this time, he reverted to that of a child, and yet you -" She swallowed. "Still have your scars."

"I can't pretend to understand how this happened," Sheik said softly. "I left Hyrule - two and a half years after the war ended - via a Boundary."

Zelda's eyes lit up in acknowledgment. "The same way Link left. Another layer of reality, perhaps - where different times and places may converge."

Nodding emphatically, Link reached out to pat Sheik's hand. "Yeah - we both ended up in Mecestia - this little country near the sea. I don't know how - I'd been travelling for over six years by then. I went through a lot of Boundaries." He grinned a little. "Maybe some of them crossed the timelines around and we just ended up going in a circle."

"It's possible," Zelda chuckled, although she had not taken her gaze off the younger of the two Sheikah. And, finally, it simply slipped out, the princess practically sighing as she spoke. "Sheik, Link, may I speak to - ah." She paused. "To the younger Sheik?"

Communication was going to be a problem, here.

"Sure," Link murmured, the older Sheikah nodding. With a smile, she stood, holding a hand out to the younger Sheik.

Silently, he accepted it, quiet as they walked side by side.

"How have you been, Sheik?" she asked quietly as they emerged out in to the trees, "The last I remember you - well, it was the moment Link had been sent back. I simply..." She sighed. "I was ten years old, Sheik. And suddenly, seven years spilled in to my head, and I could only wonder about the fate of my closest friend, someone who I had never met in this waking world." Her blue eyes, the shade so similar to Link's, looked terribly, terribly sad. "And so I must ask - how have you been?"
He laughed quietly, almost sadly. "For a long time, I lived in a state of limbo," he confessed, "I had been... plagued by memories. But things have been improving."

"Because of Link?" she asked quietly.

"Because of Link." He smiled, very briefly - the memory was a painful one, but it was one that he relished for what it had meant. "I told Link what happened. I had never... told anyone, before. I was... angry. Hurt. Everything I had been holding in for years - it simply burst out." Letting out a sigh, he gave Zelda a sideways glance, taking in the way the youthful lines of her face had matured, the slight creases around her eyes. "But he did not judge me for it," he continued quietly, "And once it came out, I could continue on with my life."

She nodded slowly, coming to a stop and reaching for both of his hands. "Sheik," she said softly, "I am glad you found one another again. I had struggled with that decision for all of the last week - when we were returned, and I saw the hurt in Link's heart, I knew I had made a mistake. And I am glad that your life has not been forfeit on my part." Leaning in, she dropped a kiss on his cheek.

He smiled, touching a hand to her hair lightly. "I do not blame you for anything," he reassured, and she nodded, hesitating over something.

"The other Sheik, your older counterpart," she admitted suddenly, the words bursting free like water behind a dam, "Impa and I recalled him from Toaru for - largely Link's sake."

He still wasn't sure about being replaced, but, finally, he nodded. "He told me about that," he said quietly, recalling quiet talks curled up next to one another. "We had not remembered the same things. The man back there did not have the history I shared with Link, he told me. And..." An awkward shrug. "He found the disconnect troubling."

Zelda nodded, her own expression as troubled as he imagined Link had felt. "Link doesn't know yet," she murmured, the faintest hint of pink crawling across her cheeks, "But - well, you are not the same people, and his memories of those seven years are only the faintest of dreams. Your lives diverged at twelve - you grew up in very different ways. And..." That was definitely pink, yes. "And with very different loves."

For a moment, he gazed at her uncertainly. And then he let out a short laugh. "I see," he chuckled, "Then I'm glad he has found happiness too."

"Oh, he has," she told him with a small, coy smile, the blush receding but the tips of her ears still pink. "And so have I - and I cannot tell you how happy I am that you and Link have, too."

And, very suddenly, Sheik found himself being hugged, laughing in genuine amusement and surprise before Zelda linked her arm with his.

"Now," she said brightly, "I do believe they are waiting."

He gave her arm a squeeze, and, content, followed her back to where Link was waiting for him.

It was strange, being back in the castle.

Passing himself off as his older counterpart's younger brother and Link as simply aging superbly well, the two, at Zelda's urging, settled in for a spell at the castle, the one Sheik had never had the chance to see before its destruction. Still, even now, it differed from the one Zelda had often spoken of in the Boundary - they were expanding, rebuilding parts.
This was not a Hyrule neither he nor Link remembered.

And yet, here and there, there were reminders. Ganondorf had seen no need in stripping the human guards that served him of their Hylian uniforms, desiring to keep the human population under control with, at least, something familiar. And here, now, were guard uniforms that were the very same as the corrupt guards that had committed atrocities in his name.

When Zelda had tentatively suggested that he and Link join the guard, perhaps as a method of acclimatising himself to them once more, he had refused flat out and had spent the rest of the evening in his and Link's room, restless and anxious.

And yet it was refreshing to be able to move freely throughout the castle, glamour no longer necessary but still hiding his scars behind his hair and cowl, and not receive looks of pity, or disgust, or contempt.

Free of the demands that the Queensguard had forced upon him, he could move freely and watch as his older counterpart fulfilled the duty he had always struggled with.

And here, too, laid other challenges. Impa had been told of the other timeline, had been informed that a strange boy from Toaru would see her as another parent - and yet she remembered practically nothing of him. Having Impa back and having her recall nothing of their life together, seven years with her as the closest thing he had had to a parent in quite some time, hurt more than her not being there at all.

And still, he was restless. Link was, too - once, he had taken Sheik's hand and led him out of Castle Town almost desperately, the two making their way across to Lon Lon Ranch. There, an eighteen-year-old Epona in the prime of her life stood waiting for him, and the ranch mistress Malon, now married and with two small children tugging in fascination at Link's tunic and the hilt of his sword, had only been semi-reluctant to return her to him.

She did not recall Sheik. Sheik remembered a girl who had nearly impaled him with a pitchfork and then had hidden him from Ganondorf's men at risk to her own life, and remained quiet.

Upon Epona, Hyrule was theirs to explore. They returned to Kakariko, Epona content to linger outside the stairs on the tree while Sheik gazed across the town from the grassy ledge the windmill stood on. A smile lingered on his face when he turned to Impa's house, or to the graveyard, and the square where things had once gone terribly, terribly wrong for him was duly ignored.

They returned to Zora River, and Link splashed cheerfully in the shallow parts, Sheik dangling his feet in the cooling water. He remembered his feet sliding across the ice of Zora's Domain, the sudden jolt of jealousy he had felt when Ruto had spoken of her fiance and the realisation, the truly solid fact that what he felt for Link was not merely physical attraction, and laughed suddenly, startling both Link and the cucco on the shore he was attempting to stalk.

The time where Link had won favour with the Gerudo had been erased, now. But with their king gone and the Valley in Nabooru's capable (if mildly terrifying) hands, and the strong ties between the Gerudo leader and the Hylian princess growing stronger by the day, the Valley was opened up again. While Link practised horseback archery, the larger quiver he wanted a prize at the end of the road, Sheik settled in for a spar, his muscles stretching as endorphins pumped at the exercise.

One day, they returned to Lake Hylia.

Beneath the tree where they had shared their first kiss, Link and Sheik sat side by side, Sheik rested his head on Link's shoulder and gazed out at the clear blue water, remembering the desperation in
Link's eyes as he pleaded, begged for Sheik not to leave - just that once.

"The rules suck," Sheik whispered to himself, then turned his head to claim Link's lips in a kiss.

Link chuckled - he could feel the vibrations from the soft laughter - and wrapped his arms around Sheik's middle. "I love you," he whispered, his blue eyes sparkling like the lake that spread before them, an uncontrollable smile spreading across his face, "Together, we can get through anything."

"Through fire and rain," Sheik murmured, recalling a night that had had both. "Link..."

And he exhaled, as quietly as a prayer, as he turned to face Link and settled himself on the Hero's lap.

Link gazed up at him, wonder in his face, and grinned. "...Hi," he murmured, and Sheik leaned down to drop a kiss on the end of his nose.

"...Hi," he breathed, and reached up to brush a curl of blonde hair out of cornflower blue eyes. "I've made you wait," he murmured, "It never felt right before - I could not fully let go of the past and embrace a future. But now..."

And careful fingers unfastened the buckle of Link's belt, drawing it through and dropping it aside, his hands slipping up Link's sides to rest lightly on the bare skin of his hips.

"Now," he told Link, voice steady, every hint of doubt or fear, every anxiety from the past three years, utterly gone, "I am ready to give myself entirely to you."

And an ecstatic smile spread its way across Link's face. "I'm glad," he told Sheik sincerely, and caught his lips in a kiss that sent Sheik reeling.

If only all oxygen deprivation felt like this, he thought dizzily, not drawing away until the need to breathe made itself urgent. A soft laugh bubbled from his lips as they broke away, a flush emerging across his cheeks. "I love you," he whispered, and then repeated it simply because the words felt so good. "And I am yours."

The rapture in Link's eyes as he lifted his hands to Sheik's hips, unwrapping the cloth belt and tossing it aside, made this all worth it.

The concentration on his face as he took one of Sheik's hands, dropping kisses on the backs of his fingers while he unfastened the wraps, made this feel like something he had been right to hold off, like he was a long-awaited, cherished treasure to be unwrapped.

The sheer affection and warmth in his smile as the long-sleeved tunic was drawn over Sheik's head, revealing bare skin to his waiting hands, made even the slight nip of autumn air feel like the warmest of caresses.

"You are too dressed," Sheik whispered, and began liberating Link of his own clothing. The belt was gone, and now so was the sword belt, the gauntlet on his sword arm unbuckled, the long fingerless leather gloves untied and set aside.

Sheik traced the collar of the green tunic and tugged it free, sliding the white undershirt over his head and depositing a kiss on the pale skin of Link's throat revealed by it, smiling at the laugh that the slight tickle had produced. A hand, run through his hair, found the green hat falling carelessly to one side, Sheik's long musician's fingers caught in the silken strands.

Link's hands fell to his hips, stroking soft lines beneath the scars that Ganondorf had left there, and,
unbidden, old words fell in to his head. "A caress from iron instead of your Hero's hands," Ganondorf had whispered. "Every time you look in the mirror, every touch, every caress, every precious moment with a lover... you will remember this instead of him."

Ha, Sheik thought, and stole Link's lips in another kiss, letting himself abandon every dark thought over to pleasure.

Three years could slip away like rain against glass, here in the sun in the soft green grass with his lover. Perhaps it would still return to haunt him one day, perhaps he would still flinch at sudden grabs, and perhaps his nights would, occasionally, be interrupted by dark dreams.

But here, if only for one afternoon with Link, he could allow himself to be complete happy.

Link's eyes were shining as his rid them both of their clothes, boots and trousers scattered to the side like confetti, fingertips calloused from the sword no longer that of a warrior's, but that of a lover's, exploring the terrain of Sheik's skin with the same dedicated thoroughness that he put in to everything. Little pinpricks of pleasure ran in waves across Sheik's skin, letting out a shuddering breath as Link trailed fingertips down his spine and lower still.

"Okay," he whispered finally, the barest brush of his lips against Link's as he murmured the word to him. And Link's gaze did not leave his own as he reached one-handed for his pack, searching for the oil used to polish his sword.

The symbolism of the choice was not lost on Link, who gave a short little laugh as he glanced down at the bottle.

"That sounds about right," he chuckled, bumping his hips up against Sheik's. He let out an involuntary gasp as the sudden contact - their moments of intimacy over the past months had been limited to touch only, explorations of the other's body, exploring networks of scars. Sheik remembered shuddering, stomach curling in anxiety as Link's roaming fingers strayed over scar tissue, and he remembered the look in Link's eyes to show that he did not mind this disfigurement in the slightest.

A scar crossed his lips, and yet Link certainly showed no sign of wanting to stop kissing him any time soon.

Before, when he had hesitated, it had been because of memories - of Link's well-meaning touches replaced by other, more ugly contact. But now there was no doubt in his eyes as a warrior's hands brought nothing but tenderness and pleasure, Sheik letting out a soft sigh of contentment as he angled his body towards Link's, eyes closed as he focused on the sensations of Link's actions.

They were going to get terribly grass-stained, weren't they?

"Are you ready?" Link whispered, wiping his oil-slicked hand on the grass. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," Sheik breathed, his hands resting on Link's shoulders as he readied himself, silently thanking him for allowing it to be this way - for giving him time, for giving him choice, for giving him control. Everything Link did had been designed to put Sheik at ease, to never force him out of the fragile comfort zone he had build around him.

Every touch, every encounter, every single moment of physical pleasure had been Sheik maintaining tight control over everything in his surrounds. But if control was a gift, then he would relinquish the control he had so tightly held to his heart for three years to Link.
And, he realised as he gave himself over to Link, sometimes a bit of abandonment of control could feel very good in the right circumstances.

Was that amazement in Link's eyes, he wondered, as they moved together? Could he see fascination? Had he found himself impressed by the Sheikah straddling his hips, had he forgotten what the union of their bodies had felt like after ten whole years?

Link's body, in this timeline, was still a virgin's, untouched by anyone save himself. But the memory still existed of their earlier unions, and his touch was as practised as if it had been only yesterday, as if he had spent the entirety of their time apart dreaming of this moment again.

Perhaps he had.

Sheik bowed his head, forehead to forehead, and let a moan slip forth from his lips. And Link gave a dizzying, amazed laugh, claiming them with his own, fingers trailing over Sheik's cheeks, his jawline, his shoulders and throat as if he was the most exquisite piece of artwork.

"You're amazing," the Hero whispered, his eyes alive with joy even as his words were interrupted by gasps and hitched breaths, "I'm - so glad we found each other again. You are what I need to be happy."

"And you are what I need," Sheik told him, stealing his words away with another long, lingering kiss, a stifled moan against Link's skin making the Hylian shudder. "To be able to live again."

Could he learn to be happy on his own? Perhaps, he thought dizzily, his mind somewhere else rather than on deep philosophical questions at the current time. But there was no shame in asking for help. There was no loss of pride to accept that one had suffered a loss and would need time to heal. Perhaps, one day, he could be happy without Link...

But, right now, he did not even want to try.

Home was not Hyrule - home was where Link was. Happiness was not an abstract concept to find in isolation - happiness was surrounding himself with the things he loved, with the people he loved.

Finding himself meant finding home and happiness where ever it happened to be.

And right now, he could find himself in Link's arms, in pleasure, in joy, in finally finding a place where he belonged.

With Link's hand in his, they departed the castle.

Zelda had not been surprised, making them promise only to write frequently. It was something neither had any problem with doing - their destination now was not another Boundary, another world, but the borders of their own homeland, to see what laid beyond the border.

Perhaps, there, they could find a physical place to call home, somewhere to stay and learn and live.

And so they climbed aboard Epona's back once they reached the green grass of Hyrule Field, their belongings packed and the whole world ahead of them. Zelda and Sheik's older counterpart had journeyed with them, and now stood watching, hand in hand, Zelda's free hand raised in a wave as Link and Sheik tore off.

Where Link's story began, in the forest that most forgot, the next chapter was being readied.
The Hero had said goodbye to Saria, carrying away an ocarina shaped for adult hands and her blessings in his heart. And then they had journeyed onwards to lands that Link did not know, passing sunny groves and glittering springs.

Once, Sheik was positive he saw a glint of blue flitting through the leaves.

When they found themselves at the edge of a precipice, only a single bridge spanning the gap, it had not taken long to decide - beyond the gorge laid another land, one they would learn of - together.

"Let's go," Sheik said evenly, gazing ahead as he wrapped his arms around Link's middle, eyes not on the chasm beneath their feet but whatever future they could find directly ahead.

For together, they could get through anything.
"Sheik! Come on, we're going to be late!"

Hands stilling on the lyre strings, Sheik glanced down through the branches and smiled at the sight he found there. Link's excitement was infectious, a cheery grin across his face, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Chuckling as the Hylian's movements sent the little bells knotted to the ends of his clothing jangling and ringing, he tucked the lyre away, the composition he had been working on stored away for later, and leaped nimbly out of the tree.

"Have they arrived yet?" he asked, dusting himself off out of habit - his own outfit was mostly free of dust, but he found that he could not quite help himself from fussing.

"Not yet. Yula's gone ahead to keep watch, though - and we should check up on Epona before."

Sheik made a sound in the affirmative, gazing up at the sunlight shining through the leaves. "How is she doing?"

Link smiled fondly. "Pretty well. She's gone for a few runs since then, although she's sticking close by. For, well, obvious reasons," he added with a chuckle.

"Of course," he smiled, following Link up the path that led to the ranch. The sound of the odd blue goats reached them before they could see them, bleats and calls filling the air. From nearby, there was a loud whinny.

Jogging ahead, Link started for the stable. "Hey, girl!" he called, and Epona trotted calmly to the gate, followed by a small chestnut foal. "And hey there, cutie!" A wide smile crossed his face, and Epona's foal butted his hand boldly.

"They're coming along nicely." Sheik observed, offering the apple he carried to Epona. She plucked it from his hand delicately, and he gave her a pat.

"Uh huh," Link smiled, "The mayor wants her to have more - he says she has good bloodlines." A faint shrug - horse genetics, it seemed, were still a mystery to him.

"She is in her prime," he conceded, then reached a hand out to the foal.

She snorted, and Sheik withdrew his hand, looking bemused. Link chuckled outright, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "She'll get used to you," he said encouragingly, then gave his shoulder a squeeze, voice lowering. "How are you feeling?"

The Sheikah let out a sigh. "Fine, Link," he reassured, "It was just one dream. Even normal people have bad dreams sometimes." Despite the self-deprecating words, his tone was light, almost teasing. "Now, we should hurry back, or else we will miss our guests."

"Okay," Link finally conceded, although he wasn't about to move his arm from Sheik's shoulders. "I bet she'll like it here - it's helped a lot for you, huh?"

"It has," Sheik said quietly, eyes on the landscape as they started back towards the village's mouth. "Having a purpose has helped - and I'm sure the forest air is healing."

Link smiled a little, eyes lifting as a little blue spark flitted by. "Hey!"
"Hi!" he grinned back, holding out a hand for her to land on. "Ready for the big day?"

"Am I ever!" Navi said enthusiastically, alighting from Link's hand and doing a loop around Sheik's head. "Maybe one day, she'll decide to come back to the forest as well, like everyone else!"

That got a chuckle. "But she's not from the forest," he pouted out.

Navi made a rude sound. "Neither's Sheik, but he came!"

"Alright," Sheik interrupted good-naturedly, "I'm sure we can decide her future for her when she's actually here."

Link let out an embarrassed laugh, dropping his arm to catch Sheik's hand and swing it idly. Here and there, as they walked, the beginnings of festivities were beginning to emerge from the forest around them - a pavilion in a clearing, colourful lamps on long poles, the different glass in each one promising to be a glowing spectacle once night fell. The celebration for the first day of summer - it was Link and Sheik's fourth, since coming here, and this year would be a special one.

Near the entrance to the village, at the road that led through the woods and, eventually, back to the bridge that divided this land from Hyrule, they lingered.

They did not have to wait for long - Link's sharp ears caught the sound of horses and a carriage well before the round-eared Humans that inhabited the forest caught wind of the arrival. Soon, though, a whistle was blown, a cry of, "Make way for Her Majesty Zelda, Queen of Hyrule!" shaking the very leaves.

And out of the carriage stepped the young queen, laughing, her hair tied back in a practical braid and dressed in the customary dress of the summer festival. "Just call me Zelda," she told the young villager who had announced her presence, then turned back to the carriage and lifted from it a little boy.

It was curious, seeing the child now after so many letters. Sheik gazed at him, and a faint smile crossed his lips as he glanced from the blonde-haired, blue-eyed prince to his blonde-haired, blue-eyed mother - and the Sheikah moving to stand behind Zelda, the little boy resembling him to every last facial feature.

Link glanced between prince and Sheikah, and a laugh bubbled out of him.

Handed over to his father (or, at least to all official knowledge, to his mother's protector), the queen reached for the younger pair's hands, swinging them merrily as they led her back to the village proper. "- is so cute - you'll be able to see her a bit later, once she's rested. And you should see the bonfire we're going to have this evening!" Link enthused, Sheik simply content to listen and watch.

Somewhere ahead, music was beginning to play.

*The summer festival dance. Glowing orbs in glass lanterns light up the trees and the field, the little prince clapping delightedly as Navi swoops and loops before his eyes, Link grinning fondly at his old friend. Beside him, Sheik plucks a melody on his lyre, watched the fire, and is content, music in his hands and peace in his heart.*

Quietly, Link reaches for his hands as another song starts, a lively promise of joy. Catching sight of Zelda already twirling and laughing in her protector's hands, the boy watched over by a persistent fairy and a few fascinated young women from the village, Sheik allows himself to be lead
Here, he finds it easy to move and lose himself in the music, the fire light in Link's eyes the brightest thing he's ever seen. Reaching out as the dance begins, he cups his Hero's cheek in one hand and lets a smile cross his scarred lips.

And then he's laughing in sudden surprised shock as Link wraps his arms around Sheik's middle and spins him around, grinning gleefully.

Beneath the moon, the fairies loop and dance, and beneath their light, the people gathered around the fire do the same.

It's summer, and there's warmth in the air and in Link's eyes as he gazes at Sheik and in Sheik's heart, eight years past a long forgotten memory. How could it possibly still slip its claws in to him, here in the night, here in Link's arms, here with his closest friend and his other half?

Link steals a kiss, and spins him around, and Sheik lets his head fall back as he laughs.

Finally, he is happy.

The End

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!