

Shadows of Aytolis: Interlude

Azura led the group, approaching the mountaintop in complete silence. Sticking to the plan, they had parted ways with Queen Yelena, who had returned to castle Aytolis. She would ensure they wouldn't be bothered. It had taken more time than desired, as the directions given were a bit vague. But they proved to be correct, as the entrance to their destination lay open, waiting for them.

An ancient temple on the top of a mountain, long forgotten and scrubbed off the records. However, that did not mean by any means it was a ruin. Quite the opposite in fact, as it could act both as a place of worship or a fortress. With its careful and delicate stonework, it crowned the top of the mountain, even if its outside had been a bit weathered from the time and the elements. But otherwise, it was fine, ready for use at the moment it would be needed.

During their march to it, dust and dirt had stuck to their bodies. It darkened their luster and their sheen, but as they came closer and closer to the entrance of the temple, the mist clung to them. Humidity condensed into water droplets, sliding down the curves of their bodies and almost lovingly washing away the dirt and dust. The arch that led inside had no walls nor door slabs, but it did not matter, as the inside was in pristine condition.

Stepping across the doorstep, their lustre returned, gleaming in the golden light that seeped in from the outside. None could say how or why the place was spotless as it was, but it mattered little, as the light filtered through the many filigrees and decorations the walls had. Decorated in all sorts of patterns, from geometric to nautical knot-like designs. Enough to let air and light in, but sturdy to keep the interior safe.

The massive structure was composed, at first sight, of two rooms. The main entrance, stretching back to an altar and two parallel staircases that led to the upper floor, and said upper floor. And there would be more than enough time to find any and all secrets the place

could hold, but for the moment the march of the five stone women came to an end. This would be their -her- lair.

Azura clasped her hands on her chest, satisfied. A feeling Hinoka shared, while Corrin and Tiki just beamed happily, remaining by her side. Lucina, however, did not share the optimism. Lost in thoughts, her expression became grave and slightly worried. She let out a tired sigh, earning the attention of Corrin by her side. There were concerns that needed to be addressed, even if it broke her leader's ecstasy.

- I do not intend to ruin the moment -spoke the blue woman- but this lair is isolated and out of the way. How are we going to move forward with the plan?

The expression of the blue woman changed notably. From a pleased demeanour and relaxed pose, she deflated like a balloon, turning into a frown with a slightly defeated hunch. She steeled her resolve though, closing her eyes to order her ideas. They would be free from the tantrums of destiny, and with the royal woman's help, they would make sure more people shared their joy.

"There are still heroes from other worlds in Aytolis, and Queen Yelena will make sure to send her two scions on a wild goose chase." She rationalised. *"They can be more than a match to us. However, they trust us, and we can use that to seize the advantage."*

Her expression, dead serious as it was, changed yet again. Her lips curled into a sly smile, as a plan took form in her mind. Yes, they would use that to their favour, and there would be more in number soon enough. They would sever the threads of destiny, setting them free from the clutches of such a puppeteer. Whether they wanted to or not.

- Azura? -Called Lucina.

- Do not worry Lucina, we will prevail.

- That's good, but she has a point, you know. -Said Hinoka, the red stone woman crossing her arms on her bust.- Things don't look exactly great right now, even if we have a home.

- They will shortly. -Reassured the ring leader.- And it will be thanks to you.

- Eh? -The red woman scratched her stone hair, a scraping noise filling the place.- I'm sorry, but I don't follow.

- Although we might look a bit different, it is still us. With our pasts, our baggage and our bonds. And some of those we bonded with will probably be looking for us, and lucky them, someone that looks familiar might have been spotted nearby recently...

Tiki squinted her blank yellow eyes, nodding slowly. Even though she did not state things clearly, the general idea the purple songstress conveyed wormed its way inside their minds. Azura, having turned her back on them, turned around yet again. Her demeanour commanded respect and power, the path forward laying bare.

- Hinoka, Lucina, my dear friends, I want you to wander the nearby lands. Let yourselves be spotted, so that word reached the Queen in the castle. She'll know who to send.

Neither understood fully the plan yet, but they would follow it to the letter. They stood tall, saluting their queen and departing to do her bidding immediately. And Azura watched them part, taking a guess who would eventually stumble upon their home. But while red and blue did as told, she sneaked a hand around the waists of Tiki and Corrin, the latter in particular relishing her attention. They would make sure the temple was spotless and ready to house more of them.

She could hear them, coming closer and closer. A cacophony of noises had taken the place of the whooshing and flapping of wings that a moment ago had flown over their home. Clanking plates of armour and the rustling of clothes. The panting breath of both exhaustion and excitement. It was thrilling that her new senses fed her so much information. At least one of them wore armoured greaves and the rustling was befitting of a dress or a gown of sorts. Different from something that would be more practical on a battlefield.

Voices reverberated across the entrance and into their fortress, which laid bare, awaiting. And they did so too, having cleared the entrance and posing for the moment they would find them. She sat on the stone altar that led deeper into the temple, surrounded by her brethren. Her two trusted lieutenants stood by her side, Hinoka to her left and Lucina to her right, while Corrin and Tiki sat and knelt below her.

- Lady Mikoto, I insist you stay back, for your own safety.

- I know you mean well, Kagero, but I won't stand idly by while the rest of you look for my daughters.

- I know. -The ninja sighed.

She snickered at the exchange in her mind. Such a loving and caring woman Queen Mikoto was... shame her nation did not follow her example. The light outside projected five silhouettes, the shadows partially making their way inside as they made their way to the entrance.

- Besides, these are my daughters you are talking about.

- I meant no disrespect, your highness.

- Queen Yelena mentioned there were two of them -another voice intervened- the description matches that of Lucina... even if it's different.

- That might be... worrisome, I concur -Mikoto ceded- but it's still them we are looking for.

The five women entered the temple, chatting among them and surprisingly relaxed. Any and all chatter died down the moment they laid eyes on their tableau. Mikoto's face changed like night and day, and it was delightful to look at. Her cheerful and lively expression, twisted and morphed into worry and disbelief. Her hands quickly clasped together, but her shaking did not go unnoticed to Azura.

- A-Azura? Corrin? Hinoka? -She gasped, hand in mouth- is... is that you?

More gasps and mumbled followed, incoherent words in quiet tones and names spoken with surprise and disbelief. Par for the course.

- Yes, mother. -Azura smiled, playfully twisting the lock that crossed her face.- And these are my brethren and my servants.

- What in Naga's name...

- We arrived in this world to do the bidding of others, mere puppets at their disposal. The ritual set us free.

While she talked, she stood up and took a step forward, spreading her arms in a grandiose pose. Lucina and Hinoka struck similar poses, with rehearsed theatrical antics, while Tiki and Corrin were content to sit on the floor, flaunting their assets at the gawking newcomers. Poses that the red and blue stone women to her side quickly matched, Hinoka running her hands behind her head and puffing her small bust forth while Lucina beamed in delight.

- Will you join us?

The silence was deafening, but their expression said it all. Mikoto was torn between sobbing and a stunned defeat, but the rest... their bodies tensed, ready to plunge forth, to unleash their pent up anger and frustration at them.

- A-A... Az-

- Not a chance!

- Take them out!

Everything happened in a blur. The party of four women dashed forth, Flora and Kagero having their knives and daggers at the ready, while Zelcher and Cordelia used an axe and fists respectively. But their eyes held doubt. The stone statues were familiar faces after all, they were their dear friends and comrades. So hopefully they would fall down easily, only having

to knock them out before reining them in. Mikoto was a powerful magic user, so maybe she could undo what had happened to them.

Speaking of, maybe she had noticed, her hand raised and mouth open in a silent shout. Was she trying to cast a spell? To let out a warning cry? It didn't matter. With a single motion, the purple stone woman spread her hand forth, something mimicked by Lucina and Hinoka. A large glyph spread under their feet, each of them freezing in place as they stood on a tip of a five pointed star.

Images of eyes and writings surrounded them, while the exterior ring of the spell turned steadily. And from below, a colourful light shot up, encasing each of them in a cylinder of magic glow.

- What... is this?

As her companions remained by the altar, Azura stepped closer, standing before the five women with an amused look on her face. Gone were the expressions of defiance and anger, now looking at her with dread and worry. *"And with good reason."*

- I did offer you to join us, did I not? And instead you leaped to attack us.

- Azura, please, stop this! -Pleaded Mikoto, as the outer ring spun faster and faster.

- You will be set free, but for your actions, you shall be punished.

They had tried to attack them, so there would be no singing nor melodic spell for them. With her lips curled into a twisted grin, she closed her hand. The effects were immediate, as the light pillars intensified. No matter if it was the blue light surrounding Flora, the golden one surrounding Kagero or Mikoto's white light, they all acted as one. They relieved them of all they had, be it cloth or armour; weapon or garment. All of it vanished, pulverised into thin dust that dissolved into the still air.

Over their heads, she materialised the five stones that had first transformed them. And under her command, they would do as she desired. The spheres lit up, each of them reflecting the

light in their smooth surfaces, resonating with it, and making it their own. Just like they had done with them some time ago. And like they would do now with these five women.

A cracking noise filled the air, gasps quickly dying down as the stones freed the women. Their fair skins, soft and supple, hardened into smooth stone curves, the transformation spreading from different points for each one of them. It didn't matter where the starting point was; their crotches, one of their breasts or both of them; part of their face or all of it... they were petrified all the same. And they could do nothing but watch, as their bodies, already blessed with plenty of beauty, hardened into delightful works of statuary.

Their hair solidified into intricate and detailed stonework, switching colour to their pertinent stone, and rendering their style for eternity. The figures they sported, a result of exercise and natural beauty, became carefully sculpted statues; while their busts, regardless of size and shape, all had a hard nipple on top. Their graceful and alluring limbs would remain spread out, a consequence of the heat of the moment... even their faces, discarding the expressions they bore a moment ago, became delightful masks of stone.

When the light faded and the spheres vanished, they remained standing still, arms spread to the side and staring forward in complete silence and awaiting orders. They were mindless servants right now, but once she considered they had learned their lesson, she would let them revel in their new freedom. Eventually.

- Kneel.

They obeyed as one, bending to her will in silence. Perfect.

- Your queen needs a throne, make it so.

Without a word or protest, the five statues marched past her and her dear servants, walking behind the altar they had greeted them on. Flora was first, kneeling down all fours and looking forward, making sure her back was firm to sit on while her curves offered comfort to do so. Cordelia and Zelcher followed, standing behind her. The first simply stood up, arms to the side; but the second gently patted her on the head, mirroring her pose as they became the back of the throne.

Mikoto and Kagero were last, crouching and gently sitting on the very edge of Flora's shapely rear. Hunched forward, they rested their arms on their legs. They would make sure their queen was comfortable should she fall into a sweet sleep while reigning over them.

As the finishing touch, she casted the spell that had been used before. Behind the throne, the air seemed to ripple as the pattern displayed itself once more. A series of turning rings and eyes that never blinked, always watching, always vigilant. And, just as before, on the tip of each of the star's arms, one of the stones materialised. They floated in the air, seemingly without effort, as the whole emblem crowned the new throne.

Azura was most pleased, walking over to her servants and approaching the throne with them. She sat down, finding herself comfortable and in good spirits. Finally they had some place they could call their own.

- What's next?

- For now, we rest and enjoy our company.

Not having to be told more, Tiki and Corrin sat next to her, content to remain by her side and to keep their queen in a good mood. She deserved it after such a moment. Hinoka and Lucina, for their part, stood a bit forward, standing guard while cocking their hips and planting their left hands on their waists. They could also give the queen a good view of their rears while keeping an eye out.

At her command, an altar with the statuette of a golden dragon materialised where the women had transformed. But once on her throne, she closed her eyes. Maybe it was something out of reflex, but she found herself humming. She was in a good mood, and her servants had earned it, particularly Hinoka and Lucina. There was a great deal to think of, plans to hatch and ideas to let grow and mature. All of it surrounded by her dear servants, mobile or otherwise.