The Legend of Zelda: Paradise Calling

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Summary

Link rescues Malon from bandits, but after seven years apart she doesn't recognize him. He escorts her home, only to find that Ingo has taken over and is driving the ranch to ruin. To save his old friend, Link must restore hope to a disheartened Malon and vows to return the ranch to her control. A closer look at the relationship between a simple farmgirl and the green-clad hero.
Ambush

The covered wagon appeared over the broad crest of a hill in the endless field, its canvas peaking like that of a great sailing ship as it crowned the grassy ridge and began its leisurely journey down the leeward side. It swayed gently and silently as it was pulled along the well-worn road that carved its way across the great plains of Hyrule Field, with only a mild groan of protest from the rear axle whenever it encountered a gopher hole or a protruding stone in the road. Though it was in desperate need of a new coat of paint and the canvas had turned a bleached yellow from weather and age, the ancient wagon was in fine repair considering it had been built nearly half a century prior.

A great mare of powerful Gerudo lineage led it, an equine masthead hitched to the wagon's prow. Its powder-white mane and golden chestnut coat shone brightly under the late morning sun, courtesy of the careful grooming given by its owner only candlemarks prior. It strode proudly even burdened as it was, its long, high neck drooping only slightly with exertion in the sweltering heat.

A young woman sat on the bench of the wagon, reins held loosely in her long fingers. She wore a simple cotton shift and a long lavender skirt that reached to her bare ankles. A bright yellow neckerchief and its accompanying decorative dragon's head woggle sat on the bench beside her, temporarily discarded along with a heavy worker's apron. Sweat had already started to soak a trio of dark 'V's beneath her arms and between her breasts, and her sleeves were rolled up well past her elbows, revealing a thin strip of fair skin that the sun had yet to bake to the healthy bronze of her forearms and face. A bright yellow sunhat was perched upon her head in order to shade her cobalt-blue eyes, and her work boots had been shucked and tucked carefully beneath the seat next to a well-oiled crossbow, allowing her long legs to swing freely. The most stunning physical feature to behold, however, was her hair; a rich, fiery crimson whose colors and hues rivaled those of a sailor's twilight. Her name was Malon Lon, and she was utterly miserable.

It was hot. As in, really hot. So hot that her simple working dress was clinging to her like a second skin. Her camisole was already soaked through with sweat, and her mane of auburn hair was matted to her head beneath her sunhat. The wind blew gently across the plains of Hyrule Field, but only strong enough for her to note and curse its fickle presence. She could feel the rivulets of sweat rolling down her cheeks and neck before soaking into her collar, doing little to cool her heated skin.

Upon reaching a relatively straight stretch of the road, Malon laid the reins down on her lap and plucked the broad-billed sunhat off of her head, using it to fan herself. It was one of those days, the kind where it seemed as if summer had come back to exact its final gasping vengeance on the kingdom before giving way to true autumn. Her almanac back at the ranch said that cooler days were supposedly just around the corner. She hoped it was right. In her opinion, a good, mild Hyrule winter couldn't arrive soon enough.

She sighed and drank deeply from her water flask, which had already become uncomfortably warm. Her clothes felt stifling, and the damp spot on her chest had already reached her belly. Replacing the hat upon her head and gripping the reins with one hand, she settled for peeling the sticky garment away from her chest and fanning herself with it instead, just to get some cooler air against her feverish skin. It helped, a little.

She wondered idly how Epona was holding up. The mare was strong – the strongest horse she had ever had the pleasure of rearing, in fact – and she seemed to be handling the heat quite well, but Malon knew that pulling the heavy wagon beneath today's sun had to be taking its toll on her. She hoped that they could reach the river soon so that Epona could have a well-earned drink. To be honest, she wouldn't mind one herself. Just the thought of dipping her cupped hands into the
perpetually icy-cold Zora River and splashing her face was enough to help her bear the heat, at least for a little while longer.

Malon sighed again. "Just a little farther, Epona. Then we can take a small break," She reassured the mare.

Epona snorted and shook her mane, though it was a half-hearted gesture as they plodded along. Yes, the mare could definitely use a good drink and half a candlemark's rest, maybe a nice brushing while they were at it. Or maybe she could just dip her legs in the water for a few minutes. The idea tickled the back of her mind as they continued on, and as she continued to dwell on it she really couldn't find any reason that she shouldn't take a quick dip. The cool river would feel sooo good on her skin...

Her head jerked upright, and she blinked lazily before shaking her head and quietly chastising herself. To nod off daydreaming about dipping her feet in the river? Irresponsible. She rolled her shoulders and willed the wagon to travel faster.

Goddesses above, it was hot.

The sun hadn't even reached its zenith in the cloudless sky, and yet it cast everything about her in a blurry, humid haze, causing her to sometimes see bodies of water where none existed. Tricks of the light or playful spirits, she didn't know. What she did know was that if she continued on this road it should lead her right past the edge of the river where it swept closest to the road. In fact, just around the curve of this hill here...

Ah, She thought, and smiled brightly at the sight. There you are.

The river spread out before her, winding through the hills like a great dark snake for as far as the eye could see. The waters of the broad river swept down from the eastern foothills, bringing an endless supply of fresh, clean water to the lower fields. The bend here swept in so that the road was only several yards away, making it a popular spot to stop and water the horses for those few traders that plied the western routes. Luckily there was no one else in sight.

When they reached the edge of the river, it took her a moment to bring Epona to a complete stop. The mare was impatient. It could smell the water, it could see the water, so it didn't like having to wait for the water, but Malon brought her around skillfully before setting the wheelbrake.

"Calm down, girl," She said soothingly. "It would be just my luck if you got it into your head to drag the entire wagon into the river,"

Epona did not answer, merely staring with a quiet longing at the river's edge as her owner went about the business of securing the wagon. Malon decided to forgo her boots and sunhat and lowered herself to the ground gently, mindful of sharp rocks. She hummed a wordless tune and ran a calming hand along the great mare's flank as Epona cantered in place impatiently. Within seconds she had unhooked Epona's harness from the tug loops, a full decade of experience lending her the swiftness she desired. As soon as the horse sensed it was free it trotted forward, eagerly stepping into the river and stooping its long neck to drink.

Malon followed to the river's edge and was delighted to find her favorite drinking spot untouched; a flat shalestone that extended a meter out over the water, allowing her a dry perch to kneel and drink from. She bent low, dipping her fingers deep into the swiftly flowing river. She noted with interest that the water was definitely warmer than she remembered – a testament to the unnatural seasonal temperatures, she thought – but it was still pleasantly cool against her fingers. She dipped her hands deeper, allowing the water to cool the pulse in her wrists, then cupped her hands and brought the precious liquid to her mouth, closed her eyes, savored it as it flowed past her lips and spilled over her
Delicious.

She drank two more handfuls before standing, having decided that it was too laborious a process. She allowed herself a smile as she stepped daintily into the river, first one foot, then the other. She felt just like a little girl again, when she was first allowed to go with her father on a trip to Lake Hylia. She had been afraid at first, but then she grew to love it, shrieking and laughing and splashing the water in all directions. She had loved to go diving, to find tiny crabs or pretty shells that she would eagerly bring back for her father's inspection like valuable treasure. Her father, having spent all of his life landbound, had warned her about the many dangers of deep water, and had seemed anxious whenever she had immersed herself past her waist. Luckily, Malon had not inherited her father's phobia of the deep, and relished every rare opportunity she was given to swim.

She lifted her skirt to mid-thigh as she stepped deeper in the river, even though in reflection it was probably a silly thing to do considering what she was planning, finally dropping the hem as the water flowed past her knees. It clung to her long legs, swirling effervescently with the current. She waded in several meters until the river rose up to envelope her waist, soaking the hem of her blouse. The current was a gentle but persistent pressure, and the pebbles on the riverbed were smooth and soft on the soles of her feet. The water felt wonderful against her skin, but even as she tried to enjoy it, she was reminded uncomfortably of the sun beating down on her upper half. She felt that she would not be totally satisfied if she was only able to cool half of her body. She glanced behind her towards the road almost guiltily, but her courage was bolstered when she saw that there was still no one else in sight.

Well, why not?

All pretense of propriety forgotten, she knelt in the shallows and bent forward, luxuriating in its liquid coolness as she lowered herself, shivering slightly as the water flowed past her belly, breasts, shoulders, and finally her throat. Epona drank and watched her curiously from the river's edge, but seemed to feel no desire to follow her owner deeper into the water. On a whim, Malon inhaled deeply and completely submerged herself, allowing the river to flow over her and cleanse the sweat from her body.

Everything felt the same as it had when she was younger. The tingle of bubbles trapped against her scalp, the slight sense of pressure on her eyes and ears. The old thrill of excitement came back tenfold, and she propelled herself with a swift kick into deeper water. It was a different world beneath the surface of the river, a world where the shadows mingled with the light, touched it and played with it in ways that seemed surreal, dreamlike. The smooth stones of the river bottom glinted in an earthy rainbow of blacks and browns and reds, and the occasional bulbous fish could be seen making its home in the shallow eddies, staring back in quiet awe at this awkward intruder in their aquatic realm. It was a dreamworld, like the faerie tales her mother had told her as a little girl, and she cherished every second of it.

Finally, the desire for air ended her brief sojourn. She broke the surface with the grace (in her mind, at least) of a Zora princess and swam back towards the shallows, whipping the hair back from her face with a quick toss. As soon as her feet touched the smooth bottom, she leaned forward again and allowed the river to flow directly between her lips.

Mmm. Drinking straight from the river... nothing like it in the world.

As soon as she had drunk her fill she stepped from the river, intent on retrieving a brush for Epona, but stopped when she caught sight of a man's legs standing on the far side of the wagon. She froze instantly, like a wild hare caught in the gaze of a hungry wolfos, but the man couldn't see her from
where he was standing. From what she could see, he seemed to be inspecting the wagon.

Malon cursed herself for leaving the crossbow in the wagon. She didn't have many options. She couldn't just ignore the man and hope he wandered away, and she wouldn't be able to get Epona hooked back up without him realizing she was there. Abandoning the wagon was out of the question as well. Talking to him looked like the only available option.

Her decision made, Malon affected an air of friendly indifference. "Can I help you, sir?" She called out, crossing her arms across her chest, uncomfortably aware of the curves of her chest and waist in her wet clothes.

The man's legs tensed, then cautiously made their way around towards the front of the wagon. Malon's eyes swept over the man as he stepped into view, and she didn't like what she saw. Like many of the poorer denizens of Hyrule in the wake of Ganondorf's coup d'état, he was dressed rather shabbily, wearing anything he could scavenge or steal. In point of fact, his trousers and threadbare coat were in desperate need of tailoring, but he had somehow managed to get his hands on a relatively clean dandy's top-hat. The effect was absurd, like dressing a rodent for a palace masque... not that Malon had ever had the pleasure of attending a masque, of course. Except for the spotless hat, nothing on the man looked as if it had been washed in months, and the smell coming off of him alone – even at this distance – was enough to confirm her suspicions. A vagabond, possibly an outlaw, or a bandit even. Whatever he was, Malon sensed trouble.

The man offered a toothy grin as Malon approached the wagon on the opposite side. She held back a grimace at what passed for teeth in the man's mouth. Hygienic he was not. "G'day tya," He said, tipping his hat. His eyes darted from her, to Epona, to the wagon, and finally back to her. "Fine lookin' wagon thar. Don s'pose you'd be in a helpful mood, woudja? See, me an a few o' the boys were makin' fer Labrynna, an' we could really use a ride."

"Seems like you managed to get this far just fine by walking," Malon said coolly.

A second man stepped out from behind the first, and Malon tensed. He was shorter and if possible even scruffier than the first man. "We jus' wanna lift darlin', is all. It's jus' so awfully hot out here..."

Malon's smile was saccharine sweet. "Sorry, but my Daddy always said to never give rides to strangers."

"Then let's get more acquainted." A third man said, stepping out from behind the wagon on her left side.

Malon cursed herself again for her carelessness. She had to give them credit. She hadn't noticed how many of them had actually approached the wagon while she was swimming. Careless and stupid. They had probably been close by, just waiting for some poor unsuspecting soul to stop and take a drink from the river before they moved in, and she had walked right into it.

The third man was still walking towards her, while the second man was slowly making his was around to the right, moving into what her father would call a pincer manoeuvre. Her left hand twitched, and she glanced towards the wagon. She could see her crossbow, stowed beneath the wagon's bench, out of sight of the bandits. But the bandits – and that was exactly what they were, no matter what garbage they spewed about being downtrodden wanderers – were much too close for comfort. Would they back off when faced with a weapon? Would she even be able to grab it and bring it to bear before they overpowered her?

She moved just as the second man was about to come around the harnessing shafts, leaping up and scrambling onto the bench. Her fingers closed around the wooden haft of the crossbow and she
silently thanked her father for those years of practice as she drew back the lever to charge the bolt. The man in the top hat was yelling and reaching for a dagger, but it would be the man behind her – the third man who had come around the back of the wagon – that was closest, and thus, her immediate worry.

Her first shot was hastily fired as she spun, but her aim was true. The nearest bandit was already halfway up the wagon behind her when the bolt crossed the distance between them and imbedded itself in his chest. He fell back and collapsed to the ground with a surprised gurgle, and Malon was drawing the second bolt in place when she felt a sudden harsh tug on the back of her dress and was yanked bodily from the wagon. She cried out as the crossbow was ripped from her hands and she was dragged to the ground, then hauled to her feet, her arms held tightly behind her by one of the men. More bandits appeared around her as she struggled, until finally she was surrounded by a small posse.

"Dumb bitch shot Jerod dead." One of the men called out from the other side of the wagon. "Never did like 'im very much anyway. Just means more for us anyhow," The man in the top-hat – presumably their leader – laughed, then turned to one of the other men. "Go see what we caught ourselves this time. I'm feelin' lucky today."

"Keep away from my wagon, and LET ME GO!" Malon cried as she wrenched against her captor's vice-like grip.

One of the men brought out his knife and waved it threateningly beneath her throat. "You look awfully hot, baby," He said, aiming lower and drawing the flat of the blade between her breasts. "Meybe ya should think about takin' off some dem wet clothes before ya faint."

Her rebuttal was a wad of spit in the man's eye. The rest of the group dissolved into chortling laughter and catcalls as the man spluttered and wiped at his face with a grimy sleeve. The man holding her had let her go as he keeled over onto his hands and knees and seemed to be having trouble drawing breath, but there were still too many of them surrounding her for her to risk making a break for it. "Ah, looks like we gots ourselves a real fiesty one," One of them called out.

The man with the knife became furious, his face mottled with rage. He advanced, holding the knife out as if about to stick a wild boar. "Fuckin' little—"

"Hey boss," One of the men in the wagon called out, causing the knife wielding thug to stop in his tracks. Greed beat rage with these men, it seemed.

The man in the wagon appeared with a bottle of milk in his hand, which he tossed carelessly over the side. It shattered on the ground, spilling the precious white liquid everywhere. "Ain't nothin' back here but a buncha shit in sacks and some boxes full of milk."

Their leader looked slightly disappointed. "What kinda shit?"

"Shit shit."

Top-hat planted his hands on his hips and frowned at Malon as if she had done him some personal injustice. "Why're you cartin' shit and milk around fer?"

"Stall!" Malon said, but this only seemed to confuse the poor men around her. She desperately resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. "It's fertilizer," Malon said, but this only seemed to confuse the poor men around her. She desperately resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. "It helps people's crops grow. I was on my way to New Ordon to sell them."

"Got no use fer ferta-lizard," The bandit to her left said dumbly. "But at least we guts us a nice
herse."

"And a good ride too, eh?" Cackled the one behind her before he lightly slapped her buttocks. Malon jumped and let out a squeak of surprise and embarrassment, which elicited another raucous round of laughter from the rest of the group.

"Yeah, can't forget that," The leader laughed with a feral grin. "So how's about it, baby? Feel up to showin' me an' my boys a good time?"

"The moon'll fall out of the sky first," Malon muttered, only following the conversation with her ears as her eyes darted around the group of men, desperately looking for an exit.

"Haw?"

Her anger got the best of her, and she focused her eyes like a thousand archers on the idiot talking to her. "I said when pigs fly, slop-for-brains!" She shouted, causing Top-hat to take a step back.

"Gots a good mouth on her," Said one of the bandits, who then chuckled, pleased with his own innuendo.

The boss sneered, apparently embarrassed at having his cohorts laugh at him, and shoved his face in close to hers. His hand shot out, a craggy claw of skin and bones, and wrapped around her jaw like a gargoyle's talon. She fought back the tears as his unkempt fingernails burrowed into her soft skin and squeezed her lips into a pucker. "So how's 'bout we just roll on somewheres nice an' you can show me what else that pretty little mouth o' yers is good fer?" He said, his voice now dangerously quiet.

Pure, unadulterated rage shot through her like a fiery lance, and Malon showed him what she thought of that idea. Her bare foot came up, catching the overconfident man straight in the family gems.

The man went down, grabbing at his groin and shrieking in pain at octaves that probably didn't come naturally to him. The man that had released her earlier made a grab for her elbow, but the sweat and river water dripping from her clothes actually worked to her advantage. She slid from his grasp before he was able to get a grip and kicked him in the kneecap, then clawed at a third man that made to grab ahold of her wrist, drawing blood as her nails raked across his face. He screamed and clasped his hands to the bloody gouges across his eyelids. Then she turned and ran through the opening the man had given her.

She was free, but she didn't plan on sticking around to enjoy it. She raced towards Epona, who was thankfully still standing in the shallows, which allowed her a much easier leg up. In one swift motion she leapt from the flat rock she had laid on earlier and mounted the mare, fear and adrenalin driving her faster than the remaining group of stunned and enraged bandits could keep up. She slapped the reins down and they were off, Epona giving a frightened whinny as the men closed in behind them. River water kicked up around her in a torrential spray as the mare bolted through the shallows and back onto the road. Malon didn't look back at the shouts and curses directed at her, didn't look back as she felt grimy hands grasp at the hem of her skirt, yanking at her waist and tearing off a large strip of fabric.

Her mind raced as she urged Epona into a gallop, fear and rage and shame churning in her stomach like sour milk. The wagon and everything in it would be a loss. She had no idea how she would explain it all to Ingo, but at least she would escape unharmed, untainted by those twisted deviants. At least she and Epona would still be saf—

The world darkened with pain, and she distantly felt a heavy impact on the side of her head. The reins fell from her grasp, and she saw the world spin as she slipped from the saddle, hills and trees
switching places and spinning twirly-whirly with the sky and the clouds as Epona galloped away. On the roof of the world? Such a strange horse. Then the earth came up/down and knocked the breath from her lungs as she landed on her back.

Several pairs of booted feet filled her swimming field of vision, and a large rock fell to the ground by her head. "Good shot, Lenny!" One of the men said.

"Thankee, boss," Lenny replied, sounding as pleased as if he had bagged himself a feast after a particularly long hunt.

Malon's vision swam as she tried to focus her eyes, but the world refused to cooperate and continued to drift in slow, lazy circles. Prickly tufts of grass pressed into her cheek. Ticklish. Smelled good, too. Oops, and there were the hands, those dirty dirty hands, grasping and groping and touching...

She was hauled roughly to her feet, and one of the men slapped her several times across the face, drawing a thin trickle of blood from her split lip. Shock and dread pierced the tumbling fog of her mind and sharpened her focus on the hands that we now holding her immobilized from several different angles.

"Let go of me!"

The leader tsk'd. "Now now, baby, don't be like dat. We just want a lil taste o' wut you got, tha's all," A craggy hand shot down to her inner thigh and began to move suggestively upwards.

Terror flitted through her mind. No. Not like this. Sweet Nayru, anything but this.

The bandit behind her cupped a dirty hand around her chin and mouth, pulling her head backwards while provocatively running his thumb across her lips, and she bit down out of instinct, hard. Grime and coppery blood flooded her mouth, then sparks flashed across her vision as the cursing bandit swatted at the back of her head. But the bandit didn't have the leverage to do any real harm, so in a desperate bid to save what was left of his thumb he thrust her forcefully away from him. Malon went down in a sprawl, and she winced as the sharp pebbles in the road cut into her palms. She spit the bloody scrap of flesh into the dust, knowing with an icy certainty that her own blood would probably be joining it very soon.

The was no room in her mind left for cognitive thought. As their kicks landed against her stomach and thighs and the gnarled hands closed around her and dragged her through the dirt, there was only room for pure animal instinct. She thrashed wildly, but aside from a low curse when her fist caught the chin of a man reaching for her she was only rewarded with more vicious kicks. A tumultuous swirl of emotions filled her. Fear, anger at herself for being so weak, and the dreaded certainty that she would not enjoy her final moments before they grew bored with her and she was allowed to die.

With one last surge of rational thought, Malon opened her mouth, and she screamed.

"HEEEEEEEEelp!"
Goddesses above, it was hot.

Link sighed and closed his eyes, letting the hand that grasped his ocarina fall to the side as he willed the heat of the noonday sun away. He lay beneath the shade of a mighty hardwood, the lone sentinel of this particular hilltop in the middle of Hyrule Field. It was his favorite spot for kilometers (which probably wasn't saying much), simply because its broad leaves shielded him and his faerie companion from the furious wrath of the harsh sun. His sheathed sword and quiver rested against the white trunk, momentarily forgotten, while his shield was currently serving as a makeshift pillow. Not the most comfortable pillow in the world to be sure, but it would suffice for a few candlemarks of quiet napping.

"Why is it so hoot?" Navi whimpered from her usual orbit around his head, her voice taking on a singsong tenor. Link tried to hold back a smile. Navi could be annoying at times, sure, but sometimes, rarely, she could almost be called cute.

"No use complaining, I suppose," He said, shifting slightly to a more comfortable position and wiping a bead of sweat off his cheek. "Best just to enjoy what little breeze we can."

Another reason for picking this hill; it was one of the tallest in the field, allowing him to enjoy a halfway decent breeze while he fiddled with his ocarina and thought about his current predicament. As it turned out, there was a very good reason that he was napping on a hill instead of continuing his quest to release the seven sages. It had been nearly two weeks since he had cleansed the water temple and, to be honest, he had no idea where he was supposed to go next. It was frustrating knowing that you were so close to your final objective with no obvious way to get there. It also didn't help matters that Sheik, the Master of Bafflement himself hadn't shown his covered face since the ice cavern behind Zora's Domain. It seemed unusually unlike the young Sheikah. He seemed to show up after the successful completion of one of Link's little spelunking expeditions with his familiar song-and-tune show. It had come as a most welcome relief when he hadn't shown himself after Link had awakened Ruto as the Sage of Water, but now…

"Gee, it sure would be great if I could get a hint right about now!" Link called out to no one in particular.

Only the wind and a whisper of leaves answered, not that he had expected anything else. Sheik did not appear to provide him with a new riddle while he fiddled with his ocarina and thought about his current predicament. As it turned out, there was a very good reason that he was napping on a hill instead of continuing his quest to release the seven sages. It had been nearly two weeks since he had cleansed the water temple and, to be honest, he had no idea where he was supposed to go next. It was frustrating knowing that you were so close to your final objective with no obvious way to get there. It also didn't help matters that Sheik, the Master of Bafflement himself hadn't shown his covered face since the ice cavern behind Zora's Domain. It seemed unusually unlike the young Sheikah. He seemed to show up after the successful completion of one of Link's little spelunking expeditions with his familiar song-and-tune show. It had come as a most welcome relief when he hadn't shown himself after Link had awakened Ruto as the Sage of Water, but now…

"Gee, it sure would be great if I could get a hint right about now!" Link called out to no one in particular.

Only the wind and a whisper of leaves answered, not that he had expected anything else. Sheik did not appear to provide him with a new riddle, and Ruto seemed to have followed the usual path of a reawakened Sage by refusing to answer any direct questions. Hell, he hadn't even seen hide nor feather of that longwinded Kaepora Gaebora. What he would give to have that damnable owl pop up to give him even a smidgen of a clue...

Everyone's disappeared just when I need their help the most, He thought with a huff, then settled back and blew a random melody through his ocarina.

"Aw, cheer up grumpy. Look at it this way; At least we get a little vacation," Navi chimed. "You'd think after that last temple that you'd enjoy a little break."

Link had to concede the point, but wisely kept the thought to himself. No need to give her anything more to gloat about, after all. After he had defeated that amorphous blob of… something… in the water temple, he had thought that he could use a well-deserved break. Really, how many other people in all of Hyrule had to put up with fighting giant amoeba monsters that could smack you into a bed of conveniently placed spikes and couldn't be stabbed to death like any normal creature? He
was lucky to have escaped from that one without looking like a chunk of Labrynan cheese.

He opened his eyes. "But two weeks? I thought I was doing something, you know, important. I didn't realize that saving the kingdom could be put on hiatus so easily," Link growled in frustration. "Where is that damn Sheikah when you need him?"

Navi gave a quick bob – the faerie equivalent of a shrug – which, from Link's perspective, looked as if she grew momentarily larger before reverting back to normal. "Maybe he's dead?"

"Heh, we should be so lucky."

"You shouldn't say things like that. I think Sheik's a nice boy," Navi said.

Link closed his eyes again and waved a flippant hand in the air as if to ward away her compliments. "He's creepy and obnoxious. He's obviously got fighting talents that might even surpass my own, and yet all he ever does is spew riddles and songs and save his own hide whenever there's the slightest hint of danger. What's he hiding under that mask of his, anyways?"

Another bob-shrug from the faerie. "Maybe he's got a snaggletooth," She ventured, then brightened. "Ooh! Or maybe, when he was really young, his house caught fire and he was trapped in the wreckage, and it burned his body from the nose down."

Link was quiet for several moments, merely staring at his companion with one cracked eye. "And you say my imagination is morbid," He said, needling her with a smile.

Navi's shade flashed a light pink for a moment in embarrassment. "It's just a thought…"

They fell quiet once more, Navi keeping silent watch as Link relaxed and practiced with his ocarina. Memories swirled through his thoughts as he played through his repertoire of tunes, the faces of old friends and places he had left behind. Saria, who had given him his first ocarina. The Sacred Meadow, where he had snuck off to many a night to practice with the skullchildren. The young Princess Zelda, who, in desperate flight, had thrown him the instrument that he was currently playing; the Ocarina of Time. Lon Lon Ranch, where he had spent many carefree days before being locked in the Temple of Time. He practiced the magical songs he had learned as well, minus several key notes of course in order to avoid activating them. Hot as it was, he felt that summoning a monsoon would not be in his best interest. It certainly hadn't worked out for him the last time he'd tried it. Epona's Song was perhaps the safest of all the songs he hadn't taught himself, and he played it regularly. It also happened to be one of his favorites.

As the last notes of Epona's Song echoed on the breeze, Navi dipped low. "You're getting better," She said appreciatively.

A tired "Hmm," was all he could manage in reply.

"Used to be that I couldn't stand your horrid screeching," Navi continued.

He waved a gloved hand half-heartedly in her direction. "Shoo, bug. Don't bother me."

"Ugh… I can't even muster the energy to be angry at you for that one…" She fluttered briefly, distracted, then swooped down so that she was closer to Link. "Hey, take a look at that."

Link crossed his arms over his eyes. "Nooo, don't wanna… s'too hot," He moaned.

Navi jingled. "No, seriously, I think something's coming this way."
Link propped himself up on his elbows and turned to look in the direction that Navi was hovering.

At first he didn't see what she was talking about, but Navi darted forward several meters, allowing her glow to direct his eyes towards the figure rapidly approaching across the field. It galloped along the rise of a hill, sleek muscle and sinew rippling beneath its earthen-brown coat, following a long arc as it ran.

He stood to get a better view. Beautiful horse. Was it wild? There was a time when great herds of wild horses ran Hyrule Field, but that age was long past. There weren't many wild horses any more, ever since Ganondorf's minions had corralled them all up for the war effort.

A flash of white caught his eye as the horse approached, illuminated against golden chestnut. Wow. White-manes are really rare, even in the Gerudo bloodlines. The last one I remember seeing was—

"Link, isn't that…?"

It clicked in his mind as the horse came to a cantering stop in front of him.

"Epona?"

It was her. Seven years older, of course, like everything else had become after his imprisonment inside of the Temple of Time, but the mare was as familiar to him as his own sword and shield. Memories flooded him, and he smiled as he remembered the young red-headed girl that had first introduced him to this amazing horse. His smile faltered, however, when he remembered just how much the waves of Time had eroded the kingdom around him. Did Malon still own Epona? Did she still live at Lon Lon Ranch? Was she even alive? He at once craved and dreaded the answers, and was ashamed that he had not attempted to call on her before now.

Epona nickered and pranced in agitated circles. She was fitted with full tack – unusual in itself for Epona, who had developed an intense dislike for all forms of saddlery – and was even equipped with a specialized breast strap, as if someone had planned to harness her to a wagon or carriage. But here she was, prancing back and forth, alone. Very strange.

Navi fluttered back and forth. "Uh, Link? I don't speak a lot of Horse, but I think she's trying to tell you something's wrong."

Epona snorted, as if confirming the faerie's suspicions. She lowered her head and butted Link gently in the chest, which he recognized as her familiar way of saying, 'Get a move on!'

Link smiled again, running a gloved hand across the horse's snout before turning to retrieve his gear. As soon as his equipment was firmly in its proper place on his back and Navi had tucked herself into his cap, he grabbed ahold of Epona's thick mane and hoisted himself up into the saddle. The great mare wheeled around with a high whinny and was off like a bolt of lightning before he even had time to put his feet in the stirrups.

It felt good to ride a horse again, especially one as powerful as Epona. He bent low as the wind began to tug at him, and it all came rushing back to him in a surge of adrenalin. All of that time spent at Lon Lon Ranch in the past had helped hone his natural talent with her, and it felt as if he had just ridden her yesterday.

Link felt a gentle tug on his bangs. "What do you think she's in such a rush for?" Navi yelled over the wind.

Link didn't answer, fearing that he already knew and hoping that it wasn't true. Malon had once told him that Epona was the most precious thing in the world to her besides her father. There were very
few reasons that the horse would be running wild in full harness, and none of them were good.

The ride across the plains was exhilarating. Eventually they came upon a well-worn road that snaked through the hills. They followed it for some time, Epona kicking up a long dust trail behind them as she galloped. As they rounded a hill, they were greeted by the sight of a grey-blue swath of river that swept close to the road. A familiar looking wagon stood off in the grass, and Link could see several figures milling around, most of them surrounding the limp form of a very familiar redhead. His pulse hummed at the knowledge that Malon was still alive after all these years, and it was with great reluctance that he didn't charge straight into the midst of the men surrounding her. With a quick pull of the reins he slowed Epona and guided her up the back side of the hill, allowing himself to get as close to the wagon as possible without being seen. He buckled his shield securely to his forearm just in case one of the men got cute and tried something before he had a chance to talk them down, but left his sword sheathed. No need to antagonize them before he had a chance to talk to them, he thought.

Navi ducked out from beneath his cap and resumed her usual orbit as they slowed. "I saw them. Looks like we might be in for a bit of a fight."

"Looks like," Link agreed with a sigh, allowing Epona to crest the hill.

There were five… no, six of them, all spread out around the wagon. Two of them were busy tying Malon's arms and legs with lengths of rope, and one was busy digging around in the back of the wagon. They were all in varying states of dress, though it was obvious that none of them were very well off. They seemed to be dressed in whatever suited them, from thick leather hides (almost suicidal in this weather) to a maid's bonnet tied around one man's throat. One of them was even wearing a ridiculous looking top-hat and seemed exceptionally proud of it, since it was the cleanest article of clothing on the entire bunch.

Two of the bandits turned as he approached and drew Epona to a cantering stop, but the rest paid him no mind, avarice for the spoils of their ambush overcoming any curiosity regarding the newcomer.

"Let the girl go," He said loud and calmly, though he was anything but. If they had hurt her, violence would quickly ensue.

That got their attention. Most of the men turned to regard the stranger with barely concealed scorn, though the one in the wagon continued rooting around in the back. The closest bandit gave him the once over, then sneered. "Don't listen to no snot nosed punks. 'specially a punk in a clown costume."

Link let that one slide and crossed his arms, letting his shield rest across his abdomen. "If only these guys had a mirror... "Not sure what your usual attitude towards clowns is, but I'd suggest listening to this one. There doesn't need to be any more violence. Take the wagon if you must, but leave the girl."

"Jus' who do you think you are?"

Link felt his eyes fall to half mast, his mind set. He knew enough about scum like this to know that they wouldn't be listening to reason. "A minor annoyance or your quick and painful death. Your choice."

"Keh, I'm thinkin' yer outnumbered kid."

"And I'm thinking that you weren't burdened with an over-abundance of schooling," He shot back, letting his hand drop to the old Sheikah scroll pinned to the back of his shield. "Now pay attention,
because I'm only going to say this one more time: Let. Her. Go."

As he talked, the warrior portion of Link's mind assessed the men in front of him. One was limping awkwardly and another had a bloody cut over his eye. A third was favoring his hand, limp-wristed as he struggled to get a purchase on something within the wagon.

*Good girl, Malon,* he thought proudly. At least she had been able to inflict some minor injuries before they overwhelmed her. They didn't seem like very competent thieves, so their fighting skills were most likely sub-par. Good news for him, very bad news for them.

His fingers finally brushed against the papyrus inlaid against his shield, and Link felt the tingle of ancient Sheikah magic shoot its way through his fingertips as he tapped the stylized rendition of a bow near the top left edge of the parchment and muttered "Adeat," the ancient Sheikah word that Impa had taught him to activate the scroll. As he withdrew his hand, the faerie-worked wood of his shortbow followed with a sparkling blue-white luminescence that emanated from the scroll. Several of the bandits had turned and watched Link maliciously as he worked his magic.

The bandit with the maid's bonnet saw what he was withdrawing and brandished his sword. He pointed it at Link in what he must have thought a grand gesture. "Let's kill that pun—!" The bandit's words ended in a sickening gargle as Link's arrow tore through his throat.

"Five left," Navi announced cheerfully.

Link smiled and reached for another arrow. He was half tempted to reach for a bomb to put a quick end to this, but the risk to Malon and the wagon was too great. Ah well. He had plenty of arrows left.

Steel flashed in the midday sun as the remaining bandits drew their blades.

"Shield!" Navi cried.

He didn't even have time to think as he raised his shield arm to protect his face, instantly reacting to Navi's warning. Link felt his shoulder absorb the hard impact of a crossbow bolt as it imbedded itself deep in his shield, its thick iron tip penetrating an inch below the scroll. *Stupid,* he reprimanded himself. *I didn't see any ranged weapons on them...*

He caught sight of the bandit up in the wagon desperately fiddling with the crossbow's dislodged magazine. The bandit was either in a panic or he didn't seem to know the weapon very well, since he was trying to load the magazine backwards.

Navi darted restlessly. "You're vulnerable up here. Time to show those bandits what you're made of!"

She was right. In one fluid motion he slipped from the saddle and slapped Epona on the rump with a loud "Hyah!" Epona bolted through the crowd, plowing through two of the bandits who were stupid enough to try to stop a charging horse.

Two thousand pounds of charging muscle can do horrible things to a person. One of the men was thrown bodily against the wagon, his chin catching the edge of the footrest as he fell. Link could hear the sick crackle of bones snapping from where he stood, and the man landed awkwardly with his neck twisted at a very odd looking angle. He made no move to get up.

*Four more to go...* Link thought, pressing the bow back into his scroll and drawing his sword as he advanced.

The bandit in the top hat rushed him, screaming a wordless battle cry and raising his sword above his
head in a loose two-handed grip.

Link smirked. *These guys have probably never been in a real fight before in their lives...* He sidestepped, letting the bandit's blade slide across his own and directing the man's momentum upward, then pivoted, swinging his right arm around and smashing his attacker in the face with his shield.

Mr. Hat cried out as his nose flattened itself against his skull. He stumbled back, dazed as blood began to pour from his ruined nose. Link reversed his spin and brought the biting edge of his blade across the man's back, sending him sprawling into the dirt.

The last two bandits charged at once, screaming as they came. Link feinted left but spun and sidestepped right as one sliced down vertically with his sword, sailing past Link as his momentum carried him forward. Link brought his blade up, catching the second man's blade across the pommel and thrusting back and upwards, causing the bandit to lose his balance for one critical moment. That gave Link enough time to bring his sword back down in a powerful two-handed strike, catching the stunned bandit across his right shoulder and opening him up to his left hip. The man collapsed as blood and viscera spilled from the mortal wound and turned the dirt beneath their feet to mud.

"Bastard!"

Link spun at the shout, ducking beneath the returning bandit's wild swing and bringing his blade around and across his front at stomach level. Both the blade and the bandit kept going, which was very unfortunate for the bandit. A long stream of scarlet splashed against the side of the wagon while the bandit's top and bottom half tried to run off in two different directions. Neither was very successful, and both crumpled to the ground a short distance away.

Link returned to a defensive stance and surveyed the field of the short-lived battle. When no one else stepped forward to confront him, he flicked his sword to remove the majority of ichor, the remaining blood sizzling as the blade's magical aura burned it from its brilliant surface. A job well done, he thought, even if he did have a new hole in his shield.

A soft snort to his left. He turned, glad to see that Epona had not run far and had returned when things had settled down. "Hey there, girl," He said, giving the horse a comforting pat, then wrinkling his nose as the familiar battlefield scents of blood and voided bowels reached him. He realized sadly that he was growing used to the smell; the first time he had experienced the aftermath of such a battle he had spent half a candlemark retching in the woods.

"Link, he's got Malon!"

Link spun, his sword swinging into an *en garde* position at Navi's warning.

The man with the crossbow had abandoned the weapon, and was now struggling to hold the unconscious form of Malon in something resembling a standing position while keeping a wicked looking dagger pressed perilously close to her throat.

Link's jaw tightened as he shifted, furious with himself for forgetting the idiot in the wagon. "Hiding behind a defenseless young woman?" He spat on the ground. "Yeah, some badass you are. Your friends here would be proud."

"Drop yer sword boy, er I'll cut the fucking wench."

Link frowned. "And cursing in front of a lady, no less," He taunted, but did as the bandit said, giving his sword a quick twirl before thrusting it into the loamy ground blade first. "What would your
"Don't need no preachin' from ah dumbass brat," The bandit spat.

"Ya know, it's really too hot out here to deal with you fools for much longer." Link said, letting his fingers brush against the underside of his shield. He pursed his lips and gave a sharp whistle, then nodded at the bandit. "Navi, sic 'im."

The faerie darted forward, letting loose with a sound that was half battle cry, half maniacal giggle as she flared to a stop mere inches from the bandit's face. Brilliant sparks erupted out from her body in all directions, flashing all of the colors of the rainbow in a pyrotechnics show that even Link found painful to look at from ten meters away.

As predicted, the bandit jerked away from the flashing lights. "The hell—ghk!" His eyes crossed as the arrow embedded itself deep into his forehead with a meaty thwk. He began a slow crumple backwards before collapsing into the dirt, dead.

"Great job, Navi." Link said, transmuting his bow back into the Sheikah scroll, then sword and shield across his back before approaching the unconscious form of Malon, now sprawled across the bandit's slowly cooling corpse.

Navi gave a delicate sniff of mock disdain. "And you say that all I'm good for is complaining."

"I don't say that," He professed as he crouched and ran his fingers across Malon's throat, breathing a sigh of relief when he found a strong pulse and steady breathing. He pretended to think for a moment before glancing at Navi with an innocent smile. "Well, to your face."

He ignored Navi's squawk of dismay and focused his attention on his old friend as he picked her up in a soldier's carry. The past seven and a half years seemed to have been good to her, unlike many he had met in the three months since he had awoken in the burnt out ruins of the Temple of Time. She had lost the scrawny, clumsy frame of a nine-year-old girl and had blossomed into a lovely young woman of... how old would she be now? Sixteen, he thought. Her Namingday would still be several months off, if he recalled correctly. My, how Time flies...

Her face was serene, as if she didn’t have a care in the world, though the peppering of bruises and drying streaks of blood welling up from her lip and temple laid that lie bare. He noted with interest that her luxurious hair, ever her pride and joy, had grown out even more than the last time he had seen her, reaching all the way down to her lower back. He had to adjust his grip to avoid pulling on it as it spilled out around his arms.

Satisfied that she was safe for the time being, he carried her towards the back of the wagon. He sent a silent prayer to Farore that she woke up soon.
Savior

Goddesses, her head hurt.

Pain pulsed a dull staccato behind her eyes as reality slowly swam back into focus. Soft shadows obscured the gently swaying lamp and canvas cover of the wagon overhead. Her vision swam as her eyes found it difficult to focus on any one thing, as if the world were made of quicksilver, slippery and intangible. It was only made worse by the fact that her breathing came in soft little pants, causing eruptions of pain down her side and her vision to darken momentarily when she attempted to breath too deeply. She could feel the deep, aching burn of bruises beginning to form all across her body. She hadn't felt this bad since she had been thrown and nearly trampled to death by that stallion a couple years back.

Malon reached up with tentative fingers to probe her throbbing temple, dislodging a moist strip of cloth that fell across her face. She plucked it from her nose and stared at it cross-eyed, confused before she recognized it as a piece of her skirt, damp with river water. Irritation flashed through her, then anger that someone would dare rip her skirt, which quickly morphed into a spike of fear as she remembered exactly how it had been ripped in the first place. Panic seized her heart with an iron grip and she shot upright, body tense in preparation for a curse or a punch to the face. Her eyes darted around the cramped, shadowy confines of the wagon and her breathing became ragged as her pulse pounded in her ears.

But there was no one there. She was completely alone. Instead, only the distant war drums of a soon-to-be-monumental headache greeted her return to consciousness. She leaned forward, her hands reaching for something to hold on to as a wave of nausea swept over her and her ears began to ring. She had just enough time to think, Damnit... sat up too fast... Before the world resumed its merry dance and she slumped sideways against a packing crate as the darkness took her once more.

"Well, that's the last of them," Link said, mopping his brow of sweat.

He surveyed his work with satisfaction. After deciding earlier that five corpses laid out in the middle of the road was the sort of thing that would attract unwanted and unnecessary attention, Link had set about the laborious task of finding a decent hiding place and dragging the bandits (sometimes consisting of several pieces) a hundred yards away from the road. It had taken him nearly two candlemarks, but since Malon hadn't shown any signs of awakening he considered it time well spent. Sure, he was sweating and exhausted, but it sure beat the alternative if a band of the town militia happened by.

He kicked a pebble into the gulch. "I'll say one good thing for monsters; the Master Sword makes cleanup a whole lot easier when it just banishes them back to the Dark Realm."

"You sure you shouldn't move them back farther?" Navi asked.

Link shrugged, but said nothing, too fatigued to argue. If the fairy wanted the bodies moved any farther, he thought, she was more than welcome to move them herself.

Since he had no digging tools to speak of, he had laid them out in a shallow gully in the hopes that a few good monsoons would eventually deposit enough silt to cover the bodies. That is, assuming the local fauna didn't make off with everything worth eating first. The local wolfos weren't known for their picky palates. At Navi's gentle prodding he had left an old rotten log as their tombstone. Good riddance.
Satisfied that the bandits were finally disposed of, he turned with a final brush of his hands and began the short trek back to Malon’s wagon, Navi following dutifully in his wake. They walked in silence for several moments, with Link working out the last few details of his plan before he spoke. "I need you to do me a favor."

Navi flashed brightly. "What's up, partner?"

"I need you to scout high, and come down to warn me only if you see anything suspicious on the way back," Link said.

"Back? Back where?"

Link scratched at his chin thoughtfully. "I was thinking that I'll probably have to drive Malon's wagon back to the ranch since she hasn't woken up yet. I don't want to just leave her out here for the wolfos to find. Just... stay out of sight for now."

"You want me hidden for some reason?" Navi asked.

Link mulled that over for a moment. "You remember what happened with Anju? I want you out of sight just in case Malon wakes up and pulls something similar."

Navi tinkled with a fairy shudder. "Please, don't say another word about that horrible woman. Her screeching was loud enough to wake the dead. I mean, honestly. How could anyone confuse me with a Blue Bubble? I look nothing like a flying, flaming skull."

Link couldn't hold back a chuckle. "And then she brought out the flyswatter. Good times."

Navi huffed in exasperation. "Well sure, you would find that amusing, but do you realize how massive that thing was to someone like me? You've fought fire breathing dragons and you've never faced something this scary. We're talking about a titan swinging a steel grate the size of a small wagon here..."

Malon awoke again with a quiet moan, which quickly turned into a whimper as the light dug needles into her pulsing, watery vision. As her eyes focused she found that she still sat within the shadowy confines of the wagon, her head resting on the packing crate that she had slumped against before passing out again. Judging from the long shadows and the waning light it had been some time since she had first awoken. The last thing that she remembered, aside from the precious minute of consciousness earlier, was being dragged from the ground after she fell from Epona and hauled to her feet, a dozen groping hands moving across her body, and then... nothing. She must have fainted, though it was nothing like the few times that she had fainted from heat exhaustion back at the ranch. This time she had fainted from pain and fear.

Stupid. Weak. As long as she had remained conscious she had stood a fighting chance, but to faint like some pampered noble at the sight of a mouse? Stupid stupid stupid.

Slowly, finally, confusion took hold as her brain brought itself back up to speed. After what the bandits had gone through to subdue her, she held no illusions as to what would be her inevitable fate. A quick death, if she were lucky. If not...

She halted that train of thought, not overly eager for her mind to continue down that dark path. And yet, they had obviously not had their way with her. She had spoken with women at the markets who had lived through bandit raids, and it was obvious that something had caused the thieves to suddenly call off the assault. She didn't believe for a second that a sudden change of conscience had struck all of them at once, but aside from the deep bruises and the migraine, she seemed to be utterly
untouched, for which she sent a silent thanks to the Goddesses.

She slowly scanned the wagon, giving her body time to recuperate. Several boxes had been shifted, and one had its top pried open, but very little had actually been moved. Very strange.

*Come to think of it...* She thought as she inspected the rope burns on her wrists and ankles, surprised to find that she was no longer tied up. She distinctly remembered them bringing out the rope, but it no longer bound her. It was as if the bandits had left her in the back of the wagon, cut her bonds, and just... vanished.

She was about to crawl forward to inspect the rest of the cargo when the wagon swayed gently, and a sudden dimming of the light alerted her to the presence of someone climbing into the wagon. Her pulse quickened as panic shot through her. *They're back, they've come back to finish the job, sweet Nayru, please, no more...*

A lean form had climbed into the wagon, shadows shifting across the contours of a clearly male shape as it eclipsed the sunlight filtering in from the back. Though it was hard to tell from his silhouette, he didn't look like any of the bandits that she had seen before, but that didn't put her at ease. If anything it made her heart-rate increase.

Malon felt a scream die in her throat. She knew that she was in no condition to flee or fight back. If this new stranger meant her any harm, then she could already tell that it was too late for her. Better to go along with it, to beg leniency and pray that he was quick and merciful.

They both froze as their eyes met, mirror images of surprise and trepidation on both of their faces. The stranger swept a few stray locks of straw coloured hair from his cobalt blue eyes as he caught sight of her, his lips parting in a soft smile. "Hello there."

Years of proper upbringing demanded that she greet him in return, but all Malon managed was a panicked squeak.

The newcomer didn't seem to notice her anxiety and continued, "Glad to see that you're finally awake. I was starting to worry for a moment there." He crawled forward, causing Malon to shrink backwards against the crates.

He paused and held his gloved hands out in a placating gesture as he stopped and crouched low, and Malon was uncomfortably reminded of how her father had once shown her how to tame an unruly horse, all kind words and sweetness before they threw on the bridle. "Hey, hey, easy. I'm not going to hurt you." He moved closer, slowly this time, and filtered sunlight lit his features.

Even through the panic in her heart she noticed that this newcomer was attractive by anyone's standards. Strawberry-blond hair framing a handsome face. Strong jawline and nice full lips. Lightly tanned and obviously fit, with an easy grace in the cramped confines of the wagon that spoke of either a rural living or possibly military training. Young though, probably not much older than her, she guessed.

Malon swallowed, realizing with a start that her face had flushed. Whoever this newcomer was, he was certainly... striking.

When she didn't make any more sudden moves, the newcomer edged forward, peeling off his gloves while he eased into a crouched position in front of her and retrieved the discarded piece of cloth. "Probably gonna get a nice scar here," He said, dabbing lightly at the wound at her hairline. She fidgeted as he wiped the blood from her temple, her eyes watching his every move with the attentiveness of a cornered wolfos. She jerked away from his touch when she felt a particularly nasty...
"Sit still," He scolded softly, shifting back on his haunches. "You don't want to be moving around too much until you're sure you're alright."

Her curiosity finally overwhelmed her defensiveness. "Who are you? What happened to the men who attacked me?"

His eyes locked on hers, and she felt her heart race. Such pretty eyes, a soft shade of blue-grey like the sky before a rainstorm. He seemed to be thinking carefully, because it took him a moment to answer before he turned back to his ministrations. "How much do you remember?" He asked, and she noted that he had deflected her questions.

She shook her head gently, the warm flutter in her stomach quickly turning to nausea. It hurt to think, to breathe. "I was traveling from Lon Lon Ranch, heading to New Ordon. I stopped by the river to give Epona a drink when I was attacked..."

The stranger nodded in understanding, a contemplative look on his face. "It was a good trap. Waiting where the river came closest to the road on a sweltering day like this. It was only a matter of time before someone came along and stopped," He gestured to her waist. "May I?"

It took her a moment to grasp what he meant, but she realized that anyone that would bother asking could probably be trusted, and nodded her assent. She held her breath as he prodded and poked along her ribs through her blouse, his fingers working skillfully over the bruised flesh. She relaxed slightly as he went about his work with clinical detachment and not an ounce of suggestive intent, but winced several times as his probing fingers found the spots where she had been kicked or punched. He paused only when she jumped at a prod to her lower left abdomen.

"Tender?"

"Ticklish."

He favored her with an amused smile as he completed his inspection. "No broken ribs, at least. Bruised, definitely. Might be a couple cracked if you weren't lucky, but that's a lot easier to fix. You'll want to bandage it up for a few days to let the bone knit back together. No fear of a punctured lung either, which is always a plus." He sat back again, watching her. "Try to take a deep breath."

She breathed in a tentative breath, held it, then inhaled some more until the painful tightness in her chest threatened to become overwhelming. He nodded in satisfaction as she exhaled. The ache was already starting to fade slightly, and her breath came easier. "What, are you... a doctor or something?"

He waved the question away. "Nah, but I did meet a Shiekah once that gave me a crash course in basic survival medicine. I know enough to keep myself or someone else alive long enough to get some proper care. Really comes in handy when I'm traveling alone."

He's met a Shiekah. Riiight... She though, shifting self-consciously as he continued to inspect the wounds on her scalp. The strange thing was, even though she wasn't sure that she believed him, he didn't seem to recognize how unlikely an occurrence it would be to meet a member of an extinct race. Either he was a very poor liar, or..."}

She jerked her head away when his probing fingers found the swelling goose egg forming on the back of her skull. She made to scurry sideways but halted when he brought his hands back up in a placating gesture. 
"Calm down, Malon. Let me at least make sure that you're not going to do any more damage by moving around."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion as she skewered him with a speculative glare. "How do you know my name?"

His smile froze on his face, and he seemed to think over his answer carefully before speaking. "Young, attractive red-headed woman, alone, driving a wagon with a prime specimen of a horse." He shrugged. "People talk about you. I've heard good things."

Her eyes flicked to the sword and shield on his back. "You must get around a lot."

He hummed in agreement, giving her a secretive smile. "You could say that I've done a fair bit of traveling in my time." He gestured to her hairline. "May I continue?"

She eyed him warily for a moment before nodding, allowing him to move closer and resume his inspection. "So," She said, mustering her courage. "Does the wanderer have a name?"

He paused for a moment, again seeming to think the answer over for a quick beat before he answered. "Link."

"Link?" She asked. She felt a faint tickle of recognition, like the half remembered scent of a favored aunt's cooking, but the thought was quickly banished when he prodded at the tender spot above her hairline where the rock had connected with her skull.

"Yeah… fairly common name where I grew up," Link said.

Malon was about to ask where that might be, but was distracted when he placed his fingers on her cheeks and temples and pulled gently to inspect her eyes. Such gentle hands...

Link pursed his lips and frowned. "Hmmm, your right pupil is slightly dilated. Probably means you have a mild concussion, which I guess shouldn't surprise me."

Her hand shot up of its own accord to gently probe her eye, as if she could actually feel the affected area. Now that he mentioned it, the light did seem to be a tad harsher on that side.

"Hmmm. This bruise here looks older than the rest," He said, gesturing to her left eye where another bruise had left her with half of a raccoon's mask. He blinked in surprise when her demeanor suddenly turned downcast and withdrawn.

"N-no, I got that today." She said, facing away so that the bruise was hidden beneath her hair.

Link frowned. The bruise in question had turned a sickly greenish-yellow around the edges, meaning that it was older than the rest, but she was oddly defensive about it. Against his better judgment, he let the matter drop.

"Well, overall you're not in bad shape for surviving a bandit raid. How do you feel?"

"Like I've got a Goron dancing in my skull." She leaned forward, but even that simple act sent the world spinning in directions that her stomach didn't like. Her hands shot to her forehead in an effort to contain the pounding. "Strike that, make it an entire tribe of Gorons."

Link winced. "I've seen an entire tribe of Gorons burst into dance. I know your pain," He said, giving her a chance to regain her equilibrium as he inspected the sacks and boxes lining the sides of the wagon. "So you said you were heading to New Ordon to deliver supplies when you were
attacked?” He glanced over her shoulder, peering at the shadowed crates at the back of the wagon. "Anything back there that would particularly interest a group of thieves?"

Suspicion drenched her earlier warm feelings like a bucket of lake water. "Why are you so curious?"

His answer was distracted as he inspected the cargo. "Just piecing together the puzzle, as they say. Trying to determine if they were targeting you specifically or if you were just that unlucky." He turned and caught her glaring at him, and frowned as he realized the meaning behind her question. "I'm not sizing you up to see if there's anything worth stealing. If I was just another marauder I could have simply slit your throat while you were unconscious and dumped you in the river."

Malon felt her cheeks warm and she lowered her eyes, embarrassed. "I... I'm sorry. It's just... been one of those days."

He offered a soft smile. "No worries, I'd probably be asking the same questions if I were in your position," He glanced back, then forward. "It doesn't look like they had a chance to cart anything off before I arrived."

Malon let out a sigh of relief. "Thank Nayru. Ingo would flay me alive if anything had been stolen."

Link's ears perked. That name certainly rang several bells. When she was younger she had never really cared what Ingo thought as long as her father was happy. What had changed?

"Ingo?" He asked cautiously.

Malon nodded gently. "Ingo... runs the ranch while I'm out making deliveries. He and I don't get a long very well, but we've only got each other to keep the ranch afloat, so we make the most of it."

Link's eyebrow rose in a questioning look. "What kind of ranch only has two employees?"

Malon froze, and Link realized he had discovered a sore point. "We get by. Barely. That's all that matters," She said icily, and began to edge forward towards the front of the wagon.

Link turned, following her slow progress with concern. "Where do you think you're you going?"

"I still have to deliver these supplies to New Ordon," Malon answered.

Link frowned. "You were just attacked and you have a concussion. The last thing that you need to be doing is pushing yourself right now."

"I'll be fine as long as I take it slow." She crawled her way towards the bench, determination set in every supple curve of her body. She groaned slightly as another wave of dizziness struck her. "Very, very slow..."

He shook his head, frustrated. "It's a couple candlemarks before nightfall, and New Ordon closes its gates at dusk. You'd never get your errands done on time. If you continue on, you'd end up having to spend the night at the village."

"Beats the alternative. I can't return to the ranch without delivering these supplies."

"Why not?"

Malon turned her head and favored him with a cheerless smile. "Well get a load of you. First my doctor, now my prosecutor?" She asked with a smirk. Link didn't reply, merely content to gaze at her until she started to fidget. Exasperation began to edge into her voice. "Because the villagers need
these supplies, and I need to pick up our monthly feed shipment, alright? No delivery, no money, no food, and we all die of starvation."

"Why can't you just make the trip again tomorrow? The markets will still be open then," He paused and blinked innocently as if a thought had suddenly occurred to him. "Well, unless the world ends tonight, but it wouldn't really matter then, would it?"

"I just... can't..." She finished lamely.

He gave her a shrewd look. "Ingo."

Not a question.

"Yes," She said with a defeated sigh. "If I go back and he sees that I didn't make it to the market, he'll think I just fell asleep somewhere. The last thing I need is for him to think that I was being lazy. He'd… he'd never let me out of his sight again," She finished evasively. Not the whole truth, but she felt no need to give voice to the rest of her fears of what that man was capable of.

Link was quiet for several moments before relenting. "Fine," He said, relenting as he grabbed his gloves and followed her to the front of the wagon. "But take it a bit easier for the next couple of days at least. Your body needs time to heal, and it can't do that if you're constantly pushing yourself."

Malon nodded but said nothing. Easier to break a promise if one is never made, right? She sat on the edge of the bench and noticed that the step on the left side had been broken and was hanging by one useless rail. Probably jumped on and snapped in half by one of the bandits. Bastards.

She held up a hand. "Help me down."

He offered her his hand, and as she grasped it for support he noted with interest that she had a very solid grip. Epona trotted over as she stepped gingerly from the wagon, sensing her master's intentions, and within minutes she had the horse hitched once more. When she turned back towards the wagon, she noticed that Link had settled himself into the passenger's seat and looked as if he had no intention of moving.

She cocked an eyebrow, amused. "Need a ride, I take it?"

"Wouldn't mind," He said simply.

Malon shrugged and climbed into the driver's seat, replacing the sunhat on her head before taking the reins into her hands. With a quick flick of the wrists, they set off.

After several minutes of studiously ignoring him she turned and glared at her companion. She had tried to dismiss it, assuming he would soon grow bored, but he hadn't taken his eyes off of her since they had set out.

"What?" She asked, inwardly wincing at the harshness of the question.

"You've been squinting slightly against the light since you stepped out into the sun," He said gently. "You should probably lie down in the back and get some rest. I can get us the rest of the way to New Ordon."

Malon shook her head, irritated that he could pick out her weaknesses so easily. "Not a chance. I appreciate the rescue and all, I really do, but this is my wagon, and with my luck today you'd probably drive it into a lake."
He gave her an appraising look, then shrugged. "Yes, ma'am," He said with a grin, drawing his forest-green cap down over his eyes as he leaned back into a more comfortable position.

Malon gently shook her head once more in exasperation. She had been assaulted, rescued, delayed for several candlemarks, and gained a handsome, smart-mouthed hitchhiker. She sent a silent prayer to whichever deity might be listening that the rest of the day wouldn't turn out to be as full of surprises.

With a final self-reassuring huff, she flicked the reins to encourage Epona to move a bit faster, eager to get this day over with. New Ordon's militia wasn't known for being overly kind to latecomers, and if there was any hope of reaching the village gates by nightfall they would have to hurry.
The blazing sun crawled along its inexorable path across the autumn sky as they made their way towards New Ordon. Epona was making good time, newly refreshed as she was by the layover by the river, but it would still be several candelmarks before they arrived at the gates of the village.

The wind had picked up from the south, if only slightly, blessing them with a cooling breeze that cut through the horrid mugginess of the morning. Clouds had begun to form, as wispy as tufts of carnival faerie floss as they drifted across the land, casting fleeting islands of shadow upon the great grassy sea. To Link's experienced eyes it looked as if a front was coming, promising rain and perhaps a welcome drop in temperature in the next several days. For now though they simply bore the heat as best as they could.

Malon had remained largely silent as they traveled, humming a quiet song to herself that had an added effect of discouraging conversation. No more bandits had attempted to assault them, and indeed, they had not seen a single person in the candlemarks since they had set out. With nothing to keep himself occupied as they traversed the plains, Link found his mind wandering to memories of Malon and the Ranch, back before Ganondorf's rise to power. Between the oppressive heat and the rhythmic rocking motion of the wagon, it wasn't long before he found himself nodding off.

He dreamed...

The clouds roiled in the darkened sky, and the wind blew cool and damp with the promise of rain soon to come. The massive hollow log that served as the border between the Kokiri Forest and Hyrule Field had disappeared over the horizon several candelmarks ago, leaving them in a vast, unending expanse of rolling hills covered in supple grass the likes of which Link had never seen.

"Come on, Link, we're not going to make it to shelter unless you can pick up the pace!" Navi yelled over the gusting wind.

Link, ten years old and fresh with excitement over his recent adventure inside of the Great Deku Tree, slid to a halt and grabbed his wobbling knees, his lungs heaving for much needed oxygen. He had been running for what felt like days and he still couldn't see anything that even remotely resembled a castle. "I never—" He paused, gasping for another breath of air. "I never thought that… that Hyrule Field… was so… big!" He said between intakes of breath.

"Oh come on, it's not that bad." Navi chided. "Besides, the breeze is nice and cool. Imagine what this would feel like on a summer day?"

Link stood straight on shaky legs, observing the savage black thunderheads roiling above him. The Goddesses are angry. He thought sadly. Could it somehow be connected to the Great Deku Tree's death?

Taking a few moments to regain his composure, his spared a sideways glance at his faerie partner. "It may be easy for you; you don't have to run the whole way."

Navi sniffed in mock disdain. "Well, whatever, we just need to get to the castle before this storm hits us," The faerie said, and flew to her usual orbit around Link's head as she surveyed the field. "Now… which way was the castle again?"

Link sighed. "Face it, Navi. We're lost," He said, desperately searching the horizon for any sign of
civilization, "This field is too big. Even if we travel the whole night, I doubt we'd get to the castle by
daybreak." He closed his eyes as he remembered what he had been told. "The owl said to head north
to find the castle, and that I would meet a princess there, but with this rainstorm coming I can't even
tell which way the sun is moving."

"Don't worry so much, I have a good head for directions. I'll keep you on the right path," Navi said.
"Although... it is a shame you sold that compass that you found."

Link barked a bitter laugh. "What we need right about now is a miracle."

Navi's glow brightened. "Hey, look at the bright side! At least it isn't raining—"

If there was a Fate, and if one happened to believe in such things, then she was a very cruel and
unforgiving mistress indeed, for it was at that exact moment that the heavens decided to split into a
torrential cloudburst. The leading edge of the storm raced across the field and was upon them in
moments, shocking them both with the sudden icy torrent that the front brought.

"...yet." Navi finished somewhat somberly as she darted under Link's hat, where it was safer. For
Link, the raindrops would be a mere inconvenience. While annoying, it was hardly dangerous when
he got hit. But to Navi, even a glancing strike could be deadly, knocking the hapless faerie to the
ground where she could easily be pummeled with successive drops.

"Let's get out of here, shall we?" Link heard from under his cap. With a small shiver, Link set off for
the nearest hill, his clothes already thoroughly soaked. It was going to be a long day.

Several candelmarks later and the downpour still showed no signs of letting up. It had grown much
darker and the temperature continued to drop as the day wore on. Navi had informed him sullenly
that the sun had probably already set. The rain poured relentlessly onto Hyrule Field, slicking the
grass and causing bared patches of dirt to turn into thick mud. While living in Kokiri Forest, Link
had been caught outside during many rainstorms, but they had always been sheltered by the many
great trees surrounding them, and had little to fear from the wind and falling rain. In fact, a good
rainstorm had always seemed like something to celebrate, either to go outside and dance or burrow
into a warm blanket with a steaming cup of tea.

This storm was something entirely different. It seemed to Link as if an entire lake must have
evaporated and condensed again directly overhead. Worse still, his breathing was becoming more
labored, and he had developed a cough, probably the beginning of a cold. The rain was lighter now
than when it had first started, but now at times it seemed as if it were being blown directly at him
instead of falling straight down like he was used to. Fighting his way against the freezing, buffeting
winds, he ascended the last rise of a particularly large hill, only to feel his heart fall at the sight of the
seemingly endless plain before him.

He shivered again, violently this time, and found that he couldn't stop. I can't keep this up for much
longer, he thought to himself, an animal growl of frustration passing his lips. He fell to his knees as
his spirit shattered, and gazed at the open expanse before him. "T—that's it, Navi…” He suddenly
doubled over, grabbing his stomach as a coughing fit wracking his small frame. When it was over, he
just laid there with his burning forehead in the cool mud, not even bothering to wipe the newly
formed tears from his eyes. "I just... can't do it. What a glorious h—hero I turned out to be, huh? D
—done in by a little rain." He shivered, tears and rain staining his mud laced cheeks. "Goddesses,
I'm pathetic."

"Don't say that, Link!" Navi yelled, trying to make herself heard over the pounding rain. "What
would Saria think if she saw you now? Do you know what she would say?"
"She'd say that she hated me," he sobbed, picking himself up from the mud in a crouched position. "I can't even cross a s—stupid field by myself. Mido was right, I'll never be strong enough."

"Argh!" Against her better judgment, the little faerie shot out from underneath his hat and into the slight cover provided by his bowed head. "Damnit Link, she wouldn't hate you. She loves you!"

Link stared down in shock at his guardian faerie. He had never heard of any fairies cursing at their partners, no matter how badly they deserved to be scolded.

"All of the Kokiri love you," she continued. "Even that bumbling oaf Mido. And there is nothing that will ever change that. But if you give up now, you'll disappoint them. All of them. And you'll disappointed her." Her words softened as she looked straight into his eyes, noticing the unshed tears still collected there. "You don't want to fail them just as you are setting out, do you? You can do this; you just have to believe in yourself."

Link sniffed, rubbing the arm of his rain soaked tunic across his face. "No. No, you're right. I've got to keep going… I've got to be strong..." He paused, his eyes seemingly fixated on Navi. After a few moments of dead silence, it began to rattle her. "W—what?" She asked nervously. "What is it? Is there something stuck in my teeth?"

Link closed his eyes and shook his head. When he reopened them, he had to blink a few times before he came to the conclusion that he wasn't going crazy.

"Navi... There's light."

"Huh?" The faerie turned around and dodged a few errant raindrops, then fled back to the safety of Link's hat. "What do you mean, light?" She asked, poking her head out from under the cap.

"There." He said simply, pointing in the direction that he was staring.

Navi followed the length of his arm with her eyes and looked beyond. There, off in the distance, was a tiny flickering speck of light. If she hadn't been looking for it, she might have dismissed it as a star in the night sky, but since the sky was overcast and no stars were showing...

Navi smiled. "Oh, Link... There's light! And where there's light, there's people! We can rest there for the night!" She smiled and patted him on the head. "Let's go!"

With a grunt of renewed determination, Link hoisted himself up. He wobbled a little on unsteady legs before taking off down the hill at a run.

"Wait, Link, slow down, you're not feeling we—eaaaAAAAAHHHH!" Navi screamed as Link slipped on a particularly slick patch of grass, sending him skidding down the steep hill on his rear. He barely missed a beat when he hit the bottom, as he was up and running again in an instant, shivering against the cold.

"C'mon, partner, let's get you into a warm bed!" Navi chirped, invigorated by Link's renewed spirit.

He ran for what felt like an eternity. He couldn't remember how long it had taken him to arrive at the towering walls, the light from a solitary window his only guide, but he eventually arrived at the mighty iron gates of what could only be a castle. He gazed up at the towering fortress for a moment, gasping as he reveled in the fact that he had finally made it to his destination.

Lightning jagged, a flashing pitchfork of brilliant white through the heavy sky, illuminating the high, foreboding ramparts. Link leaned against the heavy iron gate, his breath coming ragged and uneven, half dead with exhaustion. Navi had had to shout encouragement at him in order to push him the last
kilometer, but he was here. He was finally here.

"C'mon, buddy, we're almost there, don't give up on me now." Navi said soothingly to her partner. Through the unique bond that all faeries shared with their partners, Navi could sense that Link couldn't take much more abuse. If only he could hold out a little while longer, they would be safely inside.

Nodding mutely, Link scrambled through the gate, muttering an awkward curse when he clocked his head on one of the thick iron bars. His thoughts seemed as thick and clouded as honey left out for too long, and he was having a hard time telling if things were actually where he saw them. Everything seemed to be floating in front of his eyes, as if the rain had become so thick that everything was swimming around him.

Inside the compound, he blindly trudged up the path and towards the only building with lit windows. His arms felt like someone had tied bricks to them, and it took an effort of will to raise one and weakly knock on the door.

"Oooh, no one's going to hear you over this gale," Navi said before zooming out of his hat and up to the warm glow of a window. Inside she thought she could make out two distinct forms sitting in front of a roaring fire, but it was hard to tell because the pane of glass was warped and pitted with age.

"Link, I think I can see someone in there. You're going to have to knock louder, or they won't hear you." She turned to her partner. It took her a moment to realize that he wasn't standing in the same spot anymore. In fact, he wasn't even standing.

"Link!" Navi gasped, zipping back down to her partner's side. Link had collapsed face down in the mud, his once green Kokiri tunic stained a muddy brown. Navi flitted in panicked circles around his head. "Oh no, don't lie down when you're so close!"

But the ground felt too comfortable, especially after all of that running. Navi was being silly. The cool mud felt good against his hot skin. Why shouldn't he lay down for a few moments and catch his breath?

"Link, don't go to sleep!" Navi cried, landing on his forehead. She leapt up again almost immediately, his feverish skin nearly burning her delicate feat. "Oh no oh no ohno-ohno-ohno … This is not good. Link, please wake up!"

Even when a crack of light fell over him and the warmth wrapped around him like a fuzzy blanket, he felt no need to wake up, even for Navi's frantic cries…

"... wake up," The voice said, and he felt a gentle prod to his side.

"Hmm?" Link said as the fuzzy remnants of his dream evaporated like water on stone.

Malon nudge him again. "I said, wake up, we're almost there."

Link nodded in acknowledgment and sat up straighter. He noted that the sun had dipped low in the sky while he was napping, and it would soon set behind the distant foreboding form of Death Mountain.

He softly worked the kinks out of his neck, allowing him to surreptitiously watch Malon from the corner of his eye. Seven years ago he had been taken in by Talon and his daughter when he was ill and exhausted. It had turned out that the "castle" that he had stumbled upon was really an old Hylian fort in the middle of Hyrule Field that had been converted into a horse ranch. It was due to their
charity alone that his quest hadn't met an abrupt end before it had even begun. He owed them more than he could ever hope to repay, and he was ashamed that he had never been able to return once his quest for the Spiritual Stones was complete. It hurt that she didn't seem to recognize him after all this time, but then again, it was probably for the best. He had made her a promise to return, all those years ago, and he had failed to live up to it.

Until now.

He wondered how Talon and the ranch had fared in the last seven years, but could think of no way to broach the subject that wouldn't immediately set her on the defensive. Best to just wait and see if he could exploit an opening in a conversation, just as he had when he asked about Ingo earlier.

Saria might have been his first friend, but she had always been the leader of the Kokiri first and foremost, settling disputes and keeping order amongst the forest children. She had been more of a mother figure than anything else. The rest of the Kokiri had accepted him, but had generally kept their distance.

But Malon... Malon was something special. She had been his first equal, the first person to truly accept him for who and what he was, the first person with which he could just relax and have fun. With Saria he had always been on edge, because there was always something else that would inevitably come along and demand her attention.

With Malon it had been different. In the weeks that he had spent at the ranch in between searching for the Spiritual Stones, he had learned so much from his newfound friend. She taught him how to ride, how to laugh at himself and how to care for others through her love of animals.

With the last rays of sunlight warming their backs, the familiar walls of New Ordon came into view in the far distance. Link smiled at the sight. They had made it the rest of the way without incident, but he couldn't wait to be behind those fortifications. New Ordon might have been a backwoods farming village, but it had survived the recent spread of bandits and monster attacks by being orderly and well disciplined. Short of a full-blown monster incursion, they would be safe once inside the village proper. Though she didn't say anything, Link knew from the slight relaxation of her shoulders that Malon was feeling the same.

He promised himself that, this time, things would be different.
The Goddesses were not in a generous mood, it would seem.

It had taken longer than expected to reach New Ordon. With the village walls in view, the broken metal step on the wagon caught on a boulder protruding from the grassy shoulder and was jammed into the ground. It had cost them nearly half a candlemark to try to fix before they both grew frustrated and, with Malon's blessing, Link snapped it off with a few well-placed kicks. Twilight had come all too soon, and with it the final mournful bugle call that signaled the closing of the town gates.

Now that they had finally arrived, they both sat in the wagon and stared up at the unwelcoming gates of New Ordon. Malon shook her head in frustration. "Just… friggin'… great."

Link frowned, his eyes sweeping from side to side as he regarded the empty palisades thoughtfully. "You'd think that they'd have a few guards posted to warn the gatekeeper not to close it on approaching wagons," He mused, then turned and looked at her. "Well, we could always camp out and wait for morning."

Malon scowled and looked back in the direction that they had come. Travelers who were not swift enough often found that drawing the creatures that stalked the fields at night towards a town was not the best way to make friends. Overzealous guards usually drove them away, often with something long-ranged and flaming, so it was common practice if one were to arrive at a town at night to bivouac just out of arrow shot, but still close enough to the gates that a sympathetic guard might aim for the creatures instead of a fleeing traveler. Sometimes though it was just easier to aim for the travelers and let the beasties eat their fill. At least then they wouldn't be hungry enough to attempt an attack on the settlement.

Malon shook her head sadly. Such was the world they now lived in.

They had passed one such camp a few minutes ago, but it had long since been deserted, the ashes of a abandoned camp fire cool and compacted with the last rain, which marked it at least a week old. There would likely be no one else along tonight, and Malon knew that they would have to fend for themselves. She was secretly glad to have someone along to protect her in case of another bandit attack, but there was no way they would be able to spend the entire night keeping watch and expect to be able to work through the full day tomorrow. Besides, time was a critical factor, and not just because she was carrying perishable cargo. She needed to deliver her provisions in time for tomorrow morning's market rush if she was expecting to be paid the full amount on her various contracts. To add to her problems, her professional pride was also at stake.

"The hell with that," She said gruffly, and jumped from the wagon, wincing as she landed. She took two steps, then stopped and reached for Epona's harness to steady herself as the world spun and darkened, only remaining standing through sheer force of will. As soon as the pounding in her head dwindled to manageable levels she straightened her back, took a deep steadying breath, and strode forward.

Link glanced at her curiously. "What're you gonna do now?" He asked.

"The only thing I can do," She answered, and slammed her open palm repeatedly against the heavy wooden gate. "Hey! Open up in there!"

A pregnant silence fell for several moments as both young Hylians perked their ears for any sign of a
response, but the only sounds to be heard were Epona's gentle breathing and the mournful hum of cicadas echoing through the twilight.

"I don't think there's anyone nearby that can hear you," Link said, jumping down from the wagon to join her by the gate.

Malon felt the burn of her irritation pulse in time with her migraine as she turned to face him. "Well then, smart-ass, are you gonna stand around all night or are you gonna help me get inside?" She snapped impatiently.

He favored her with a cheerless smile. "Would you like me to scream at the gate ineffectually as well?"

Malon blew a raspberry and turned back to ponder the door, frustrated with herself for taking her anger out on Link. It took some doing, but after a moment she could feel the burning fire of her anger waning. She wasn't sure she could trust this enigmatic traveler, but his actions thus far had been above reproach, and so at the very least he deserved a little respect. "Can you... please... help me find a way to get inside so we're not eaten alive tonight?"

Link bowed his head in respectful acknowledgment and stepped back from the gate to better scrutinize the town's fortifications. New Ordon sat nestled in the forest marking the southern border of Hyrule Field, and the stone and brick walls surrounding it formed a bulge that pushed outward from the treeline before sweeping back into the forest. At first he inspected the closest trees in the hopes that he would be able to scale one and jump over the wall, but they had obviously been pruned in such a way as to discourage such an act. Every likely looking branch had been stripped away, leaving dozens of unusual half-trees lining the walls as far as he could see. He assumed that the rest of the trees surrounding the village were similarly pruned, and it would be pointless to continue looking for one.

He continued his inspection of the wall, noting that his hookshot would be next to useless since there was virtually no wood for the barbed head to imbed itself into. He could attempt to lodge it between two stones on the upper part of the fortification, but there were no guarantees that it would support his body weight even if he were lucky enough to make such a shot.

He was stumped. The Ordonians seemed to have done their job well. There didn't appear to be any way over.

That was when he saw the first watch tower and noticed the light from a window several meters up.

A small smile crept across his face. Well, if I can't go over...

He turned and called softly to Malon. "Sit tight, I'll be back in a couple minutes."

He jogged down the length of the wall. The guard tower was built like the rest of the wall, unfortunately, and had no vulnerable protruding wooden components. As he approached, he saw that the window the light came from was really an arrowslit, designed so that archers inside of the towers would have as much protection as possible from attackers but would still be able to cover as large of a firing arc as possible. He knew immediately that he would be unable to squeeze through such a small opening, but that hadn't stopped him before in similar situations.

He slowed to a stealthy prowl as he approached, since the light and sounds emanating from the gap indicated that there were in fact some guards on duty. He snuck past it quietly, knowing that if he approached there was an even chance that the guards would shoot first rather than assist him by opening the gate. The bottom-most arrowslit was just low enough that he could barely see the room's
ceiling illuminated by torchlight, and shadows occasionally flickered across it as the people inside moved about. This one was a bust, then.

He continued on. After a few minutes of searching, he found what he was looking for; another guard tower, this one with a darkened arrowslit.

*This should do nicely,* He thought, reaching his sword hand across to brush against the top of his right gauntlet.

Two cloudy orbs set into the back of his gauntlet began to glow with an effervescent fire as Link began to draw upon his magic, casting red and green shadows about in the twilight. His fingers brushed against the brighter of the two orbs; a small emerald crystal that coolly pulsed with suppressed power. He concentrated on the feel of the crystal in his mind, and the soft green glow brightened for an instant as he channeled the magic at the core of his being down his arm and through the gem. The familiar weightless sensation of spinning and falling through a trap door enveloped him as his body dissolved into faerie lights, allowing the glowing spheres of pure magical energy to slip through the view-port and coalesce on the far side.

His Ocarina was able to mimic the same effect as the crystal, but those songs were only attuned to distant, specific predetermined locations. The beauty of Farore's Wind was that it allowed him to travel anywhere he could directly see, with the only downsides being that it had a relatively short range of several meters and was slow to use, leaving him open for attack were he to try it in battle. For this though, it served his purposes perfectly.

The ethereal orbs of light reformed in mid-air, causing him to fall gently to the floor as gravity resumed its control over his body. As soon as the spell was complete, he shook his hand to rid himself of the last of the lingering tingle of magic and strode forward.

He had barely taken a step when a low buzzing sound caused him to pause and crouch as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. The sound stopped, but repeated itself after several seconds before falling silent once more. He waited, tense, his ears perked and alert, but the position of the sound didn't seem to be moving, only constantly repeating. As the room came slowly into sharper focus, and the source of the sound showed no sign of approaching, he straightened and moved forward, cautiously feeling and shuffling his way around empty tables and chairs towards what appeared to be an exit in the far wall.

He froze again as movement in the soft shadows directly ahead of him caught his eye, the same direction as the buzzing. He reached his arm back slowly and plucked an arrow from his quiver, holding it high above him with his right hand so that the arrowhead was not in his direct line of sight as his left hand moved towards the grip of his sword.

"*Fuego,*" He whispered, and a burst of magic sped through the arrow and ignited the tip, giving him a makeshift torch.

The sleeping guard in the corner turned out to be the source of the buzzing as he gently snored. His well-worn armor reflected the torchlight, sending flickering shards of firelight dancing about the room. He sat in a chair propped against the wall with his legs crossed, his head back and mouth open in a boneless position that only those in a deep sleep can truly accomplish.

Link snorted in amusement and blew out the magic flame on his arrow before re-sheathing it. He allowed himself another few moments to grow accustomed to the gloom before moving again, taking great care to step over the outstretched legs of the guard.

*Thank the Goddesses for slackers,* He thought to himself with a smile, and quietly slipped out the
Malon paced restlessly, her arms folded tightly across her chest. Every time her path took her back towards the forest, she cast an anxious look into the darkness that her new companion had disappeared into. Twilight had nearly given way to full night, and the stars overhead were starting to peak out from behind a thin veil of clouds, even as the shadows began to swell around her with tendrils of inky darkness that reached out from the treeline like barbed, jagged fingers.

She wasn't afraid of the dark, really. Only children and superstitious old biddies feared the darkness and the unknown evils that lurked therein.

At least... that's what she kept telling herself even as she found her revolving path becoming smaller and smaller and edging closer to the cart. She began to wonder if retrieving her crossbow from the wagon would alleviate some of the stress of waiting.

Sensing her master's impatience, Epona whickered softly and tossed her mane. Malon forced herself to stop and inhale deeply in an effort to calm herself and turned to give the mare a comforting pat on the flank.

"Just a little while longer, Epona, then we'll get you stabled for the night," She said, still looking into the forest for signs of anyone – or thing – approaching. Still, even with her fervent wishing, Link did not materialize out of the gloom.

Where was he?

The sounds of creaking wood and well-oiled hinges caused her to spin. The left door of the gate had slid free from its lock, and before long it stood fully open thanks to a familiar green-garbed figure.

Malon rushed forward and took hold of Epona's bridle as soon as the gate was open and began to lead her into the village.

"What took you so long?" She asked, using a smirk to soften the question's bite and hide her earlier anxiety.

Link shrugged diffidently. "Had to avoid the guards. Just be glad they're not as alert as the ones in King's Bay, or else we'd look like pin cushions right about now."

Malon said nothing as she drew Epona forward, eager to be about her business. As soon as the wagon was past, Link pulled the gate closed, cushioning it at the last moment so that it fell into its lock with a quiet click in an effort to avoid alerting the guards, and turned to catch up with Malon.

Link had assumed that Malon's first priority would be finding a place to rest for the night and that she would make her deliveries tomorrow morning. However, as the wagon pulled into the central square, it turned out that she had had other plans. Link caught up with her moments after a door to one of the larger houses had opened at her knock.

"Good evening, Mrs. Ballesta. I know it's getting late and I apologize," Malon said with a gracious bow, her hands clasped tightly in front of her skirt. "I was hoping to talk to your husband about the supplies I was supposed to deliver earlier today."

As Link approached, he saw that Mrs. Ballesta was a tall, heavy-set woman with a glare that could eviscerate a Goron. In fact, he wondered if she didn't have a little Goron somewhere in her family tree since she nearly took up the entire width of the doorway.
She glared at Malon, her beady coal-black eyes scrunched as she scrutinized the lovely young redhead. "You're late," She said accusingly.

Malon smiled with patient saccharine sweetness. "As I said, ma'am, I sincerely apologize. I—" She noticed Link approaching and corrected herself. "That is, we were delayed by bandits earlier today on the road here, and we lost several candlemarks. We only just now arrived and I made sure that this was our very first stop."

Mrs. Ballesta glowered with her fiercest beady-eyed glare, then grunted and tossed her head towards the heart of town. "He's gone for the evening, went down to the mill. Just get our stuff and I'll get your money," She said, and without waiting for Malon's reply, turned and let the door fall closed to a crack.

Malon bowed once more as she was dismissed, then turned and began striding purposefully towards the wagon. She growled in frustration when she remembered the step on the side closest to her was broken and made to walk around the back before she nearly stumbled into Link. She paused, her business-like demeanor suddenly turning uneasy as she opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it without saying a word and looked away.

Link waited a brief moment for Malon to collect her thoughts, then tried to fill the increasingly uncomfortable silence. "Here, let me help you," He said, moving towards the back of the wagon.

She reached out towards the wooden paneling of the wagon in an effort to steady not only her physical balance, but to keep her emotional balance as well. Her hand brushed over a thin streak of red-brown that looked as if it had been splashed across the wagon. She frowned when her fingers came away dry, but rust red. Paint?

"I didn't ask earlier... but I'd like some answers now," She said, then turned and looked straight into his eyes. "How did you manage to get rid of the bandits?"

Link grimaced and tried to avoid her piercing blue gaze. "You... probably don't want to know."

"Try me," She said, folding her arms defiantly.

He met her challenging stare for several long seconds, then said, "When I came across your wagon, I found a group of men surrounding you. I warned them off, and they didn't listen. When I pushed the subject, they attacked me."

The simple intensity of the answer made her shiver in the cooling night air. "You just... killed them? All of them?" She asked. When he said nothing, she continued, "Do you know how strange, how implausible, that sounds? That you were able to win against those kinds of numbers?"

"Six," He offered.

"Six men," She said incredulously. "Six armed men. That you alone were capable of winning against those kinds of numbers?"

He nodded, his demeanor frigid. "Weren't much of a fight, really. Not a one of them was a real soldier."

"And you are?"

"I'm... different," He said, shifting uncomfortably.

"How so?" She asked.
Link sighed. "Those men learned over the years how to fight in order to take things from other people that didn't belong to them. I've learned to fight so that I can protect those that can't protect themselves."

Malon gave a bitter laugh and she felt her cynical side bubble up in full force. "How poetic. So very noble of you. But what do you get out of it?"

Link's jaw clenched in an effort to bite back a scathing retort. "The satisfaction of a job well done," He said seriously.

She blinked at him, then slowly shook her head and took a step back. "Go away. I thank you for the help, but I really can't afford to be more generous than that."

"I'm not looking for a reward; I just want to help you. Is that really so hard to believe?"

"Yes, yes it is." Malon said and locked eyes with him once more as if daring him to prove her otherwise.

Link felt a frustrated growl escape his lips. "Well believe it or not, I didn't save you earlier because I was looking for an easy payoff." He crossed his arms with a sigh and kicked at the dirt. His head hung low for a moment as he gathered his thoughts, but when he looked up determination burned in his eyes.

"Look, here's the deal. I've got nowhere to go, and since I can't seem to find the person I'm looking for, I'm stuck. Before I found you by the side of the road, I was wandering with no direction. If I were to walk out those gates now," He stabbed a finger back the way they had come, "That's what I would still be. Aimless.

"I'm offering to help you because I want to help, nothing more. I'm not expecting some reward, and I'm not asking anything from you. Just... let me help you, at least until you're safely back at your ranch. Please."

Malon was quiet as he spoke, though her gaze remained locked with his. After a moment though, slowly, a cooling touch of gratitude softened her glare. "All right, then," She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, distracted with her thoughts, then nodded as she reached a private decision. "All right. Come on, you can help me move these boxes around."

Link blinked, surprised but grateful for her sudden change of heart. "We're not unloading them?" He asked as she climbed into the back of the wagon.

"Normally I would, but then normally this would be my last stop on my way out the gate. But if I want to get everything done before midnight, I need to hit all of my stops as I reach them instead of driving across town and starting my errands on the far side like I usually do."

As they settled into the cramped confines of the wagon, Malon showed him exactly which boxes needed to be moved, mostly those in the middle. Once the center was cleared, she urged him to back out and began rapping on one of the wooden floor-planks. Much to Link's surprise, after a few solid taps it popped loose. Malon set the small plank aside and dug her fingers into the crevice. She strained slightly, allowing him to see the lithe muscle in her arms that she had built up due to years of manual labor. After a moment a large piece of the paneling popped upwards, revealing a small recessed hollow built into the floor of the wagon and completely filled with covered cartons.

Link whistled appreciatively. "Clever."

She flashed him a wicked smile as she removed several long, thin cartons and placed them to the
side. Pride smouldered in her eyes, concealed behind the veil of her bands. "I learned a long time ago not to put all of our eggs in one basket, so to speak. Today wasn't the first time I've been robbed, though last time they were just happy to take the crates."

Link nodded appreciatively. "You can't even tell, really, from the outside. You've disguised it quite well with the canvas sides," He said, and smiled when he saw the next item that Malon withdrew from the secret compartment. "Aaah, so this is why you didn't want to wait until tomorrow. The milk would spoil."

Malon nodded and began passing him large glass bottles full of the creamy liquid. "Not only that, but the glass alone is worth a small fortune. We nearly went bankrupt the last time we had to replace everything that was stolen. I figured it would be safer this way if I was seen only carting around manure and other cheap items."

Link began arranging the bottles to the side as they were handed to him. During a pause in which Malon pulled out another thin carton, he held a bottle up in the torchlight and studied the familiar blue and white hand-painted label of Lon Lon Ranch. The small caricature of a milk cow stared back at him dolefully through a thin sheen of condensation. "Why don't you use clay or metal urns to transport the milk like everyone else?"

Malon shot him a look that hovered between bemused and insulted. "We'll do that for large orders occasionally, but for individual families we like to put in some extra effort. Lon Lon Milk is some of the highest quality milk in all of Hyrule," She said with the familiar air of someone delivering a well-rehearsed sale's pitch. "Clay pots shatter too easily or will give the milk an earthy taste, and steel will rust. Only glass is pure enough to allow our milk to retain its cool, delicious flavor, untainted by outside contaminants."

She continued handing Link bottles until there was only one left, which she held up for his inspection. "Besides, the glass allows you to see that what you're receiving is the genuine article; pure, one hundred percent cow milk. Some farms will try to cheat and dilute their milk with water or mix in goat milk, which has a distinct yellowish color," She gave the jar a gentle shake for emphasis, sloshing the milk around the bottle until it bubbled against the cork stopper. "This right here is high-quality stuff, pure as the driven snow."

"Isn't it more expensive to do it this way though?" Link asked, still dubious. "Last time I looked glass isn't cheap."

Malon nodded, conceding his point. "It is, and our price reflects that, but we have an arrangement with all of our customers. For every bottle that they return to us, we give them a discount on their next order. Sometimes bottles end up broken or people decide to keep them for other things, but overall we get most of our bottles back."

"This lets the customer feel like they're getting a good deal," She added with a sly wink. "Aaand it ropes them into buying more milk from us down the line. High quality taste for a reasonable price, as long as you keep doing business with us."

Link threw his hands up in surrender, laughing. "All right, all right. You've convinced me."

Malon grinned triumphantly and began refitting the door to the secret compartment, leaving Link to organize the milk jars. He was still smiling when an elderly man appeared around the corner of a building and approached them upon seeing the wagon.

"There yeh are, girl!" The man said in greeting as he shuffled closer. He walked with a simple hardwood cane and his back was stooped with age, but his eyes were bright and attentive beneath a
bushy pair of grey eyebrows.

Link turned with interest as Malon's demeanor warmed and she gently slid from the wagon. The old man stopped a respectful distance away and, with a small flourish, bowed and removed the softcap from his salt-and-pepper hair, causing Malon's grin to widen and her cheeks to flush.

"Good evening, Mr. Ballesta. I just spoke with your wife; I have those lengths of horse hair you ordered," Malon said, giving a small bow in return.

"Good evening, good evening. I was wondering what ha' happened to yeh. Worried I wasn't goin' ta be able ta fill Jerik's order tomorrow," The man man said, replacing his cap on his head. He paused when he caught sight of the bruises framing Malon's face, and continued in a quieter voice, "Yeh look like 'ell, girl. Yeh been havin' trouble at the ranch?"

Malon's eyes widened at the old man's directness, but she plastered on as large a smile as she could muster. "N—not at all, sir. Just a minor incident on my way here. I had plenty of help sorting it out, though," She said, gesturing towards Link.

The old man studied Link for a moment with the cool assessing gaze that men use on one another to judge a potential threat before nodding his head. "Tha's good then, I s'pose," He said, then turned back to Malon. "If'n you'll just be good enough tah unload my order, I'll go an' find your money."

With another respectful bow, he turned and walked into the house.

As the door swung shut, Link looked askance at Malon. "Horse hair?"

Malon turned with a nod. "Mr. Ballesta is a bowyer, and in his spare time he makes bows," She said, and hastened to explain at Link's confused frown. "Bows for string instruments, not just archery bows. Horse hair makes excellent string since it's strong but very pliant." She pointed towards a small leather satchel placed on top of one of the larger crates. "Hand me that and two bottles of milk, will you?"

He handed her the order and with a nimble flick of her skirt she turned and went to make her first delivery of the day.

The rest of the evening was spent much the same way; Malon would drive the wagon and give Link instructions while he rooted around in the back for the next stop's order. They made several deliveries in the area around the central market, mostly to private homes to deliver bottles of milk. Several bundles of cucco down were delivered to a quilter, while a separate carefully packed parcel of cucco primary feathers were delivered to a fletcher. Cucco feathers weren't the best for making arrows, but they were far more readily available than the highly demanded kargaroc feathers.

Link noticed that Malon was making more of an effort to conceal her wounds after the first stop at the Ballesta's. Though she went about her business with gusto, she kept the bruised half of her face turned away, and always made sure to hide the limp. If anyone were to question her about her injuries, she would wave it off with a laugh and quickly move on with the conversation.

As they continued their deliveries across the town, Link found that he was quickly falling into a routine. Malon would drive and instruct Link on what needed to be pulled out for the next order. He in turn would dig around in the back and stack orders in neat piles. When they stopped, he would jump down and quietly place the order by the door as Malon negotiated her fee, then return to the wagon and begin rearranging the cargo in preparation for the next stop. Soon after, Malon would return, usually carrying several empty milk bottles which she would hand to Link, and they would be off to the next delivery.
Finally, as the night wore on and their stores were gradually depleted, the end was in sight. A dozen jars of milk and several pallets of eggs were delivered to a local bakery, whose owner was kind enough to sell them a couple of leftover meat-buns for dinner at a discount. Crates full of bagged manure were unloaded and delivered to several farms on the edge of town. The last pallet of eggs – marked "fertilized" on the top – was delivered to a farmer that had apparently lost his last two egg laying hens to a marauding fox. The farmer was still shouting his gratitude to Malon as they drove away.

Link leaned casually against the wagon with his arms crossed as he watched Malon deliver the last of the milk to an elderly couple. The wagon itself was nearly empty, save for several open crates and the carefully packed milk bottles. It had taken them nearly five candlemarks to make their way across the town, but they had finally finished their deliveries for the day.

All the while he had worried about Malon's well-being. Though she put up a brave front, he could see that the work was beginning to take a real toll on her in her fragile state. She was noticeably breathing harder, even though her duties amounted to little more than driving the wagon and negotiating her fee, and her limp had become pronounced enough that she was unable to hide it any longer. The old woman had commented on Malon's bruised face, but as usual she had laughed it off with a wave of her hand and complimented the woman on her woolen shawl in an effort to divert the conversation.

"Stubborn woman," Link muttered under his breath.

A high feminine voice answered him: "She always was. The only reason you don't like it now is that it's being directed at you."

Link smiled as the familiar tinkling sound of faerie wings settled about his head. "Navi. Thanks for the lookout."

"No problem," She answered, then made a show of looking around. "Although this doesn't look like Lon Lon Ranch."

Link's smile changed to a crooked grin. "Slight change of plans. As I said before; stubborn woman."

"Still want me to stay out of sight?" She asked, pausing when she saw the distracted look in his eyes. "What's the matter?"

Only someone who had spent as much time around Link as Navi had would notice the troubled frown that flickered across his face. His cool gaze never left the redhead young woman across the street as she chatted with the elderly couple. "She didn't recognize me," He said quietly, "Just like what happened with Saria…"

Navi said nothing. She had already tried to console him after the Forest Temple. What else could she say that wouldn't ultimately amount to useless platitudes?

Link sighed and shook himself free of his dispirited thoughts. "Stay out of sight for now. I've managed to convince her to take me back with her when she leaves. I want to find out what's happened at the ranch."

"And after that?"

He thought for a moment. "After that... we'll see what we see. Find a place to keep warm for tonight. Tomorrow morning I'd like you to keep an eye out on our way back to the ranch. Then you can find me when I'm able to get some privacy."
"Roger that, partner," Navi said, flew off to resume her watch high overhead.

"You should have been asleep candlemarks ago."

Malon turned and blinked sleepily, looking for the source of Link's voice. It took her a moment to see that he had climbed into the back of the wagon and was lying with his head propped on his shield. His boots and sword had been removed and placed neatly to the side, and his chain-mail was airing out on top of a packing crate. Overall, he looked fairly comfortable.

"Had to wash Epona down after I fed her," Malon said, putting a hand to her mouth to cover a mighty yawn, then continued. "Horses require a lot of care-taking. You can't let something like good hygiene slide or else you'll be looking at a lot of trouble down the road."

"I offered to do it for you," He said.

Malon shook her head. "Epona doesn't like anyone touching her, especially strangers. She won't even let Ingo near her, and she's known him her entire life," Her eyes shifted. "Not that I can blame her..."

He watched her silently for a moment, torchlight from the market square causing his blue-grey eyes to sparkle in the darkness. There was a hint of a smile on his lips, as if he knew some secret that she wasn't privy to, but he shrugged and rolled over. "Just try to get some rest. You certainly earned it today."

An understatement, She thought as she walked around to the front of the wagon and climbed in. Her muscles were so sore and stiff that she could barely walk, much less crawl into the wagon, but she eventually made it. It took her longer than it should have due to her aching body, but she was able to find a spare saddle blanket that she kept for Epona. It was approaching midnight, and with the drop in temperature the blanket would serve her well.

In minutes she had her own little nest laid out in the front of the wagon. After a moment's contemplation she decided to shift an empty crate into the middle of the wagon, giving herself a small measure of privacy before she laid down.

The last thing she heard before sweet oblivion overtook her was Link's amused chuckle.
They awoke the next morning later than Malon would have liked, Link's excuse being that she desperately needed the rest after the previous day's ordeal and he didn't want to disturb her for breakfast. That she had slept through not only the rooster calls but the town's morning bells told her that he was probably right, so her complaints were more just to keep up appearances. The sweet-roll he handed her by way of apology certainly helped curb her temper.

Malon's joints and muscles protested from a night spent on hard wooden planks, but within minutes of her awakening they had cleaned up and had Epona hitched to the wagon. Before they set out, Malon made sure she paid the stable-boy a tip for watching over Epona during the night. He stared at the shiny blue gem in his palm, a look of wonder on his dirt-smudged face before he clenched his fist tight, then turned and ran off with a toothy grin.

"That was awfully generous of you," Link said.

"I'm not the only one who has to make a living," Malon replied, replacing the wallet on her belt. It jingled softly, bulging with her recent earnings. "It's not much, but if he's thrifty it should feed him for a couple of days at least."

Soon afterward, they set off, exiting out of the same gate they had used to previous day. As they passed, the man standing guard frowned and looked at the docket he had been given from the previous watch. He looked as if he were about to say something, then stopped and shook his head, and gestured to the gatekeeper to let them through.

They passed the early candlemarks back to the ranch in silence, though it was not as tense as the journey the day before. Feathery bands of clouds had moved in overnight, blunting the hammering force of the sun somewhat. Epona seemed happier as well, more eager to make the day's journey now that the wagon weighed significantly less with its cargo unloaded.

Towards noon they came to the spot where the road brushed against the river, the same place that Malon had been attacked the day before. As before, she unharnessed Epona to allow her to drink unhindered, but she did not step into the river herself. Instead, she sat in the wagon, her shoulders hunched as she sullenly watched Epona step into the shallows.

Link approached her cautiously, noting the distracted look in her eyes. "You look like your favorite pet died," He said, offering her a cattail stalk that he had dug up from the shallows.

Malon's unfocused gaze wavered before she looked at him with a tired smile. "I'm fine. Just ... a bit dead on my feet." She took the proffered cattail with a quiet "Thanks," and began to peel the shoot.

Link nodded in understanding and climbed up to sit beside her on the bench. Malon shifted her position slightly, giving him more space. They sat for a moment, quietly chewing on the tender cattail hearts, and he noticed that her posture seemed to relax as she focused on her snack.

Malon finished hers first, and she tossed the husk over the side before turning to Link. "You mentioned yesterday that you were looking for someone."

Link finished chewing before he answered, giving himself a moment to think. "I wouldn't say I'm really looking for him, since I have no idea where to look in the first place. More like wandering aimlessly in the hopes that I run into him."

Malon nodded, but the answer didn't seem to satisfy her curiosity. "Do you mind if I ask who you're
trying to find?"

"A Shiekah," He said cryptically, tossing the remains of his snack into the river.

Malon blinked, her expression skeptical. "Bullshit."

Link laughed. "It's true," He said. "At least, he fits all of the descriptions of one. Red eyes, silent as a ghost, enigmatic to a fault."

"Uh-huh," She said, one incredulous crimson eyebrow cocked. "And I suppose that this is the same Sheikah that you learned medicine from?"

"Actually, that was an older woman that I met ... a long time ago," Link said.

Malon scoffed and threw him a pout. "Fine, be that way and don't tell me."

Link spread his hands. "Hey, I can't prove that they really were Sheikah, but there's no way that I can disprove it either. So until someone comes up with a better description, that's what I'll call them."

Malon nodded as she processed the information, still unsure as to whether she believed his tall tale, but unable to find a reason to doubt his word. "So until you run into him again ... what are your plans?"

Link's eyes lost focus as he stared thoughtfully into the distance. "Honestly? I have no idea. I've been to most of the major villages in Hyrule, but people start to give you strange looks if you mention you're looking for a member of an extinct race.

"I've been thinking maybe I should just head to one of the larger towns like Kakariko and camp out for a while. Maybe he'll find me instead. I suppose I could try to find some work at a stable or an inn or something, somewhere that I'll be able to keep an eye on everyone passing through."

Malon nodded again, and before the words had even entered her head, she found herself asking, "Does that mean you're looking for a job?"

Link opened his mouth to reply, then shut it as he registered the tone of her question. "I might be," He said with a sideways glance, his voice carefully neutral. "Why do you ask?"

Malon blinked, and a crimson patina colored her cheeks. "It's ... just that ... with autumn right around the corner, we're starting to enter the busy season, and we've been understaffed for years," She said, and found that, though the words continued to spill from her unbidden, the idea was starting to grow on her. "For the past couple of years we've been really hurting for extra hands, especially during harvest time when we receive nearly twice as many orders as the rest of the year.

"The problem is, we've never really been able to find anyone that can be trusted around the horses. The last man we hired tried to make off with our best stallion in the dead of night, and the one before that was part of a slavery ring.

"In fact, I think that if you were to work for us, you'd have the best chance of finding your friend," She said, her sapphire-blue eyes sparkling with excitement at the possibilities as her thoughts fully coalesced. "Our ranch is basically in the dead center of Hyrule, which would give you easy access to most of the major villages. I'm sure that you'd find your friend in no time."

Link nodded, finding no fault with her premise. "And you trust me enough to offer me a job at your ranch?"
Malon paused, a pensive frown creasing her forehead. Her gaze swept back towards the dusty road ahead as she spoke. "Well, you've been ... very generous with your time," She paused for a moment, then continued. "You've been more than generous, really. I can't come out and say that I trust you implicitly, because I really don't know you very well. But you've..." She trailed off, and growled in frustration. "Look, I'm not very good talking about this kind of stuff, but I appreciate everything that you did for me yesterday. I feel like I ... No, I do owe you something in return."

Malon held up a hand to stall his protest. "I'll have to discuss it with Ingo, but I think he'll agree to hiring you, at least until winter or whenever you find your friend. I can't promise much beyond room and board," She finally turned and looked into his patient gaze. "Would you ... maybe be interested?"

"I'd be honored," Link said. Malon held out her hand, and they shook, sealing the deal. And with any luck, He thought to himself, I'll be able to see what's happened with Ingo and her father as well.

Both remained quiet as they rode around the last bend in the road leading to Lon Lon Ranch. The high, foreboding walls jutted upwards from a mesa that had formed in the center of the field, a rocky island in the vast grassy sea. Twilight was swiftly approaching, though the sun had already set behind a bank of thunderclouds making their way over the mountains.

Link wondered about the early history of the ranch. He knew that it had not always belonged to the Lon family, but past that he had never really asked. When he was younger, such things had rarely mattered. Back then it had initially appeared to be a castle, at least to his limited viewpoint. Now though, to his older, more experienced eyes, it looked to be better suited to warding off invading armies. The fact that it had managed to survive the past seven years amidst Ganondorf's rule and the subsequent monster incursion was a testament to its design.

The mighty iron gates that guarded the only entrance to the ranch were smaller than Link remembered. The first time he had seen them they had towered over him, an immense and powerful symbol of the protection they offered the ranch. Now though, they seemed smaller, almost diminished somehow. Link dismounted and strode towards the gates, noting that he now stood at eye level to the highest rail. Years of rust and grime had taken their toll, and the gates parted with a sharp groan of protest, requiring several sharp yanks before he could fully open them.

Link led the wagon as they entered the ranch and made their way up the familiar narrow cobblestone path between the barn and the main house. He paused when they came to the second gate and stared sadly at the ranch's crest mounted above. The bull head that had for so long been an indelible icon of the ranch had lost one of its horns, and the 'O' in the second Lon was missing. It was a sobering reminder that, even if the ranch was still operating, nothing had escaped the withering decay brought about by Ganondorf's rise to power.

Malon stepped gingerly from the wagon and unfastened a keyring from her belt, which she used to unlock the gate. She took no notice of the dilapidated state of the buildings around her, most likely, Link thought, because she was so used to it by now. However, the last time that Link had been here the ranch had been in good repair, and the changes were disquieting.

Malon opened the gate and led Epona around and past the barn. She drew her up even with the outside wall so that the wagon was tucked out of the way, and began removing Epona's harness. The young mare pawed at the ground anxiously, eager to be free of its burden.

Malon patted the horse's flank in a reassuring gesture. "Patience girl, we'll get you fed soon enough. I swear, you're always thinking with your stomach..."
Link chuckled. "I've been accused of that a few times myself."

Epona pranced forward the second Malon flicked open the last latch, causing the wagon tongues to clatter to the ground. The mare turned at Malon's frustrated yelp and began nibbling at her hair.

Malon laughed, pushing the horse away. "Okay, okay, I get the message. Food time now."

"Better get her fed before she starts snacking on your hair," Link said.

Malon nodded, then turned to him with an apologetic smile. "Well, if you're going to be working here, I suppose there's no time like the present," She pointed towards a small shack behind the barn. "If you could please start unloading the crates and stack them inside, I'll go get Epona situated in the barn. Just come and find me when you're done and I'll see what I can do about dinner."

She began to leave, but then turned back with a blush. "Oh, excuse me, where are my manners?" She said, bowing formally. "Welcome to Lon Lon Ranch."
Chapter 7

The heavy iron keys clattered dully as Malon flipped through the ring, searching for the proper one to open the barn. She flicked out the correct key and slid it into the rusty old lock, scowling as the worn metal fought against her. The ranch was falling apart, and it took all of her effort just to try to keep it in its current state of disrepair. Hopefully Ingo wouldn't argue with her about hiring her new friend so they could finally work on improving the condition of the ranch instead of merely fighting a losing battle against attrition.

As they had passed the house she had noticed that no lamps had been lit inside, so she had thought that perhaps Ingo might have been working in the barn. However, after straining to push open one of the double sliding doors at the back of the building, there appeared to be no one inside. Only the low chuffing sounds and tepid, musky scent of dozens of dozing animals locked up inside for too long greeted her.

Epona brushed past her and stepped into the barn, obediently heading for her open stall. Malon followed cautiously and made her way towards the front door. She pulled a lantern from its alcove and lit it, casting a warm golden glow about the barn as the light cut back the shadows. Dozens of pairs of sleepy, doleful eyes sparkled back at her from the darkness.

"Huh. Looks like Ingo isn't here," She said, mostly to herself, and hung the lantern high on a post to give her the best light.

"Typical," She thought with a flash of anger. Knowing him he's probably down at the tavern again, drinking and gambling away our meager earnings. Not for the first time did she feel the desire to take her newly filled wallet and hide it somewhere safe. Unfortunately, if there was one thing Ingo was good at, it was finances. Even if she were to just give him half of her earnings, he would know that she was holding back on him. The best that she had ever been able to do was to skim a couple rupees here and there and stow them beneath a loose floorboard in her room, but as a safety buffer in case of emergency expenses it left much to be desired.

She walked a circuit around the barn, propping open windows as she went in an attempt to bring in some fresh air and the last bits of waning sunlight. As she passed one of the stalls a chocolate-colored mare stuck its head out and whickered softly in greeting.

Malon smiled and rubbed the mare's black speckled nose affectionately. "Good evening, Rhiannon. How's Mama doing today?" She asked, using her old nickname for the elder mare. Rhiannon nipped at her chin, then turned and butted her head against her water trough. Malon leaned over the stall door for a better look and saw that only a few tepid sips of water remained at the bottom.

"Damnit, Ingo..." She swore quietly. Apparently he had been in too much of a hurry to drown himself in liquor to be bothered to look after the animals properly.

She reached in and patted the mare's muzzle in sympathy. "All right darlin', I know you're thirsty. Give me a second and I'll get you set up proper."

The mare shook its ivory mane and pawed at the straw-strewn floor, watching impatiently as Malon retrieved the water bucket and went to fill it from from the well at the back of the barn.

Long ago the simple act of hauling water would have been a strenuous task, but years of hard labor had blessed her with lean muscle in her arms and back, allowing her to quickly haul the full bucket of water up onto the lip of the well. As she set it down on the wood with a gentle thump, the light
from an open window caught the water at just the right angle, and she saw a glimpse of her reflection. Her hand automatically went to straighten her sweat-mussed hair, but she paused when the sloshing water shifted the reflection, and drew her hand lower. The puffy skin around her left eye had turned a sickly yellow, centered around a shallow cut just beneath the lower eyelid.

"What do you think, Rhiannon? Think it will be gone by tomorrow?" She asked the mare, then snorted quietly to herself. "Not that it would matter now though, would it? I've got a brand new matching collection of bruises to go along with it."

It was strange. Just this morning she had been aching from the multitude of bruises all over her body, but now that she found herself reminded of the one that she had received before, she found herself aware of its dull burn more than any other. She turned and tucked the pail against her hip, and her chest tightened as she began to pour the water into the drinking trough inside of the stall. As the water poured into the trough, so too did memories begin flooding her thoughts, and couldn't help but think of her ordeal only three nights ago...

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The hushed sounds and familiar musky scents of the barn tickled her senses as Malon collapsed backwards into a pile of soft hay laid out in an empty horse stall. She inhaled deeply, paused, then let her breath out slowly and groaned in boneless pleasure as her sore muscles reveled in the respite after a particularly long day.

*Animals are fed and watered, cuccos are tucked in, gates are locked, She thought sleepily, recounting her mental checklist, All closed up for the night. Now I can finally get some rest...*

She stretched luxuriously, buoyed upon the bed of hay, and curled up on her side. Her crimson hair coiled around the curves of her throat in long, wavy lengths, and she tucked her slender arms beneath her head, using them as a makeshift pillow. Before long she felt the alluring siren's call of sleep begin to sweep her away.

There were several reasons that she had chosen to nap in the barn that night, the foremost being that Elma, their four year old mare, was nearing the end of her third trimester. It was her first pregnancy and she required constant attention to ensure that the foal was birthed properly. It was Malon's first foaling as well – or rather, the first time she would be expected to handle it without the help of her father. The truth was that since she didn't have thousands of years of ingrained instinct to fall back on that she felt better by keeping a constant eye on the mare.

The second reason was more personal. She had fallen asleep in the barn not only to keep an eye on the pregnant mare, but because Ingo had gone out drinking again, and she didn't want to be trapped in the house with him when he returned. One night, several months ago, she had seen firsthand how violent the man could become when he returned to the ranch after a poor night of cards. Their dinner table had not balanced evenly on all of its legs since, and Malon had been forced to purchase a new ladle to replace the one that had ended up snapped in half.

Luckily for her she had been upstairs at the time and had managed to duck around the landing before Ingo caught her watching, but she had been witness to the full extent of the man's drunken rampage. She had promised herself that she would do all that she could to avoid being caught on the receiving end, so she decided that avoidance was the best course of action.

Her luck had managed to hold out for the past several months, until tonight.

She was dozing lightly when Ingo staggered in, reeking of ale and cigar smoke. He hobbled forward slowly, weaving to and fro on drunken, unsteady legs and mumbling sharp curses under his breath. His hands shot out to steady himself against the side of the stall, which shuddered violently and
jerked Malon from her rest.

She had left a full pail of water on the floorboards outside of the stall she had chosen to sleep in, in case Elma were to go into labor and she quickly needed the water.

When Ingo took another unsteady step forward, he tripped against the pail, sending its contents splashing across the floor and under the stall door. Malon gasped and drew her legs up in an effort to avoid the sudden torrent.

Ingo turned at the sound and peered into the stall, his eyes clouded with the dull glaze of the heavily inebriated, but after a moment of concentration he managed to focus his mind long enough to glared at Malon.

"Wha… whut ith thishit?" He asked, taking a swipe at the bucket with his foot. He missed, which sent him off balance and nearly sprawling into the stall, and only served to stoke his anger.

"I thhhought I told yuh to… cleathis plathe up!" He swung his arms out to encompass the barn. "Jus look at thiss... at thish shit. Thures water everywhere."

Malon propped herself up on her elbows and felt the color drain from her face. "I-I did, Ingo," She said, and swallowed nervously before continuing. "I made s-sure the barn was cleaned and we were locked up for the night. I even stacked th—"

Ingo bent over and slapped her sharply across the face, shocking her into silence. "Shhhhhut up yah lazy bitch!" He screamed. "I tol' yah I wanted thish place … spoless before I come back, but look at thissh shhhithole!"

Fear seized her heart when he stumbled forward and stood over her, his legs planted unsteadily on either side of her.

"Fuckin ... whore. Tha's wut you are..."

He swiped at her viciously, his swings unbalanced as she curled up into a protective ball. She felt his unsteady blows strike her upraised arms, flinched back from his slurred cursing, but tried to ignore all of his insults as she held her legs tighter to her chest. His blows did not land with the power or accuracy that he would have were he sober, so she quickly decided that her best chance was to hope that he would quickly grow tired of the beating. She knew that if she tried to fight him off, Ingo would only get that much more brutal.

She couldn't remember if he had stumbled or if it was on purpose, but suddenly he was inches from her face, his rotten breath making her eyes water. She had taken all of his abuse in stride, but when she felt his cold, clammy lips on hers, her eyes shot open in panic. All rational thought fled her mind and she lashed out reflexively. Her foot struck out and connected between his legs with perfect accuracy. She leapt to her feet and dashed from the barn, leaving Ingo to groan piteously on the floor and clutch his family gems in agony.

Malon ran, her bare feet flying across the dew dappled lawn, and escaped into the main house. She took the stairs three at a time and retreated to her room, locking the door behind her before she flung herself on her bed and burrowed beneath the thick covers.

Tears streaked down her cheeks, and she fought to find her breath. Her heart was pumping wildly in her ears as she struggled to choke back heavy sobs. She snuggled deeper beneath the thick comforter and brought her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them tightly as she rocked lightly back and forth.
She clenched her teeth to hold back the sobs until her jaw ached. Tentatively, she brought a
trembling hand to her lips, wishing the pain in her heart away.

_They're poisoned, I just know it._ She thought miserably.

He had taken her first kiss, and it was horrible. In her rational mind she knew she would be fine, that
she had escaped for now, but in her heart she had always held onto the romantic notion that one day
she would meet someone she could care for, and her first time would be something special. Now her
dream would remain just that; a dream. Nothing more.

Tears continued to stream down her face to soak into the thick cotton bedding as she hummed her
mother's favorite song, the song that she herself loved to sing when she was feeling miserable. She
lay there long into the night, singing quietly to herself until eventually she fell into a deep sleep.

Early the next morning, it had required a force of will to leave her sanctuary in order to cook
breakfast and milk the cows. Once in the barn, she easily settled into her usual rhythm, using the
gentle _psst psst_ of the milk splashing into an empty pail to calm her nerves and try to forget about
the previous night.

In fact, she had become so lost in the milking process that she hadn't heard the door creak open
behind her. She turned, startled as a dark shadow loomed over her, and flinched when she saw Ingo
standing behind her, anger and humiliation burning in his eyes. She noted with dismay that he was
sober. Now his blows would fall with both greater power and accuracy.

The slap sent her sprawling, spinning her around. The force of the blow was enough to cause her to
fall off of the stool and onto the hardwood floor. A sharp spike of pain lanced up her side as she
landed on her ribs. She raised a hand to her stinging eye as she turned to look fearfully at Ingo, who
was now standing over her, his fists clenched in rage.

"What're you doing?"

The voice behind her cut through her unpleasant reverie like a scalpel through butter. A spike of fear
seized the breath in her lungs. She spun, an irrational part of her mind telling her that Ingo had come
back for another beating.

Link had entered the barn through the open door behind her while she hadn't been paying attention.
A worried frown creased his forehead as he approached her. "You okay?"

She inhaled deeply in an effort to soothe her racing heart. "I'm … fine. Just spaced out for a
moment," She swallowed nervously. "You scared me."

He paused, as if unsure of himself. His stormy eyes swept over her and around the barn, studying his
surroundings carefully, before coming back to her. His gaze flicked downwards, and slowly swept
up her body until he was looking straight into her eyes. She didn't feel like he was appraising her,
like Ingo would do whenever he was particularly drunk. He merely examined her, evaluating. It left
her feeling naked and vulnerable, but for some reason, she was struggling to find a reason to be
offended. A small part of her mind was screaming that she was cornered in the barn by a man that
had proven that he was capable of killing a group of other men without breaking a sweat, but the fact
that he had been nothing but kind and gentle with her tempered the fear in her gut.

It certainly didn't hurt that he had a certain rugged handsomeness. Her pulse was picking up again, but for a completely different reason than before. She dipped her head meekly but did not break eye contact, and wondered how long he was planning to stare at her. A part of her hoped he wouldn't stop.

"I'm sorry, for scaring you," He said softly.

Malon blinked, and she waved away his apology, partly as a way to distract him from her flushed face. "It's my fault. I should have been paying attention."

She looked around the barn, eager for a new topic, then realized that the barn itself suited her needs perfectly. "Here, let me show you around real quick," She said, and gave him an abbreviated tour. She pointed out the animal pens, introducing Link to their current complement of seven horses and eight milk cows. The feed bins were located in the back by the well, taking up nearly the entire wall. The entire second story of the barn was taken up by the hayloft, and she showed him the winch that allowed them to lift the massive bales of hay into the air. They circled the entire barn, until finally they were once more standing in front of Epona's stall.

Link nodded and followed along as she gave her tour. He knew where everything was, of course. Not much had changed from seven years ago, but since Malon didn't appear to recognize him, he decided that he would discreet about how much he already knew.

"Now if only we could figure out how to get these pipes to work again," She said with a sigh, gesturing to a copper tube that ran the length of the barn along the walls a meter above their heads.

"What do those do?" Link asked. He didn't remember there being copper pipes lining the walls seven years ago. Then again, he had been preoccupied with a spunky young redhead, so he just might not have noticed them.

"They're supposed to feed water from the reservoir to all of the water troughs," She said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her pointed ear. "But they haven't worked in nearly a year, and damned if I can figure out how to fix them."

Link's eyes followed her hand as she drew her hair back, then his gaze settled on the sallow smudge beneath her left eye. "You didn't really give me a straight answer before. Did someone hit you here, before yesterday?" He indicated her eye, his voice quiet with concern.

Malon blinked, startled at the unexpected turn of conversation. "Um … no. No, I was … breaking in one of the new colts and I was thrown. I guess I had gotten overconfident and wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been," She shook her head with a wry smile, and touched the tender skin beneath her eye. "Good thing I managed to break my fall though. It could have been a lot worse."

Link nodded carefully. "Yes," he agreed. "It's a good thing that you somehow managed to avoid hurting your hands on the way down."

Malon desperately fought the urge to hide her hands behind her back. A nagging thought quivered in the back of her mind; Does he know that I'm lying?

He stepped closer towards her, closing the respectful distance he had kept since first entering the barn, never letting his gaze break from hers. She thought she felt her heart skip a beat when she saw the intensity burning in his steel-blue eyes, and reevaluated her earlier impression of him. Oh Goddesses, he is cute!
"Then why don't you leave if the work is too rough?" He asked, taking another half-step forward. He waited patiently for her reply, watching her carefully as the gears in her mind spun. Though he was now standing rather close to her, almost intimately so, Malon felt that he meant no harm with his questions. She could feel the warmth in his words as he spoke them, as if he was truly worried about her.

Something inside of her wanted to tell him the whole story, to finally get it all off her chest, but another part of her held back, not wanting to get into any more trouble than she already had. A fierce battle of inner turmoil rose and fell within her within the span of a breath as she desperately tried to make up her mind.

C'mon girl, tell him the truth. He's trustworthy…

Don't! Think of what Ingo would do if he found out you snitched on him?

There's nothing to worry about. It'll be all right. He saved you from a group of bandits, he can certainly protect you from one scrawny ranch hand…

Do you really think he'd be able to protect you forever? Think of what'll happen after he leaves…

Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell tell tell…

Malon shook her head to silence the brief mental skirmish. "I… If I… If I leave, Ingo, he'll hurt… he might abuse the horses…" She stroked her arm thoughtfully and turned away, unable to meet his intense stare as she ran with the half-truth. "He's not very good at taking care of the animals."

Link was quiet for a moment as he absorbed her words, his gaze searching her face as if to evaluate whether she was telling him the full truth. It was strange how piercing his eyes could be, dark as a thundercloud on a summer's day.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he moved, reaching out towards her with his gloved hand. Malon froze in shock, her eyes wide. She could smell the worn leather of his glove, hear the shifting leather rustle mere inches from her left cheek. She wet her suddenly parched lips as his face inched closer to hers, her breath catching in her throat. Her heart hammered against her breast and a brilliant blush formed on her sun-kissed cheeks.

W—what is he doing? I … I just met him yesterday, it's too—

Malon jumped slightly as she heard Epona snort behind her, causing her to gasp in surprise. Link gently stroked the mare's muzzle, whose curiosity had caused her to pause from her eating and investigate. Malon felt shivers run down her spine as he spoke close to her ear in little more than a whisper, "No one should be able to abuse such a beautiful… horse."

Malon inhaled sharply. Oh Goddesses, he knows! I don't know how, but he knows!

Suddenly Link's eyes flicked to the left, and he pulled back, his face burning a light crimson as he retreated back towards the open barn door. Malon froze in shock, her eyes wide. She could smell the worn leather of his glove, hear the shifting leather rustle mere inches from her left cheek. She wet her suddenly parched lips as his face inched closer to hers, her breath catching in her throat. Her heart hammered against her breast and a brilliant blush formed on her sun-kissed cheeks. W—what is he doing? I … I just met him yesterday, it's too soo—

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Malon inhaled sharply. Oh Goddesses, he knows! I don't know how, but he knows!

Suddenly Link's eyes flicked to the left, and he pulled back, his face burning a light crimson as he retreated back towards the open barn door. Malon raised a hand to her breast, feeling the rapid pulse of her heartbeat. As he stepped towards the door, she unconsciously reached her other hand out towards him. She didn't want her guest to leave her company just yet. "Wait…"

"Malon!"

Malon jumped, Ingo's angry call sending a lighting bolt of anxiety though her entire body. She turned, realizing that while she had been distracted by Link, Ingo had entered the barn from the front entrance and was approaching quickly. She fought to steady her breathing, eyeing Ingo with a heady
mixture of fear and defiance as he stalked towards her. "What do you want?" She asked, knowing full well it would probably earn her another slap later.

Ingo stalked towards her, his hands clenched into fists with rage. "Where the hell have you been? You said you'd be back by sundown yesterday. Do you know how long I waited for you to get back and make dinner? To top it off, I had to do all of your chores today as well as my own." He stopped in front of her, aiming an accusing finger directly at her face. "You were out there whoring yourself off again, weren't you? Weren't you?"

"Well forgive me for nearly being abducted and raped to death! You can certainly make your own dinner while I'm busy protecting our livelihood." She pinched her nose. "Smells like you already fed yourself a liquid meal anyway. You reek of alcohol."

Ingo stared at her, momentarily dumbstruck by her uncharacteristic obstreperousness, before rage once again caused his features to darken. "You arrogant little bitch!

Malon flinched backwards, but Ingo stopped, caught off guard as Link roughly cleared his throat and stepped out of the shadows. Ingo tried to recover, aborting his slap by running his hand through his thinning hair, but failed miserably at making it look convincing. "Who the hell are you?" He snarled.

Malon corrected him, then gestured to indicate Link. "He's the reason I'm here at all and not bleeding out in a ditch somewhere. He saved my life." She said flatly, looking to Link to continue introducing himself.

"Our barn," Malon turned, eyeing Link skeptically as if appraising a questionable slab of beef. "And are you here to buy something, or just wasting my valuable time flirting with the help?"

Malon sneered silently, but before she could reply, Link cut in. "Actually sir, I'm not a customer. Just a traveler passing though. As Malon said, I helped her fend off some bandits on the road to New Ordon, and she mentioned that you might have a position available for a stable hand. I was hoping to offer my services."

"She told you that, did she?" Ingo sneered, turning a venomous glare in Malon's direction. She stared back defiantly, as if daring him to claim otherwise.

Link pressed on. "I'm told that autumn is your busy season and you rarely have enough time to handle all of the orders by yourselves. If you had someone else on hand to, say, work around the ranch while Malon was out delivering orders, you'd be able to avoid situations like yesterday where almost no work was accomplished. Your profits would nearly double."

A greedy fire ignited in Ingo's eyes at the mention of more profits, but his expression soured when he thought about how much that he would have to pay a new stable hand. Malon, no matter how hard he drove her, was only one person, and a girl at that. She really couldn't do the brute labor that was involved in maintaining the ranch. Sure, she could make a half-decent effort of it if he yelled at her long enough, but having a man around that could do most of the strenuous work would go a long way towards making this place more bearable. They could really use the extra help, even if it did cost him a bit more in the short run.
Ingo stroked his unkempt mustache in thought. "Well, seeing as we're going through some tough times right now, I can't afford to pay you very much."

Link nodded. "I understand. Malon mentioned that I couldn't expect much beyond room and board. Since I'm just passing through the area it's really the best deal I can expect anywhere."

Ingo looked pleased. "Oh, well then, I would be happy to have you work for me— us. But as I said, I can only pay you a very modest amount. Fifteen rupees a week is the best I can do," he offered.

Malon nearly gagged at the proposition. She knew of a few beggars who made more than that.

Link merely smiled. He wasn't here for the money, so the wage was perfectly fine. "Deal," He said, holding out his gloved hand. Ingo looked nonplussed, expecting Link to fight for a higher wage, but recovered quickly. Shrugging, he took Link's outstretched hand and shook it, sealing the deal.

Malon looked on with quiet amusement as the exchange took place. She had also been surprised that he had taken such a small salary. Any worker worth his salt would have bartered for more money, especially in these hard times, but the newcomer had let it go without any struggle. From the looks of him, he certainly wasn't a greenhorn, which made his acceptance all the more confusing.

It wasn't enough to make her suspicious of his motives, it was just … curious. She was pleased, however, to see him wipe his hand on the back of his tunic. At least I'm not the only one who can't stand his oily hands.

Ingo apparently didn't notice. "Yes, well then, er … Link, was it? Malon here will show you where you can sleep in the barn. I'm terribly sorry that we can't keep you in the main house, but we just don't have the space available, I'm afraid."

Liar, Malon thought with a frown. We've got three rooms just waiting to be used. Granted, they need a little sprucing up, and the moths are devouring the mattresses, but it's still got to be more comfortable than sleeping out here. She kept the thought to herself, however, feeling that she had already tested Ingo's wrath enough for one night. She made a mental note to inspect the house's other bedrooms later to see if any were still habitable.

Malon's attention returned to the conversation just long enough to hear Ingo wrap it up. "I'll expect to see you ready to work bright and early tomorrow morning out by the horse paddock," he said. "I have a very long list of jobs that you can get started on." With that, Ingo turned and left, whistling a jaunty, off-pitch drinking tune.

Malon sighed after the door had closed behind him. "Sanctimonious..." She gritted her teeth, physically holding her unflattering description in, and turned to Link. "You'll notice that he didn't once comment on my bruises. As if I were off ... sleeping around with strange men. The nerve..."

She inhaled deeply in an effort to calm herself, then nodded to Link. "Thank you, for having my back."

Link snorted. "I could almost see him rubbing his hands together the second I mentioned more profit." He rubbed his hands together and cackled like a seedy storybook villain. "Mwua-ha-ha-ha..."

Malon chuckled darkly, then rubbed her temples. "Ugh, I shouldn't have been so mouthy to him. I'm only going to pay for it later..." She walked to the well to fill another bucket of water.

Link strolled casually toward Epona, giving her a rub. "Does Ingo usually talk like that, or just when he's trying to sucker people into something?"
Malon laughed frostily. "You're right on the mark. His first and last thoughts are about personal profit. Once you've learned that, it's actually pretty easy to deal with him most of the time." She turned to aim a smile at Link, pulling a full bucket of water from the well, and paused when she saw Link gently rubbing Epona. She watched, stunned as the horse nuzzled his cheek affectionately and nipped at his chin.

*Why is Epona being so friendly to him? She's only ever been friendly with Father and me, and...* She felt a flicker of recognition, but it was gone before she could latch onto it. She frowned, but could not remember where that thought had been leading her, so she shook her head and turned to fill another horse trough with water.

With instructions from Malon, Link eagerly went about the business of feeding the horses while she continued to manually fill their water troughs. He did a reasonably good job of it, and she was surprised to learn that he already knew how to properly separate the bales of hay. Maybe she had made a good choice by offering to hire him.

Malon rotated a tender shoulder, feeling the aching burn in her arms and back. The first bucket had been a piece of cake, but after her twelfth her biceps began to protest angrily. The labour was exhausting in her current state, and by the time she had finished watering the horses she had worked up a mild sweat.

*Just another hazard of the job,* she thought. It was tough, strenuous work, but she loved her ranch, and she wouldn't give it up for the world. If she had to suffer through sore muscles and smell of sweat and livestock at the end of the day, so be it.

Malon stretched her arms over her head and hooked her hands in her hair as she watched Link finish feeding the last of the colts. She noted that he had a dark splash of mud across the back of his tunic, which caused her to look down and inspect her own clothes. Her skirt was stained and smeared with mud from having been roughly pushed into the dirt, and she had grass-stains on her knees.

She turned away from Link and took a furtive sniff of her blouse. She crinkled her nose. *Fugh.*

She called his name, and once she had his attention, said, "Don't know about you, but after working like a mule for the past couple days I could really use a bath before I start dinner. Would you like one?"

Instead of answering, Link merely blinked and raised a curious eyebrow. After a moment, a fierce blush spread across Malon's face. "*Not together!*"

"Too easy," Link laughed. "And I'd love a bath."

Malon covered her face, buying herself a moment before she could trust herself to speak. "I'll go start the water boiling then. Can you finish up feeding and watering the cows?"

Link nodded. "Sure thing. Three scoops of feed and five flakes of hay for each cow, right?"

Malon paused, blinking in surprise. "That's ... very good. You already know how to feed cows too?"

There was that same secretive smile again. She wondered what it meant.

"I know my way around a barn," Link said cryptically.

Malon nodded. "That's good, then we can get started right away tomorrow," She paused, thinking. "Well, you're welcome to explore the ranch if you finish up before I'm done. I guess the only places that are really off limits are the upstairs bedrooms in the house."
Link nodded and waved her off. "Enjoy your bath."

Malon nuzzled her face into the fresh cotton towel and inhaled its sweet scent. The downy towels she used for bathing were made from the softest wool of Ordon ewes, and were one of the few luxuries she allowed herself on the ranch.

The last time she was in Kakariko, she had overheard several women discussing the best ways to keep their sheets fresh, and had decided to try one of their suggested recipes by crushing certain flowers into a white paste and mixing it into the soap, giving the cloth a floral scent without having to worry about staining the fabric.

In her mind, her experiment was a resounding success.

Malon reached across the bathtub and turned one of the bronze nozzles, causing water to spill out and begin filling the tub with cool, fresh water from the windmill reservoir. She had already filled the small cistern outside and started it boiling with a roaring fire, so upon turning the second nozzle, hot, steamy water poured into the tub as well.

She undressed quickly, eager to be out of her soiled garments. Her muscles were sore and stiff, but the promise of a nice, hot bath let her ignore such minor discomfort.

Steam rapidly began to fill the small bathroom, so she cracked open the tiny window next to the ceiling. It opened outwards from the top, allowing her a cooling breeze while still ensuring she was able to keep her privacy.

She tentatively tested the water with her toes and, finding it to be the perfect temperature, stepped into the tub.

Malon sighed happily as the water engulfed her body. Ah, the wonders of modern technology, she thought as she lowered herself into the steaming tub. Six years ago she had helped her father and several of the old farmhands to retrofit the old windmill outside to divert water from the main storage tank to run through pipes laid around the ranch and throughout the house. She wondered to herself how she had ever lived without indoor plumbing.

She relaxed for several minutes, merely allowing the heat to work its way into her sore muscles. When she felt the tension begin to drain from her body, she laid back, held her breath, and let the water wash over her. She stayed submerged for a moment, then floated upward, pushing back her sodden hair away from her face, and reached for the soap and washcloth. She began by diligently cleaning her hands, removing the past few day's grime from under her nails, then began washing her forearms.

She stopped. Frowned.

Her hands were shaking.

She stared at them for a moment, confused. Though she tried, she found that she couldn't hold them still. She continued washing, pressing down harder to compensate for her apparent lack of composure.

Lascivious leers staring down at her, surrounding her,
hungry eyes and rotten smiles evaluating her
like a piece of meat...
She hunched forward in the bath as the images crashed against her like a tidal wave. Her hair fell forward, framing her face. She sheltered there, hidden amongst the crimson curls from the outside world as she continued to wash her trembling arms.

*Hands like iron claws holding her down,*

*striking her,*

*roughly groping and kneading her flesh as they*

*crawled inexorably up her thigh...*

She scrubbed at her arms, harder and harder, until her ordinarily tanned skin was raw and cherry-red. She wasn't clean.

She needed to be clean.

*Their foul breath, nauseating, suffocating her. The feel of one of their*

*repulsive tongues on her neck,*

*another with his hands wrapped around her throat, choking the breath from her lungs...*

Her breath started coming in shallow pants. She fought to fill her lungs with precious oxygen, but found that she could not no matter how hard she tried. It was as if her body had chosen to abandon her, as if it no longer belonged to her.

Belonged to someone else.

*She fights. She fights hard.*

*It doesn't save her.*

*Dirty, cracked nails clawing up her long legs, searching*

*along the gentle curve of her hips, catching*

*on the hem of her panties,*

*tearing...*

The washcloth splashed into the bathwater, forgotten. She cupped her face in her hands, and tremors rippled through her entire body. Her shoulders shook with gentle sobs as tears ran down her cheeks.

A while later, long after the water had cooled, she stepped out of the draining tub and toweled herself off before dressing in a new, clean pair of clothes.

She opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, still running the towel through her long crimson tresses, which is why she wasn't able to stop herself in time before she ran straight into Link.

Malon gasped in surprise and nearly stumbled back into the bathroom. The hand Link had raised to knock on the door gripped her shoulder lightly, the other going to her waist to steady her in case she fell over. "Whoa, I was wondering if you had fallen asleep in there."

Malon took a hasty step back out of his gentle hold. She turned her head away and continued
toweling her hair, using it as an excuse to hide her puffy red eyes. "Just enjoying a soak. Water felt good on the bruises," She said curtly, then tossed her head back towards the bathroom. "Fresh towels on the hanger, water comes out of the faucets on the wall. Dirty clothes go in the hamper so I can wash them later. I'll go get dinner started while you're bathing." With that, she quickly brushed past him.

Link watched curiously as Malon walked stiffly down the hallway until she turned and disappeared into her bedroom, unsure what to make of her sudden brusqueness.

Deciding to let the matter lie for now, he entered the bathroom, locking the door behind him and flipping both faucets over the tub open. By the time he had undressed and retrieved a fresh pair of clothes from the scroll on his shield, the washtub had filled and the room now held a miniature fogbank.

Link eased in into the steaming tub, pleasantly surprised by the near-scalding temperature of the water. It had been a while since he had had a real bath, even longer since he had been treated to a warm one. While he was traveling the countryside he usually had to make do with a quick dip in a freezing river if he was lucky enough to find one nearby. This was heaven by comparison.

He had just settled back into the tub when a bright blue orb zoomed through the cracked window overhead.

"Whew, I thought I'd never get you alone," Navi chirped, and settled into a speedy orbit around Link's head.

Link squawked in surprise and made a desperate grab for his towel. Water sloshed over the lip of the tub.

"Hey! I'm naked you know!" He cried, dragging the towel over the tub to conceal his modesty. He threw a cautious look at the locked door, afraid that someone might come and investigate why he was apparently talking to himself.

Navi paused in her merry circling and stared back at him, nonplussed. "And?"

"And … and what? I'm naked," He hissed. "Can't this wait until later?"

"Psh, it's nothing I haven't seen it before," She said with a laugh, alighting on an empty towelhook and crossing her legs daintily. "I swear, you became such a prude after you came out of the Temple of Time. The rest of the Kokiri had no trouble bathing in the hot springs together, and as I recall you were right in there with them."

"I was a kid. We all were," He protested. "It was different then."

Navi sighed and rolled her eyes heavenward. "Teenagers," She muttered, as if she might be blessed with salvation from this particular ordeal.

Link adjusted his towel and decided to change the subject. "I don't suppose there was any sign of a lost Sheikah while you were out scouting today?"

The faerie shook her head sadly. "Sorry, partner. No such luck."

Link hummed thoughtfully. "Whatever the reason, it's not like Sheik to be gone for this long," He said, and splashed the water in frustration.

Navi was quiet for several moments before she spoke. "I'm really not supposed to do this … but I
could ask around the faerie fountains, see if they've heard of any Sheikah in the area."

Link's eyes brightened. "That's a great idea. How long do you think it would take?" He asked.

"To hit all of the fountains in Hyrule?" Navi turned her palms upward. "Two, maybe three weeks? Perhaps less if there are some good leads."

"Just how many faerie fountains are there?" Link asked in surprise.

Navi gave a tinkling laugh. "That is a very closely guarded secret," She said smugly.

Link thought for a moment before nodding. "Do it."

After a quiet dinner Malon led Link back to the barn. She carried a couple of spare blankets and a pillow she had pilfered from one of the spare bedrooms under her arms. The moon was peaking out from behind a cloud bank, giving her just enough illumination to navigate.

Link followed quietly with a lit lantern, puzzled at her behavior. Malon had been laconic during dinner, and had refused to let him help her carry the bedding outside. It was a marked difference from her earlier energy. Even after Ingo had left them in the barn she had not been this closed off. He wondered what had happened between her leaving to draw a bath and him running into her in the hallway, but could think of no good way to ask.

Malon crossed the barn quickly and walked up to the ladder leading to the loft. She turned and tossed the pillow to him underhand, then indicated that he should climb with a quick wave of her hand. "You'll be sleeping up in the hay loft, if that's all right with you," She smiled bitterly. "That is, unless you want to sleep in one of the horse stalls."

Link adjusted his grip on the pillow and nodded. "The loft's great. I actually prefer it; When I was younger I used to sleep up in a tree-house." He put the lantern handle between his teeth and grabbed hold of the rungs, hauling himself up the ladder.

Malon promptly followed, pulling herself up the ladder with her one open hand. As she reached the top she found Link sprawled out on top of a large mound of hay and couldn't help but smile.

Link sighed blissfully. "I remember this. It's perfect," he said. He grabbed a piece of hay and stuck it in his mouth.

Malon looked at him quizzically. "Remember this from what?"

Link suppressed a grimace and explained. "My favorite napping spot when I was younger was in a place like this. I used to jump from the rafters into a large pile of hay with my friends." Which isn't entirely false, he added to himself. Malon and I used to go hay jumping all the time when we were younger. I wonder if she still remembers that?

Malon chuckled lightly and tossed him the blanket. She remembered when her life had been just as carefree. "Well, I guess I'll leave you to get your sleep. Breakfast will be ready tomorrow at dawn. I'll make us a big one to get your first day started right," She said. "I guess that means that there's going to be another mouth to feed." She started back down the ladder, already mentally arranging her morning schedule.

"Malon," Link called her name softly.

"Hmm?" She poked her head back over the top of the ladder. There was a moment of silence before
he continued.

"Thank you. For everything."

Malon smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Least I could do. If you need anything else, just ask," she said, and descended the ladder.

Link spent the next several minutes arranging the bedding and hay to his liking until he had his own little nest. He shucked his boots and crawled into bed, his eyes suddenly heavy with sleep. It had been a stressful couple of days, especially after the last few weeks of stagnancy.

He went over in his mind what he had learned.

One: Ingo was no longer one of many farmhands, but now appeared to own a controlling share of the ranch, and his poor management skills were threatening to send it spiraling into ruin.

Two: Malon was doing her best to keep the ranch afloat, but it was far more work than any one person could accomplish, and she wouldn't be able to keep it up for much longer without it seriously affecting her health.

Three, and possibly most troubling: there was still no sign of Talon. Link didn't believe for a second that he would intentionally leave his only daughter in the position that she now found herself. He didn't know what that said about the old rancher, but he knew it couldn't be good.

Link sighed as he thought about the task laid out before him. In the absence of her father, it was Malon's duty to oversee the continued prosperity of the ranch. He wasn't sure how yet, but he swore to himself that he would do everything in his power to help her achieve that goal.

It had been seven long years that he had been trapped in the Temple of Time's seemingly unending embrace. Seven years of a broken promise that he had had no chance to keep. Malon had been his only friend in this new world that he had discovered outside of the Kokiri Forest, and she had, both figuratively and literally, saved his life.

He hoped that he was able to find a way to repay her.

Down in the lane between the two buildings, Malon looked up at the soft glow emanating from an open window of the second story of the barn. She sighed, feeling a sense of guilt for not being able to work up the courage to confide in her new friend. She shook her head gently and promised herself that she would try to do better from now on. It wasn't fair to keep secrets from him after all he had done for her.

Malon took one last glance at the barn before turning to open the door of the main house. Hopefully things would be better from now on.

"Good night, Link."
Link jolted from his slumber and made a grab for the hilt of his sword. His hand quickly found its place on the familiar haft behind his left shoulder, drawing it from its sheath and swinging the magnificent blade over his head and down into a fighting stance in one swift motion, instantly ready for battle. The dull golden color of the wheat in his hands shone— **huh?**

Link blinked the sleep from his eyes, wondering hazily how in the five realms his elegant Master Sword had been reduced to a few stray straws of hay. The golden wisps slowly tumbled from his fingers as he laid his arm back down to his side. His thoughts slowly pierced the hazy fog shrouding his mind and memories of the last several days came back to him.

*Just goes to show I spend too many nights away from a warm bed.* He thought, laying back down into the hay. He closed his eyes and wiped the adrenalin induced sweat from his brow.

Another thought broke through the wispy haze of disturbed sleep. *What the heck woke me up?*

"**Cakoooooooooo!**"

As if summoned by his thoughts, a large cobalt-blue bird descended from the rafters and landed heavily on his chest, flapping its stubby little wings and gripping his tunic with its tiny claws in an effort to stay upright. The remaining fog was instantly wiped from Link's mind as the bird fought to regain its balance.

*Oh, it was the friggin cuccos,* he thought, remembering the angry little birds that used to roam free across Lon Lon Ranch when he was a child. It seemed that they too had managed to survive all these years, though it didn't really surprise him. They were hardy little birds, larger and meaner than their more docile avian cousins. Chickens and ducks were by far the preferred poultry of choice for farmers, requiring less growing space and general maintenance, but cuccos were generally considered to be more flavorful and produced nearly twice as many eggs a year as chickens. They were also excellent mousers, and some people were known to use them in lieu of cats in order to keep the rat population down.

Their tempers were legendary.

The cobalt cucco watched him coldly, tilting its head to the side while one beady little eye stared at him with a frostiness that Link had rarely seen matched in sentient creatures, much less animals. It must have decided that he looked like a threat, because the blue cucco spread its wings and ruffled its feathers threateningly, puffing them up in an effort to look larger and more menacing than it really was.

"**Bekaaaaaaaa…**" The cucco cawed ominously, its pitch rising the longer it crowed. Link held his breath and tried to remain still, remembering the many times long ago that he had playfully harassed the birds, which inevitably ended with him playing dead on the ground beneath his shield as the flock swarmed him. He hoped that by skipping to the final step he would be spared a repeat performance. He didn't know what he had done to set the bird off, but for some reason the cucco had apparently decided that he was trespassing on its territory.

Evidently the bird wasn't convinced with his act. Seeing no reaction from its target, it pecked at Link's chest viciously, causing him to flinch in surprise. He was sure that had it not been for the
miniscule amount of protection offered by his tunic the violent little bird would have drawn blood from its strike.

"Hey!" He shifted, trying to dislodge the pesky little avian. The cucco, on the other hand, just dug into his shirt with its pointed claws, flapping its wings to keep its balance.

"Bekaaaaaaw…"

"Bekaaaaaaaa…"

"Beh—kaaw…"

"Beekaaaaaaaaaw…"

"Bekehkaaaaaa…"

Link froze as a rising chorus of cuccos joined in with their little friend. He glanced around, fully taking in the sight of the barn and the situation that he found himself in for the first time.

*Oh, Farore, this is not going to end well…*

Perched on top of boxes, burrowed beneath the hay, sitting on the rafters criss-crossing the ceiling, in every nook and cranny in the second story of the barn, there sat a restless cucco.

He was surrounded.

*I am going to die,* He thought with a dreaded sense of finality, adding a mental curse that he had learned from Darunia. *I must have really been out of it if I didn't even hear them come in.*

The flock had their attention fixated solely on him, like angry ivory-feathered sentinels. He quickly stopped trying to shoo the unwelcome guest off of his torso and froze. The mass of cuccos seemed to settle down as he sunk back down into the hay, seemingly pacified. The stubborn bird on his chest, however, refused to be calmed.

"Cakooo!" The cucco jabbed at him again, tearing through the linen tunic, this time revealing droplets of blood bubbling up from his broken skin.

Link's anger spiked, and he cried out. "Ah! Stupid bird!" He smacked the offending cucco off of his chest and the strike sent it tumbling over the second story ledge and down to the floor of the barn.

Decades later, long, long after he had settled down and retired from adventuring, Link – Hero of Time, slayer of the Dark King Ganondorf – would still recall that exact moment as one of the biggest mistakes he had ever made in his entire life.

The blue ball of feathers flew through the air, bouncing off of a crossbeam before coming to a jarring stop on the floor below. To say that it did not look happy would be like saying Death Mountain was a little warm. It flapped its stubby wings and started screeching in panic and distress.

And rage.

"Beka! Beka! Beka! Beka! Beka!" The blue cucco hopped about madly, creating a ruckus as it called out to its feathery brethren. The other cuccos of the flock heard their comrade's call and a hundred tiny eyes latched onto the prostrate young man in the green tunic. They began to shift and ruffle their feathers angrily, and many began calling out to their feathered brethren. To Link, their chorus of cawing was like what he would imagine the trumpet call heralding the apocalypse would
sound like.

Link's trembling hand slowly inched towards his discarded shield, hoping that it would at least provide some protection. "I ... I think it's about time I—"

He never got to finish the statement.

"Ca—koooooo!" The entire flock of cuccos burst into flight, their attention solely focused on one target: Link.

Link made a wordless cry of panic as he snatched up his shield and rolled to the side. His only aim was to get as far away from the approaching swarm of cuccos as possible. And then…

Open air.

He was falling, his roll sending him tumbling over the second story ledge of the barn. In panic he reached out his hand and grabbed for a crossbeam, slowing his fall considerably. But he was still falling too fast, and his fingers slipped from the course wood. He spun as he fell, righting himself at the last moment. The air escaped from his lungs in a muffled *oof* when he landed hard on the floor.

*No time to rest now. Move!* 

He rolled from his crouch and ran for the front door, his only chance of escape. As he ran he threw a desperate look over his shoulder. The battle cry of the angry cuccos echoed in his ears as they spilled over the ledge, looking for all the world like a great white tidal wave of feathered fury. He held his shield over his head and ran as fast as he could.

Cuccos were horrible flyers, but they could glide as well as any bird, and one of their specialties was dive-bombing their prey. They cruised low over Link's head and scraped their sharp talons across his shield and exposed arms as he zig-zagged to the exit, attempting to avoid as many birds as possible. He ducked low, feeling a cucco just barely miss his head, dodged to the left as another one came at him from the side, and jumped over a third that had over-shot him and landed on the hay-strewn floor.

*Go go go go…*

He tucked his shoulder and rammed the wooden door open with his shield, coming out in a roll. He quickly spun and threw himself against it, slamming it shut with his shield and bracing it with his weight.

THUNK! The door vibrated slightly as the first cucco crashed into it.

THUNK—*THUN—THUTHUTHUNKTHUTHUTHUNK!* The main wave of cuccos slammed into the heavy wooden door, nearly throwing Link back by their sheer numbers.

"Beekaaaaaaaaaw…"

The cuccos began to take up their battle cry once more.

THUNK!

THUNKUNK!

Link held his shoulder tight against the door, gasping for air in shock. *I don't believe it, they're ramming the friggin door!*
He took his shield and jammed it between the door and the loamy earth, just in time to hear the wooden frame give a resounding crack.

*Please Din, please just let this be a bad nightmare!* He prayed, and ran like a scalded deku scrub for the nearest building.

The rooster began to crow a candlemark before dawn, just as it had every morning for the past several years. Malon's eyes cracked open blearily, and she inhaled deeply, briefly relishing the warm sanctuary of her own bed. The goose-down comforter wrapped around her lithe, supine form like a butterfly's cocoon, and she was hesitant to leave its warm embrace. Soon though, all too soon, it was time to get up.

She slid from bed reluctantly, nearly withdrawing back into the warm covers when her slender legs encountered the cool night air. She blinked sleepily as the shadowy outlines of her room slowly swam into focus, and hesitated for a moment as she sat on the edge of her bed, but knew that the next step was unavoidable. The polished wooden floor might as well have been made of ice for all of the warmth it sucked from her bare feet. Not for the first time did she fantasize about indulging in a pair of cotton slippers.

The negligee was pulled over her head, and she shivered as the frigid air caressed her bare form. Years of practice had taught her precisely where against the wall her hamper sat in order to throw her discarded clothing.

As usual she had laid her clothes out the night before, allowing her to dress in almost total darkness. Her window blinds were cracked just enough to let a thin sliver of moonlight illuminate the floorboards, but it only served to blind her to the rest of the room. Her intimates were first, of course, followed by the linen blouse and her purple denim skirt. The clothing was comfortable and utilitarian, allowing her to work long days without worrying about ruining one of the nicer dresses her mother had left her. Those were busy being eaten by moths, anyway. It wasn't like she had regular cause to wear them.

She made the long-familiar walk down the hallway to the washroom, still half asleep.

She turned the faucet to fill the basin and gathered her hair up into a messy braid, holding it in place with an old wooden hair-pin. She dipped her fingers into the tepid water and splashed a handful across her face. It ran cool lengths down the slender curve of her throat to soak into the fabric of her cotton shift. A small terrycloth was plucked from its drying rack and folded neatly before she used it to diligently clean her teeth. If there was one thing that Ingo had taught her, it was that good hygiene was a must.

Awake now, she turned her attention to starting breakfast. The walk downstairs was quick, and she carefully considered the rather limited supplies in their pantry. Rows of jars containing everything from pickled eggs to dried spices to sweet jams stared back at her silently, but nothing piqued her interest as a suitable breakfast.

Malon had spent much of her early childhood with a hand permanently clutched to her mother's skirt. She had always enjoyed watching as her mother lovingly performed the work around the ranch that Malon was too young to help with. Cooking had been a special favorite. It had always sparked a sense of wonder in her that simple ingredients such as milk or potatoes could be mixed together to create some of the yummiest concoctions imaginable. So she had learned early, begging her mother to teach her the secrets of this wondrous new world. She was a diligent student, and soon was helping more and more around the kitchen.
After her mother's death, her father had tried to pick up some of the slack, but most of his creations could charitably be called ... disastrous. So the kitchen had become solely her domain, and she took to it with gusto. It had been difficult at first, cooking for both her and her father in addition to the half dozen or so farmhands they had working for them at the time, but soon found that practice and experience were swift teachers.

Jeriah, an older gentleman her parents had hired to help tend the goats, had used to help her out once in a while, before the farmhands started leaving. Soon though, as the Hylian economy strained under a constant state of war, one by one they left, until eventually only Ingo remained.

The unexpected thoughts of Jeriah sparked an idea, and she went to check the larder. The shelves were mostly bare, as they had been for many years now, but tucked towards the back she found the small log of goat cheese that she had made just before she left for New Ordon. The chèvre was deliciously smooth, almost like butter, and would go wonderfully with the last of their bread.

Malon carefully gathered her provisions, grabbing a few slices of salted pork as well on the way out. She was just beginning to set the table for breakfast when the front door slammed open, causing her to nearly drop the ceramic plate in her hands. She turned, surprised by the new hire's sudden appearance, and called out the young man's name.

Link dashed inside and slammed the door to the house shut behind him, quickly sliding the bolt shut as he desperately tried to regain a steady heartbeat. He turned on unsteady legs and leaned his back against the door, sliding down onto the wooden floorboards. With a deep sigh he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

I had forgotten how vicious the little devils were, He thought with a wry grin, and gently wiped his forehead clear of perspiration, noting with amusement that his hand was shaking.

Show me a real live fire-breathing dragon, complete with a molten lake of lava, and I'll take it down without breaking a sweat. Toss a flock of angry, psychotic cuccos at me and I'm shaking with fright. Something I'll have to leave out of the stories if I ever have kids.

"Link?"

He jumped in fright, half expecting another cucco assault. Malon laughed at his nervousness. "I'm surprised you're up this early."

Link chuckled uneasily. "Just, uh ... eager to get to work, I guess."

Malon favored him with a curious smile as she continued to set the table. "Well, breakfast is almost ready if you're hungry. I'll have it out on the table in a sec, if you would care to join me."

Link's ears perked at the thought of food, the whole cucco fiasco instantly erased from his mind. "Of course. What are we having?"

"Well, we're lucky that I still had some fresh food tucked away. I haven't had much of a chance to do any shopping lately, and ever since the cucco coup was damaged a while back the cuccos have been roaming free around the ranch. It's become nearly impossible to collect their eggs."

"You're having trouble finding the cuccos, huh?" He asked wryly. I think I might have a clue about where to find them…

"No, the roof of the coup collapsed when one of the trees fell on it during a storm a few months back, and Ingo … erm … hasn't had the chance to fix it yet. Here, have a seat." She gestured for him
to sit and began dividing up portions of pork and bread.

Link slid out a chair and took a seat. Malon noticed the tired set of his shoulders as she sat and asked, "What happened to you? You look like you've been to the Gerudo Desert and back. Didn't get enough sleep?"

Another wry grin slipped onto Link's face. "No, I got plenty of sleep, thanks. But I woke up this morning expecting to get an early start on work and found about a hundred angry cuccos glaring at me. Nearly gave me a heart attack, the little assassins."

Malon broke out in a fit of laughter.

"What's so funny? I could've been killed! Those things are vicious!"

"They were up in the loft?" She giggled, trying but failing to keep her mirth in. "I'm so sorry, I completely forgot that they like to spend the night up there sometimes. Ever since the coup was wrecked, they've roamed around the ranch, trying to find a suitable spot to sleep. I think that they decided that they liked the loft as a nesting ground, but there are too many places up there to lay eggs that we can't reach, so we try to keep them shut them out."

The both fell silent when Ingo appeared at the top of the stairs. He stomped down and disappeared into the pantry, returning with a couple of dripping pickled eggs clutched between his fingers and his cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk's. He grunted by way of greeting as he passed, then pushed open the door and stepped outside.

Malon watched impassively as he left. "I keep telling him to use the ladle," She said, then returned to their discussion. "But yes, that's one of their favorite spots to nap."

Link poked at the goat cheese with his knife, then followed Malon's example and began to smear it on his bread. "Thanks for the warning," He paused, brow furrowed. "But if you lock them out, then how did they get in? All of the doors were closed, so they shouldn't have been able to get inside."

"Did you leave the sky-light open? There's a narrow ledge they can reach from the top of the walls that allows them to hop inside. One time when I was calling them for their breakfast, they all came pouring out of it in one huge cloud of feathers. I hadn't laughed so hard in a long time." She giggled again, her hand going to her lips.

He thought about it for a second as he chewed on a piece of pork. Come to think of it, the skylight had been open the night before. "I didn't think that they could fly that high up."

"If there's one thing that I've learned over the years, is to never underestimate a determined cucco. The actually act more like a pack of dogs than a flock of birds. They even have a kind of 'alpha male' that leads them around everywhere. It's the first to eat, the first to bathe, but always the last to fall asleep. It's very, very protective of its flock."

"Yeah, I think I met the little devil. He was the one that started it all," Link said.

Malon tilted her head, curious. "Started what?"

Link described with great detail the events that had led to him seeking shelter in the house. Malon couldn't help but be amused as he recounted his story of woe and suffering.

"...so these things almost broke the door down, they were hammering it so hard. At that point I was about three steps beyond terrified. The only thought in my mind was to run, and fast."
Malon took a bite of her bagel before replying. "Yep. If I had to guess, the one that you smacked would defiantly be Cojiro, their leader. Most of the other cuccos are very mellow unless provoked. He's the only one that I've ever known to actually pick a fight."

Link finally took a bite the cheese smothered bread. His eyes widened with surprise. "Wow, this is great."

A light blush crept across her face. "Ah, you're just saying that."

Link shook his head and took another bite. "No, no, this is really good! The seasoning is amazing. Did you make this yourself?"

Malon beamed. "I've just slowly picked it up over the years. The trick is getting your hands on the right spices. I've heard tell that a man can live on potatoes forever as long as he's got enough rosemary." She thought for a moment, her face taking on a wistful expression, then said, "Daddy always said I make a fantastic stew. Maybe I'll get a chance to make some sometime this week."

Link's ears perked. _Hmm… speaking of which, that's a perfect opening if I ever heard one._

"Your dad? Does he work around here?"

"He's the owner of this ranch, but—" Malon glanced out the window and saw how high the sun had risen. "Crap, it's getting late. I should have gotten started on the milking by now. Didn't Ingo want to meet you out by the stables?"

"Yeah, I guess I'd better get going," Link said. They quickly finished off their meals and put their dirty dishes in the kitchen basin.

They walked out into the early morning sunlight and went their separate ways for the day. It wasn't until later that Link realized that she had managed to avoid answering the question.

Ingo was in a sour mood when Link arrived at the horse paddock. "I was wondering when you were going to get out here," He said by way of greeting, his pinched face taking on the look of a withered deku sprout. "There's work to be done, and I can't have you lolly-gagging around, especially when your bed and supper are coming out of my pocket."

Link resisted the urge to point out that his "bed" wasn't costing Ingo a single shiny rupee. He had been here for less than a day and already the lanky farmhand was starting to aggravate his nerves, but he plastered on his best abashed look. "Yes, sir. I'll try to be out here earlier tomorrow morning."

Ingo put on an equally false smile. "Good, good. That's what we need around here, more energy. I can't be expected to get everything done by myself, you know."

He pulled from his pocket a small folded square of parchment filled with uneven handwriting and scanned it quickly. "Here is a list of jobs that need to be done. Get to work on it as soon as you can, and if you see anything else that needs to be fixed, don't hesitate to add it to the list. I assume you at least know how to use a hammer." He handed the paper over to Link, who read the first few lines to himself.

_Collect animal droppings in the paddock for fertilizer shipments, muck out the outdoor stables, repair the front gate, patch the roof of the barn, rebuild the roof of the cucco coup … hmmm, that's going to be my first task. I should probably make sure the barn door is still in good condition while I'm at it … weed the herb garden, move milk crates from point A to point B. It all sounds simple enough._
"This is it?" He asked in mock astonishment.

Ingo grinned wickedly. "Oh, of course not. Your daily chores are on the back."

"Oh…” He flipped it over and was faced with an equal sized list. Oh man...

Ingo turned and sauntered back towards the main house. "The supplies for repairs are in the barn, and the milk crates are behind the north windmill at the very back of the ranch. Make sure that you get them to the barn by tomorrow, since Malon's going to need to take them to Kakariko. If you have any other questions, ask Malon, and she'll show you what to do.” He walked off, leaving Link standing alone at the gate to the paddock.

Link sighed to himself, looking at the list once more. "Well, I knew that this wasn't going to be easy. Besides, a little manual labor won't kill me." He rubbed the back of his head and turned towards the barn, scanning the list. He needed to get that cucco coup fixed as soon as possible; if not for the birds, then for the sake of his sanity. He wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing that those little demons were roaming the ranch grounds unimpeded.

He had almost reached the barn doors before a new thought struck him. Those things are still locked inside…
Old, rotten timbers groaned in protest as Link carefully descended the ancient ladder leaning against
the palisade walls. The glowing ochre sun warmed his back as it made its nightly trip towards the
horizon. Just as his feet touched grass, the bright orb slowly finished slipping from view behind the
distant mountains, signaling the end of another long day.

Link stretched his arms over his head as he strode towards the house and tried to work out the last of
the cramps brought on by another hard day's work. You'd think I'd be used to this by now… He
thought to himself with a chuckle.

It had been almost three weeks since he had first arrived at the ranch. In that time he had already
repaired several loose doors in the barn, replaced three broken windows, torn apart and fixed a leaky
drainage pipe, cut up and removed a storm-damaged tree, and essentially rebuilt an entire cucco
coup. This was all in between occasionally escorting Malon to nearby villages for supplies and
deliveries.

The work was exhausting, but not overwhelming, and he found that after several weeks of constant
aches his body was starting to adapt to the new stresses being thrust upon it. He was surprised at first
to learn that ranch work required a different set of muscles than sword fighting, especially with all of
the heavy lifting he was required to perform. The ever-present burning in his legs and lower core was
a testament to that.

The last several days had been especially grueling. After replacing the last of the broken windows on
the house a couple of days ago he had fallen through a rotten section of the palisade wall, giving
Malon a fright. After they managed to extricate him from the rotting timbers and patch him up they
made an inspection of the rest of the outer wall and came to the conclusion – much to Malon's
steadily increasing dismay – that if something wasn't done there wasn't going to be much of a wall
left in a year's time. The old fort was ancient in her father's time, and maintenance was a steady,
constant battle of attrition.

So Link now found himself in the process of cutting away the areas of the inner palisade wall and
walkway that were crumbling with age or had been infested with insects and replacing them with
newer, stronger hardwood boards. Ingo had complained, loudly, of the extra expenses at first, but
after Link had pointed out that the walls were probably the only thing keeping the bandits out (and
some creative negotiating for the lumber on Malon's part) he had agreed to pry his fingers away from
the ranch's meager coffers to pay for the repairs.

Link turned to inspect his accomplishments for the day and slowly twisted his torso, stopping when
he felt his spine give a solid pop.

Nothing like a good day's work, he thought as he studied his work. Slaying monsters and clearing
temples is all well and good, but sometimes it's more satisfying to create than to destroy.

He tucked his hands behind his head and savored the tight ache in his shoulders as a stray thought
struck him. I wonder if I could become a rancher after I'm done with this insane little quest. He
smiled, daydreaming. I could buy some horses from Malon, breed my own mares, maybe some goats
and some cuccos... He winced. Ok, not the cuccos. He sighed as reality slowly replaced fantasy. One
day before another, I suppose...

He turned and began to walk at a leisurely pace towards the farmhouse, eager to see if Malon had
started on dinner yet. He whistled to himself as he followed the fenced-in pasture and tried to ignore
his growing frustration.

Navi hadn't returned from her errand yet. She had told him that there was an outside possibility that it might be three weeks before she returned, but he had never really considered that it might take that long. At the very least he had hoped that Sheik himself might show up while Navi was out looking for him and Link could have a good laugh at everyone's expense. So far though, there had been no word from either of them, so he continued to work and wait.

He was halfway to the farmhouse when a piercing cry caused his ears to perk. He stopped, listening intently. For a while the noise didn't repeat, the only things reaching his ears being the faint chirrup of crickets in the coming twilight.

There it was again. The high pitched whinny of a horse in distress – one of the younger colts from the sound of it – was carried on the wind, coming from the direction of the central corrals. He started towards the large enclosed field that dominated the center of the ranch, drawn by the shrill cries.

He stopped at the entrance to the corrals, his eyes quickly scanning the open field and the half dozen horses scattered about before finally coming to rest of the two figures standing off to the side. He recognized the horse as Arion, a troublesome young colt that Malon had acquired recently that had been abused by its previous owner and had thus developed an intense dislike for people.

Malon stood firm as she spoke quiet, calming words to the troubled colt. She stood at an angle to Link, and hadn't seen him enter the corral. Her russet mane of hair spread around her head like a halo, silhouetting her face in a red-gold blaze while the hem of her skirt swayed lightly in the breeze.

The colt's forward left leg was pulled up and tied with a braided hobble, rendering it nearly immobile by virtue of the fact that any attempt at walking would require it to hop on its front leg and would quickly tire it out. Malon stood patiently at its side as it slowly worked this out for itself, leaning against the colt's shoulder to support its weight as she rubbed a hand along its long neck and cooed soothing words. It tried a few futile kicks with its hind legs, but soon realized that it was only tiring itself out faster.

Soon the colt learned that it wasn't going anywhere in its current state, and allowed itself to lean its weight against Malon. She in turn proceeded with the next step in her plan, and began pressing downward on the horse's neck. The colt panicked at first, but Malon had her hands gripped firmly in the colt's mane as it tried to stay upright, and slowly, ever so slowly, the colt allowed itself to be lowered to the ground on its side. Malon folded her legs beneath herself as she sat, allowing the colt's head to rest on her lap.

"Shh, good boy, Arion, good boy..."

Malon continued whispering soothing, meaningless sounds as the horse settled, then hummed the first few bars to her favorite song. As the horse's breathing began to slow, she paused and took a deep breath, then began to sing the song her mother had taught her long ago.

"Epona, Epona, soba ni oide
Futari de ireba, sabishiku nan ka nai
Dakara, Epona, koko ni ite
Omae dake o mamotte ageru..."

Link smiled and leaned against the fence as memories surfaced of the first time he had heard her sing. He gently hummed the tune as Malon sang, creating a quiet harmony with the music.
"Koushite iru to omoi dasu
Ano hi no yoake
Tsuki ga shizumi, taiyou to
Omae ga umareta
Epona, Epona, soba ni oide
Futari de ireba, kanashiku nan ka nai
Dakara, Epona, koko ni ite
Watashi no uta o kiite ite ne
Koushite iru to omoi dasu
Ano koro no koto
Omae no tame ni kaazan ga
Tsukutta kono uta
Hmm... Hmm...
Futari de ireba, kanashiku nan ka nai
Hmm... Hmm...
Wasurenai demo kono uta
Kono uta..."

The final notes faded as Malon finished her song. She leaned down and murmured something in the horse's ear, though Link was too far away to make it out.

Link smiled at the picturesque view. He hadn't heard Malon sing since before he had entered the Temple of Time, and he had quietly wondered if that part of her had been lost when she became the strong, troubled young woman she was today. He was glad to see that not everything had changed in the last seven years.

Even so, he felt as if he might be intruding upon a private moment. He pushed off of the fence, prepared to sneak quietly back out of the front gate, but the old wood creaked loudly as his weight shifted.

Malon's head shot up at the sound, startled. "Who … L—Link? Is that you?"

He tensed, cursing his luck. Slowly, his feet seemingly unwilling to cooperate, he strode around the fence and approached her where she sat. He came to a stop a short, respectful distance away, thumbs tucked into his belt. "Yeah, it's me."

She put a hand to her breast, relieved. "Oh, good. I thought that it might be…” Her face suddenly flushing scarlet as realization struck her. "Were you listening to me?" she asked.

Link smiled at the shock in her voice and shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry for eavesdropping, but I heard
the horse and came to investigate. The song was beautiful."

Her blush deepened at the compliment, her cheeks turning nearly the same shade of crimson as her hair. "I … Th—thank you. My mother taught it to me long ago…” She turned away from him, turning her eyes back towards the cloudless sky as she continued to soothingly stroke the colt's long neck.

After several long moments, she patted the ground beside her. "Why don't you come join me?"

Link blinked in surprise, then hurried forward. Malon held out a hand, though the tone of her voice never changed from a quiet calm. "Slowly. He startles easily," she said as she continued giving the colt's neck long, slow strokes. "Arion hasn't been the easiest horse to get along with." A dark look crossed her face, but quickly passed. "I can't really blame him, after what his previous owner put him through. Poor fella doesn't trust anyone at this point."

"He seems to trust you," Link said as he sat down next to her. The horse shifted as it sensed a potential new threat, but quickly settled down again.

Malon shook her head with a sad smile. "I wish he did. I'm just more stubborn than he is." She gestured towards the hobble. "My parents developed this technique. Horses are prey animals, so they frighten easily and Arion's more skittish than most. I'm sure you've seen how hard it's been just to get him into the barn at night."

Some people will beat their horses until they behave, but a broken horse is just that; broken. It will never have the same spirit or the drive that a healthy, happy horse will. So my parents learned a different tactic. Instead of beating them, we earn their trust."

"How does tying them up earn their trust?" Link asked.

Malon shrugged. "Seems a little counter-intuitive, doesn't it? But it works. I've seen too many feral horses become docile to believe otherwise. We show them that even when they're immobile and helpless that they can depend on us not to hurt them, to take care of them. Even though we could easily hurt them, we protect them. Horses aren't dumb animals. They think, and they learn quickly. It just takes a little patience."

"Sort of like people, then," Link said.

Malon nodded, and appeared to be about to say something, but then stopped when a distressed look crossed her face. She turned away and continued to watch the sky as the last vestiges of twilight began to fade.

They sat in silence for several long moments, neither of them able to find any words. Link shifted uncomfortably and swallowed nervously. He could sense that something was troubling her, but had never been very good at alleviating these sorts of situations. He had heard the expression that you could cut the tension in the air with a knife, but he had never actually experienced it before.

His gaze followed hers up towards the first of the shimmering stars starting to appear at the darkest corner of the sky. His thoughts turned to his old childhood friend, Saria, now the newly awakened Sage of the Forest. It was she who had taught him all of the constellations on one of their many overnight campouts in the Sacred Meadow. He remembered the fervent passion in her voice as she told him about the different star clusters, and about the legends that went along with them. He memorized as many as he could, knowing that he would one day pass down the same experience to someone else.
A new thought struck him, *Today's as good as any I suppose.* He squinted, picking out an old, familiar set of stars that was beginning to peek through the twilight. "You see that group of stars up there?" He pointed at a large constellation.

Malon smiled. "You mean the ones that look like the Triforce?" She asked, studying the stars overhead.

Link shook his head. "No, that's too easy. It's just to the left of that," He shifted his position until he was sitting just behind Malon. Her heart fluttered when she felt his warm breath on the back of her neck. He gently took her wrist and directed her finger towards the heavens, tracing out the pattern. "Right … there."

She swallowed nervously and focused her concentration on the stars. "It ... kind of looks like a person."

He smiled, pleased. "That's Farore's Daughter," he told her, lowering her hand. "When I was younger, my … well, my friend used to tell me all about the different myths behind all of the constellations."

Malon sighed and closed her eyes as she continued stroking Arion's neck, basking in the warmth radiating from Link's body in the coming night. She found that she enjoyed his company, and even though she had only met him a couple of weeks ago, she felt … safer than she did around Ingo at any rate. It was a feeling that she had desperately missed during the past seven years. "Would you … tell me the story? Please?"

"I suppose," he said with a soft chuckle. "If you want me to that is. I'm not as good of a storyteller as my friend, but I'll try." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, drawing the legend from his memories.

Malon leaned back against him and studied his face as he concentrated, feeling his arms reflexively slip into a comfortable position around her waist. The way that his sandy bangs were swept away from his eyes gave him a somewhat rogues appearance, and the soft curve of his lips… *What am I thinking?* Malon mentally chided herself, quickly averting her eyes as she felt her cheeks warm. *Bad thoughts, Malon. Bad thoughts."

Link started the legend slowly, not noticing the deepening blush creeping across his companion's face.

"Long ago," He opened his eyes, looking up at the sky. "Immediately following the birth of Hyrule, it is said that the three Golden Goddesses, being pleased with Their work, returned to the Sacred Realm to watch over Their creation. Din continued to replenish the Earth, maintaining the fertile lands and rivers and oceans. Nayru had blessed the world with Her laws and a concept of balance and insured that it held true, while Farore kept vigil over all of Her mortal creations. However, because of their gift of life, the various races had also acquired minds of their own. They developed their own customs and opinions, which would often clash with one another and sometimes stray from the Goddesses' will. Eventually, they learned to make war on one another, and in doing so defied the sacred laws that the Goddesses has laid down. Though all three of the sisters were distressed by this, Farore most of all was saddened by their rebellion and became deeply troubled when Her creations showed a willingness, even an eagerness, to destroy that which She had worked so hard to create.

Lonely for a different companionship than that of Her Goddess sisters, and ashamed by what she saw as her mistakes in the mortal realms, Farore used Her rich life energy to create another being;
Her very own daughter. The maiden was said to be everything that was beauty and grace, and was Farore's most beloved treasure. Her name was Allaya."

Link paused, allowing Malon time to process the story while he recalled the rest.

Malon smiled and snuggled closer, all earlier embarrassment forgotten. "I haven't heard this legend before. That's a beautiful name."

Link decided to continue. "It was indeed."

In an effort to redeem the creatures of Hyrule, Farore sent her daughter down to the mortal realms so that she might serve as an example. She was to be a gift of purity and virtue to all life, a beacon of light in the darkness. Those that fell from the path that Farore and the other Goddesses had laid down needed only look to Allaya to be shown the true way."

They say that when she walked through the forest, the wolves would shadow her and protect her from harm. When she stopped by the river to rest, the plants would cup their leaves in the current and offer her a drink. When she sang, the birds would fall silent in respect."

This was before the time of Hylia, so the world had yet to experience such righteousness. She was a true blessing given out of love to our world. But like many of the things the Goddesses gave the mortal realm, Allaya was taken for granted."

He could feel Malon slowly shaking her head. "That's so sad."

Link pressed on, "Being so sweet and generous, she was unprepared for the harshness of life in our world. In her naïveté, she felt that she could do the most good by shining a light on the darkest corners of society. So she made for the largest city in the land, a neutral trading port which sat at the crossroads of the four major races. It was originally supposed to be a city of peace where all races could commingle, but there was constant bickering and bigotry amongst its inhabitants. Crime and corruption were such a common occurrence that they were seen simply as just another facet of life in the city. But there was good in the city as well, and so Allaya meant to nurture it where she could."

The first person she met on the outskirts was an old jongleur whose body had curled and swollen with arthritis. Allaya took pity on the poor man, who could no longer make a living and was reduced to begging on the streets. Unfortunately she had no coin to give, so she took his hands in hers and channeled the rich life energy of her Mother into the poor jester. In a matter of seconds he was cured of his ailments, leaving him with a body that seemed twenty years younger. The man was ecstatic, and thanked her profusely before he rushed off to tell everyone he could about this new visitor to the city."

The second person she met was a young Zora girl who was suffering from scalerot. Again Allaya placed her hands upon the girl, and again the girl was cured. Soon, as Allaya made her way through the city, a crowd of people gathered around her, who spread the word that a miracle worker had come to heal them of their afflictions."

Many people had no ailments, but Allaya was not merely a healer. A shopkeeper needed help loading crates into a wagon. A young girl had lost her favorite scarf. A Goron merely needed directions to the nearest inn. All of these people she helped, and more, because it was in her nature to do so. In helping those in need, and not caring about creed or race or allegiance, she acted as an example to everyone who followed her, and acts of kindness began to multiply outward around her into the city, like ripples in a pond."

Davyn was a good man, but he was a coward at heart. He did his best to live a righteous life, but if
he was threatened he would always give in. All throughout his childhood he had been the target of bullies, and adulthood was no different for the poor man. He had a soft heart, and always tried to help those around him in need, but was frequently taken advantage of and lived a poor, simple life.

When Allaya came upon him, she smiled fondly, as if she had been reunited with a distant cousin, but said sadly that she did not yet have anything to give him. The crowd was surprised, because she had managed to help everyone she had come across thus far, but Davyn replied that the only gift he would like would be to help and accompany her as she made her way through the city, and so they set off for the heart of town. Davyn proved to be a fine assistant, never shirking from the physical labors given to him, and yet his manner always remained that of a skittish rabbit, fearful of those around him.

The Dark Man – he has no other name – was the lord of the local criminal underclass, the self-proclaimed king of the city. Whenever someone needed something in his city, he always had a hand in procuring it for them – for a price, of course. His spies were threaded throughout the city like a spider's web, and soon word reached his ears that a miracle worker was distributing gifts to any who asked. Needless to say, he did not take kindly to people handing out favors in his city without paying his exorbitant taxes, especially when he had yet to receive any himself.

At first the Dark Man had his lieutenants approach Allaya, but at this point the townsfolk were protective of their benefactor, and knew all of the Dark Man's agents by sight. None could get close enough to talk to her. So eventually the Dark Man himself came out to meet her, because even the bravest guard coward in fear in his presence. Wherever the Dark Man went, death was sure to follow shortly after. No one dared stand against him for fear of what he might do to them or their families.

There are several conflicting versions of the legend at this point, but all agree that he lured her to an alley with the promise that she would be able to help someone truly in need of her services. Davyn knew that the Dark Man couldn't be trusted, but was paralyzed by fear of what would happen if he followed. Allaya promised that she would return soon, and entered the alley alone.

Once the Dark Man had her alone, he demanded that Allaya give him the same powers that she had, but Allaya could see that to do so would be to bring ruin upon the land, and so refused him. He argued with her, offering her sweet lies and false promises that a strong, dominant hand would be able to unite the splintered factions of the city once and for all, but Allaya knew that those factions at odds with each other were in fact instrumental to the Dark Man's criminal empire and he would do no such thing. The Dark Man quickly lost his temper. No one refused him and lived to tell about it, certainly not some mystical healer.

The end came quickly for her. For though Allaya had a divine soul, her body was only mortal.

Farore eventually found her daughter lying in the alley, with Davyn weeping over her body as her lifeblood poured from her wounds. Farore was furious, and was prepared to blame Davyn for Her daughter's murder, but Allaya managed to shield him from her Mother's wrath. Davyn wept and begged Farore to not let Allaya die, pleaded with her for just one more day, one more minute, if not for him then for the rest of the city. He asked Her how they could be expected to go on after something so pure had touched their lives, and been so violently taken from them.

But Farore was overcome with grief, and felt that if the world would not cherish Her blessings, then it was possible that we did not deserve them. If Farore were to heal Her daughter, Allaya would only meet a similar fate somewhere down the line, because evil men were allowed to walk freely in the light. And Farore would not subject Her own daughter to such a cruel fate.

Allaya, just before she died, with the last of her strength pulled herself up and placed a soft kiss upon Davyn's cheek. Allaya's last gift was the gift of Courage to a poor man who had had none.
Anguished by Her daughter's defilement, Farore carried Allaya to the heavens and placed her among the stars so that she might never be harmed again, with the promise that she would return if we were ever judged worthy. She remains there to this day as a reminder of the perfect gift that we lost …" Link slowly trailed off, finished with his tale.

"I can see her now." Malon whispered, staring up at the Goddess' starry child. Her attitude turned somber. "Such a sad story."

"They're not all like that," he assured her. "A few of them are pretty exciting, even funny. But I'm not the expert that my friend was. I can't do them all justice, not the way she could." He said, looking up at the stars again with a fond look in his eyes. "But I remember this one, because the moral of the story is so clear."

"Don't go into dark alleys with strange men?" Malon said.

"Well … possibly, but that's not the lesson I took away from it," Link shook his head. "This world … in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't care, one way or the other, how we live or die. Some things out there, some people even, are born without a conscience, and so long as they get what they want they don't care what they destroy in the process. So if we want to be happy, we must stand up to protect the things that we love from those who would take what isn't theirs."

Silence reigned for several moments as Malon nodded. "What happened to Davyn and the Dark Man?"

"It's said that when Davyn returned to the central square and told the people there what had happened, the entire city rioted. The Dark Man's spies and lieutenants were ousted, and Davyn himself led the charge on the Dark Man's stronghold."

"Even when it wouldn't bring back what they had lost?"

Link thought carefully. "Sometimes … sometimes, taking a stand even when all you know is lost, can be just as important as if your goal were still within reach. I think that's what courage – true courage – is all about. We have the power within ourselves to make the world a better place. We just have to be brave enough to try. I learned that from my friend too."

"Hmm..." She hummed thoughtfully as she gave Arion another rub. "Do you miss your friend?"

He smiled, thinking of Saria. "Yeah, I miss her a lot. We spent most of our childhood together."

She turned in his arms, looking up into his cobalt-blue eyes. "I'm sorry. It must be hard for you, being so far away from home."

Link felt an involuntary sigh escaped his lips. "Sometimes … I wonder if they even remember me."

"I'm sorry." She apologized again, her eyes downcast.

He smiled, and reached up with a gloved hand to tilt her chin so that her eyes met his. "Don't be. It was my choice to leave. Besides," He said as he stared into her bright azure eyes, smiling a infectious grin. "I'm making some new friends here."

Malon's breath caught in her throat and she felt the bottom drop out of her stomach, as if she had taken an unwitting step over a deep gorge. She gazed back into his eyes, her pulse pounding in her ears as she mentally commanding herself to breathe. Slowly, gently, as though her body had a mind of its own, she reached up and tucked a loose strand of golden hair behind his pointed ear and let her hand drop to his shoulder. Her fingers clenched in the fabric of his green tunic. She wet her lips...
...green tunic...

... And with that seemingly random, stray thought the roaring in her ears was suddenly silenced. She quickly drew back, the magic of the moment lost.

Link blinked, astonished at her abrupt withdrawal. "What's wrong?"

Malon chewed her lower lip, then shook her head and turned away. "There's nothing wrong." She said, but felt that she owed him more. "It's just..."

Link watched her patiently for several heartbeats, but she didn't elaborate. "Just … what?" he prompted.

Malon continued to nibble thoughtfully on her lip, then shook her head once more. "Never mind … it's … impossible."

"Hmm," Link said, clearly disappointed with the abruptness of her defense, but he carefully kept his face a neutral mask. He gently disentangled himself from around her and stood up slowly so as not to spook the colt.

Malon's breath seized as he turned and walked away, panic and confusion shooting through her heart at the sudden jumble of emotions inside her. She didn't want him to go. Had she driven him away?

"I think you'd be surprised," Link called back absently as he walked back towards the entrance to the corrals.

Malon swallowed nervously, confused. "At what?"

Link turned to look her straight in her eyes. "At what's possible."

He slipped out of the horse paddock before she had a chance to respond.
Surreal lights sparkled and danced eerily into the night sky, as if the very stars had taken flight. The sky itself was aglow with shimmering shades of pastel orange and yellow and red, creating the second twilight of the day.

Her ears perked at the strange sounds filling the night, like a thousand soldiers marching across a field of fallen leaves. The impossibly loud crackling sound was accompanied by the sounds of panicked, desperate people. Malon could hear her father and several of the hired hands yelling at the top of their lungs while the whinnies of frightened horses could be heard from the direction of the barn. She hugged her favorite stuffed animal tightly to her chest – a cream colored horse with only a single lonely button for an eye, the other having been lost long ago – and let the house door close quietly behind her before making her way towards the commotion.

Great white flakes were falling across the ranch in the surreal twilight, coating the grass and trees and buildings in a wonderful ivory powder. Malon giggled, delighted to see snowfall so early in the year. It was only mid-summer, but if snow was falling this early, then that would mean that she would probably get to play in lots and lots of it when it actually got cold.

It was odd though; she had never known snow to fall so early in the year. She felt a tickle of confusion, but was too enraptured with the magic in the night air to care. She danced in circles, arms spread and face pointed to the stars as she twirled with her stuffed horse tucked into the crook of her elbow. Her father had said that snow only fell during the winter, when it got really really cold. So of course this snow must be something special, because her father was the smartest man in the whole wide world in forever, and there was no way that he could be wrong.

She soon tired of spinning and began trying to catch a snowflake on her tongue. It was as hard as she remembered from last winter. The snow seemed to guess where Malon's open mouth was waiting for it, and danced and spun through the air to avoid her. She got several thick flakes on her cheeks, but after concentrating really hard she finally caught a flake on her tongue, and quickly clamped her mouth shut to capture her prize.

Blegh. This snow tasted ucky, and was warm and bitter. In fact, it didn't taste like snow at all. Instead of the expected biting sting of ice followed quickly by a cool trickle of water, her mouth tasted as if she had been licking a dusty floor. She tried that once and didn't like it at all.

The piercing cry of her mother shouting orders echoed across the ground, causing her to spin in fright, but it wasn't her that her mother was angry with, so that was good. She was curious though. Mommy almost never got angry. The last time she had seen her mother angry had been when a Bad Man came to the ranch, and her mother had thrown him over the wall. Malon rushed through the gates and towards the corrals, eager to see who was going to be punished now.

That was when she saw that the barn was on fire.

The barn – no … her barn, her favorite place in the whole world – was on fire, ablaze with a hauntingly beautiful, destructive light. Shock and curiosity mixed within her.

Wow…

She had never seen anything so wondrous. Malon dropped her stuffed horse and ran across the dew-dappled lawn towards the glow, amazed at how warm the brilliant light was even at this distance.
It's so pretty, she thought as she held out a hand towards the yellow and red embers, trying to catch the dancing light in her palm. A small, steaming clump of grass near where she was standing had ignited, spreading the raging inferno and leaving dark ashes in its wake. She reached for the glow, but recoiled quickly and gave a small cry as the heat became unbearable to her small fingers.

"Malon, stay back sweetie!"

She felt the air in her lungs leave her as strong, slender arms scooped her up around her waist, lifting her away from the dangerous blaze. She felt confused at first at the reprimand. Her parents had always indulged their daughter's curiosity, and the only time she was told to stay away from something was if it was dangerous. Why would her barn be dangerous?

"Mommy, what's going on? Why's there fire?" She asked, pointing in the direction of the barn with her stubby fingers.

As soon as they were a safe distance away, her mother put her down and knelt in front of her, taking her daughter's small face into her hands. "Malon, love, I need you to listen to me," her mother explained quickly, "The barn is on fire, and some of the horses are still stuck inside. I need to go help them and get them out."

Malon tried to focus on her mother's face, but the inferno behind her had hidden her features beneath shifting shadows. The flames leapt into the sky behind her, accenting her deep crimson tresses with shades of golden light. So pretty, just like an angel...

"Fire?" She asked, confused. Daddy said that fire was only supposed to be in the hearth or the stove. More importantly, the horses were strong. She had been taught from a young age that the horses were strong, much stronger than her, stronger than anyone, even her father. What could possibly hurt a horse? Her gaze darted back towards the inferno framing her mother, fear and realization freezing her eyes wide. This was a very, very Bad Thing.

"Whatever you do," her mother continued urgently, "Do not follow me, do you understand, love?" She asked breathlessly. When Malon didn't answer right away she asked again, her tone rising. "Do you understand me young lady?"

"Y-yes, Mummy," Malon replied, fighting back tears. Hurt and confusion smothered her earlier curiosity like a wet blanket. Mommy never raised her voice to her like that.

Sensing her mother's anxiety, she leapt into her mother's arms, pulling her into a fierce hug. Her mother rocked her back and forth, cooing sweet reassurances. The shadows parted for a moment, and Malon saw a tear slide down her mother's chin before silently dropping onto her proffered cheek. Her own tears soon followed, and her mother placed a comforting hand on her head, giving her a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll be right back love, I promise. You've got to be a big girl for your mother. I'll be right back." Her mother's warm arms loosened, and she placed a comforting kiss on her forehead. "Be brave, Malon."

The cries of the frightened horses still trapped inside of the barn broke them from their hug, and Malon's mother ran for the barn, never looking back at her crying daughter. She dashed towards the doors, ignoring the tongues of flame that licked at her legs as she leapt through, ignoring the cries of protest from the farmhands and her beloved husband, and disappeared through the flaming portal.

"Mommy?" Malon called out, confused and scared. Why did she run into the burning barn like that? Hadn't Mommy just told her to stay away from it? What was going on? Wasn't the barn dangerous? Why would Mommy run into the barn if it was dangerous?
She could hear her mother inside of the barn yelling at the horses in the foreign tongue that her mother used whenever she was particularly angry. Suddenly, three horses shot through the burning doors in a desperate bid for freedom. The farmhands nearly dropped their buckets of water as they dodged out the way of the powerful beasts, more focused on containing the fire than trying to corral them. A fourth horse, a small new-born foal, followed her brethren as it darted from the barn in a panic, its soft brown coat and white mane singed and smoking.

It escaped just in time before a small chunk of the crumbling roof crashed to the ground right in front of the flaming door, blocking any hope of escape for those still trapped inside.

Malon stumbled forward in shock. "Mommy, come back! Come— Aaah!" She screamed at the sight, her words cut off as the first part of the barn began its inevitable fall.

The sound of crumbling timbers was deafening as the roof collapsed, the flames having already eaten through the broad support pillars. Embers raced into the sky by the scores of thousands, looking like the bright pyreflies that would occasionally grace Lake Hylia's shores with their eerie glow. The cries of the dozen people futilely trying to douse the fire could be heard over the carnage as the entire building collapsed, the weakened walls buckling under the immense weight, sending great plumes of sparks and embers into the sky.

"Mommy? Mommy?" Her mother's last words to her echoed in her ears, 'Be brave, Malon…' Tears streaked down her ash-stained cheeks. I'm a big girl, I've got to be brave for Mommy… "Mo— Mother?" She cried, racing towards the flaming wreckage, only to be caught up in Talon's arms. She screamed and kicked at her father, trying but unable to break his powerful grip. He hugged her desperately as she fought him, refusing to let her go.

Malon gave one final kick against his desperate grip. Why was he stopping her? She had to save her mother! "Let me go! Mother, come back! Mother!"

"Mother!"

"Mother!"

Malon screamed as she jolted upright from her bed, her hands reaching into the darkness as if to clench her fingers around the last, lingering wisps of her dream.

She slumped forward as the sudden tension drained from her body, gasping for air. Perspiration soaked her camisole, causing it to cling to the curves of her body as she threw back the covers and shakily swung her long legs out over the floor.

It was … only a dream. But I haven't had that dream in so long. And it was so much more … vivid … this time. So real...

She cupped her face in her hands as her body began to shake from the adrenalin draining from her system. Why again? Why tonight? She could remember a time when she had relived that dream every night for months on end. Eventually it had faded, but it came back to her occasionally, first when Castle Town had been burned to the ground, then when her father fell sick and she feared of losing him as well.

Over time though she found that the dream was slowly fading. Pieces would become fuzzy and indistinct, or even missing completely. She couldn't remember a time in the last seven years that it had been so fresh, so visceral. The only thing that had been different was...
She blinked in shock. Why couldn't she remember her mother's face?

Malon shot to her feet in a panic and rushed across the room to the nightstand. No, no, nonono...

She knelt in front of her nightstand and threw open the lower drawer. Blindly she dug through her clothes in the dark, searching by memory for what she knew lay beneath her folded skirts: A rare pictograph of her mother when she was pregnant with Malon, something that her father had sprung for when they had had the money for such frivolous things. Ingo had thrown it across the kitchen in one of his drunken rages, and so its place of honor was no longer on the table in the evening room but hidden beneath her work clothes in a dusty old nightstand, neglected if not forgotten.

She knew she would not find what she desired. Years of sitting on the table in direct sunlight had faded parts of the pictograph to near-transparency. Enough remained though to give her hope. Her fingers closed around the frame and she ripped it from the drawer, carelessly spilling her clothes out onto the floor in her haste. She turned and rushed for the window, thrusting the pictograph into the pane of pale moonlight and squinted against the glare through the cracked glass.

Nothing, just as she already knew. The pictograph was of her mother in profile, sitting on the pane of this very window when this room was being prepared as a nursery, staring out into the ranch, her arms wrapped protectively, lovingly around the swollen bulge of her pregnant belly. Sadly, time and sunlight had eaten away at the top of the pictograph until there was almost nothing left above her mother's shoulders. If she looked closely and tilted it at just the right angle, Malon thought that she could just barely make out the strong curve of her jaw, the curled, deep crimson coif of her hair, but no matter how hard she looked she could not find her mother's face in those blank spaces.

She sat back and slumped in defeat into the writing desk's chair, the pictograph clattering to the table as she felt the burning sting of tears swell in her eyes. It had been over ten years since her mother had been taken from her, and yet she felt as if that wound were ready to reopen at any second.

It wasn't fair. But then, how much of her life over the years had ever been based on fairness?

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, watching as the moonlight slowly crawled across the desk, but after a while she found that she no longer wished to sleep. She cupped her chin in her hands and stared through the dirty windowpane, watching the grass in the field slowly sway in the night wind. She looked up at the waxing moon, its bright luminescence bathing everything in soft, ethereal light, then shivered against the cool night air.

I wonder how late it is? She thought hazily, realizing that while her camisole was now cool and damp from her sweat, her mouth was as dry as the hottest desert.

Maybe a glass of water will help to calm my nerves…

Groggily, she stood and threw on a long cotton nightgown, then inhaled deeply, steadying her breathing before she unlocked and opened the door to her room. She felt a shiver run down her spine as she made her way down the shadowy hallway to the bathroom. The light from the moon shone through the window at the far end of the hall, which was filtered through an old dead tree just outside the ranch walls, and illuminated a small square patch of bare floorboards, revealing in stark relief the disturbingly claw-like characteristics of the bare limbs.

The rest of the hall was as dark as pitch; it looked as if someone had thrown a bucket of inky black paint that had seeped into every nook and cranny. Her careful footsteps caused the ancient wooden floorboards to groan, and the shadows of the monstrous tree danced in the evening breeze with a low, almost otherworldly sound that faintly reminding her of a rhyme that she had heard long ago:
Last night I saw upon the stair,
A little man who wasn't there,
I didn't see him again today,
Oh, how I wish he'd go away.

She made her way to the bathroom without incident and reached for the sink, turning the intricately
carved handle towards her. Another of her parents renovations, back when the ranch was more
successful. Cool, crisp water flowed into the basin. She cupped her hands under the flow of water
and brought it to her face, letting the chill of the water calm her jittery nerves. She cupped her hands
again, refilling her impromptu cup before bringing her hands to her mouth for a drink.

She turned off the running water and was drying her hands and face on a handtowel when her ears
perked. She turned towards the window as the breeze shifted, buffeting the house and quieting the
noise.

There it was again. Sweet, melodic music, coming from outside of the bathroom window. What on
earth? She carefully stepped up onto the rim of the tub and cracked open the window, listening
intently as the soothing music became louder, more crisp. She breathed in sharply, recognizing the
tune.

That's my song!

She closed the window and barely managed to keep herself from running down the hall. The
floorboards creaked loudly as she walked, and she winced when she heard sounds and muttered
curses coming from Ingo's room.

Oh please, no, not right now...

She had almost managed to make it past when the door cracked open. The smell of long stagnant
dust, moldy cheese, and cheap ale drifted from the room, and her breathing became shallow as she
turned. His sunken eyes stared back at her from the gloom, shining like glass beads in the dark.

"What're you doing up this early?" he asked suspiciously. "Thinkin' of sneaking out? Gonna go pay
the stablehand a midnight visit?"

Subconsciously, she crossed her arms across her chest. In reality, it didn't make a difference, since
her simple cotton gown wasn't the least bit revealing. But ever since that night he had cornered her in
the barn she had felt increasingly defensive around him.

"N-no, I just needed a glass of water," she said, carefully avoiding the fact that she was no longer
just returning to her room.

He seemed to think this over for a moment before giving an irritable, drunken huff. "Well, quit
making all that racket, bitch, or else I'll throw you outside." He slammed the door shut before she
could reply.

Malon gently laid her head against the wall as the full absurdity of his threat washed over her, then
continued on. Before she knew it she was outside, her sandals slapping against the soles of her feet
as she ran swiftly over the dew covered grass and though the gate. A light fog had sprung up,
swirling around her skirt as she went.

Where is it coming from? She paused, listening. Her head turned, her ears perking as she followed
the music. Behind the barn! She slowed and quietly she made her way forward, her nightmare
inching back from the darkest corners of her mind.
It wasn't the same building where her mother had died. It wasn't even in the same place, the original's footprint having occupied the northern border of the ranch where now only scorched rock and a fallow field mark its passing. The barn they were using now was originally the old barracks, converted to storage and sleeping quarters when her parents had first acquired the ranch. Even so, her fond memories of the new would forever be linked with the nightmares of the old. Although the old barn had burnt to the ground, in a way, in her mind at least, the spirit of what it was lived on in its current incarnation.

The barn, for her, was a place of memories, both pleasant and painful.

The barn, where she had spent most of her childhood helping her parents care for the animals and playing with the customer's children. It was also the place where she had last held her mother, begging her not to go.

Where she had spent many of her happiest carefree days learning how to ride and care for her beloved horses.

Where she had stood in silent horror as she watched her mother die.

But now, sweet music filled the air, drawing her back to this place that was full of such conflicting memories. The tone was beautiful, and she felt the faint stirrings of familiarity suggesting that she had heard this particular music before. But the thought merely brushed against her like a passing wraith, unable to find purchase in her memories.

The crackling of the grass underfoot was the only other sound that she could hear as she made her way along the outer wall. Even the nocturnal insects were unusually silent, their lack of chirruping adding to the dream-like quality of the night. As she approached, the music paused in mid-tune, a surreal silence permeating the crisp night air. She quickly ducked back behind the corner of the barn, praying that whatever had been playing the music had not heard her.

Link couldn't sleep. As he tossed and turned in the hayloft, his mind kept wandering back to earlier in the evening when he had joined Malon in the horse paddock. He hadn't been conscious of the implications at first, but he had slowly realized that sitting behind her had been a rather intimate move on his part, and had worried that she might become uncomfortable, but the ease with which she had relaxed against him had surprised him.

Malon was always so tense when she was in public. She often kept her metaphorical shield raised even if it was just the two of them alone together, but last night was so different from her usual behavior that he wasn't quite sure what to think.

However, her sudden reticence at the end of his story and the ambiguity of her thoughts had driven his worry back in full force. She had seemed about to say something important, but pulled back at the last moment. Had she recognized him? He had thought for the longest time that she had forgotten all about him, but now he wasn't so sure. If by chance she did remember him from seven years ago, but was keeping it to herself, what would happen if she were to bring it out into the open?

The worst part was that he was now well and truly stuck. If he came out and revealed himself to her, she might accuse him of intentionally hiding it from her, or worse, stalking her. However, if he waited until she brought it up, he might be in an even worse position. Last night was the first sign of her really opening up and the last thing he wanted was to drive her back into her shell.

He sat up and threw back the covers, deciding that lying here in bed wasn't going to give him the answers he sought. He grabbed his shield and climbed out of the window so as not to wake the
animals in the barn, dropping to the wagon parked below.

He sat and crossed his legs lotus-style on the bench, then drew the Ocarina of Time from his shield, smiling sadly as he ran his fingers over the sky-blue porcelain. There were so many in the world that depended on him not screwing up. Malon, Sheik, the Princess Zelda … too many. Far too many. And here he was, stuck, without a helping hand or a smidgeon of a clue to guide him.

So he did what he always did when he needed time to think, to clear his head of worries.

He began to play.

A soothing calm washed over him as he rested his fingers in the familiar pattern around the instrument and placed it to his lips. The music was slow at first as he began his warm-up routine. He hadn't practiced since he had arrived at the ranch, so he took his time going through the exercises that Saria had taught him. Eventually he began running through his repertoire, as usual leaving out a few key notes to avoid activating any of the magical songs.

Since his earlier thoughts had been so focused on his ever-growing list of problems, it was only appropriate, really, to practice Malon's song. It was among his favorites to play, since it was a slower song and had always had a calming effect on his nerves. No bolts of inspiration for his problems struck out of the blue while he played, but at least it made him feel better.

He wondered if he should join her the next time he found her singing.

He was nearly finished with his second play-though when his ears perked. He couldn't say what exactly had caught his attention, but his senses were telling him that something had changed in the environment. Link looked up from his ocarina, listening intently, his senses ringing with the last lingering sound of his song. He closed his eyes, shuttering his mind to all distractions. He had learned how to do this a long time ago, back when the first deku babas started appearing in the forest, and this particular skill had served him well in his temple delving adventures.

His breathing nearly stopped as he entered a calming state, his body becoming relaxed as he focused on his surroundings. His sensitive ears could now pick out the softest of sounds, from the wind blowing across the open fields, to flutter of the wings of a passing moth … to the hushed footsteps of a farmgirl scrambling for cover.

He huffed, snapping out of his trance as he realized that his music had not gone unheard. A grimace crossed his features as a new thought came to mind.

If she doesn't already suspect me, the fact that I know that song so well would do it...

He quietly reached for his shield and replaced the ocarina, then shifted his palm. Withdrawing his hand from the ancient scroll, he drew with it an old tool he had recovered several months back from the Kakariko Graveyard. Now to make my daring getaway…

Malon crouched at the corner of the building, her ears perked as she listened, hoping that whoever or whatever was playing her song would continue. Her prayers were not answered, however, when she heard a loud clank, followed by the ratcheting mechanical sound of hydraulic chains. A shiver ran down her spine, her thoughts turning back to the ghost stories that some of the old farmhands had once told her, of haunted spirits laden with chains and hooks and a taste for vengeance.

Silence once again reigned as the metallic sounds stopped. What was that?

She remained in her crouch for what seemed like forever, her thighs burning and her throat dry as
she waited to make sure that whatever had making that sound was well and truly gone. Courage soon returned to her as she stood and crept around the corner of the barn, slowly inching her way towards the far side. She inhaled deeply to steady herself before peeking around the last corner.

Nothing. There was no one there. Confused and with her fear forgotten, she straightened and walked around the corner, scanning the ground and wagon for any clue as to what had been playing such lovely music.

*Nothing, not even a single footprint.*

Another shiver ran down her spine at the thought of prowling ghosts haunting her farm came to mind. Her fingers itched for the comforting weight of her crossbow, which was stashed back in the house, then felt silly for it. It was a fine deterrent for the occasional marauding drunk … but what in the world could it possibly do against something that was already dead? Maybe, if brought to bear against real ghosts, a few bolts would at least make them burst into laughter so hard that she would be able to escape.

"Well … so long as they're not stealing the cows…" she joked quietly to herself.

She shivered again as she continued scanning the ground, drawing her arms around herself as she realized how cool the night air really was. Was it really only three weeks ago that she had been swimming in a river in order to cool off? Autumn was making its presence known with a vengeance, and in only a couple of short months winter would be upon them. If it got any colder at night, they might actually have to start worrying about the first frost. The very thought was hard to believe, but then Hyrule had always had some wild swings in weather.

She wandered the grounds for a minute before making her way across the field to a bare spot that had long lay fallow at the northern corner of the ranch, rubbing her arms to warm herself. For years this patch of land had borne the scars of that violent night, but eventually they had cleared away the wreckage and Din had been allowed to retake what was rightfully Hers.

The grave was plain, with two thin stone columns that they had salvaged from the wreckage leaned together to create a simple triangle, the traditional marker for those that could not afford the more lavish tombstones. There had been nothing left to bury, the fire having consumed everything down to the last support pillar, though that hadn't stopped them from memorializing the spot.

Malon was silent as she crouched in front of the grave. There was nothing to say as she studied the simple stone structure – at least, nothing that she hadn't already said. She had made her peace with her mother long ago. As a child she had always felt that her mother was watching over her from wherever souls went when they died, but those thoughts had faded with age, to be replaced by the simple feeling of fond memories.

She turned and stood as a sudden thought occurred to her. *Could it have been Link? He did hear me singing earlier…*

She strode quickly across the grounds, and within seconds she had crept inside the barn and was stealthily climbing up the ladder to Link's loft, eager to see for herself if he was the culprit. She paused when she reached the top, peeking cautiously over the edge of the balcony, ready to pull her head back down if he was … indecent. Luckily he had the covers pulled up to his shoulders, his steady breathing causing the heavy blanket to rise and fall with each breath.

She felt a pang of frustration, disappointed to find that her guess had been incorrect. His face was peaceful, with a hint of a smile at the corner of his lips. She studied him for a while, content to watch him sleep. After several moments he muttered to himself in his sleep and rolled over, drawing the
Malon sighed and descended the ladder, the cause of the music still a mystery. Frustrated, she jumped and slid down the last three rungs. Well, it's not like I expected it—

"Eep!" She jumped about a foot into the air with fright when Epona snorted behind her, curiously poking her head out of her stall.

"Epona, don't do that to me!" she whispered desperately to the mare as she spun, trying not to wake any of the other animals.

Epona grunted, shaking her luxurious white mane apologetically.

Malon couldn't help but smile as she reached out and rubbed her hand along the horse's jaw. Epona was unusually intelligent, even for her Gerudo bloodlines. Sometimes it seemed as if the horse could really understand what was being said to her.

Her smile faded as she felt herself suddenly overcome by emotion. She reached out gently, her hands finding their familiar place around the mare's neck as she reached over the stall door and gave her horse a gentle hug. Her fingers brushed against the small burn scar near the nape of Epona's neck, remnant of a piece of flaming timber that had struck her long ago.

A silent tear made its way down Malon's cheek, dropping onto Epona's brown coat.

"At least I still have you, Epona," she whispered to the mare.

She stayed like that for several long moments. Epona remained quiet, sensing her master's distress. Eventually Malon broke from the hug, running a hand along the horse's jaw. "Who knows?" she asked speculatively. "Maybe … maybe it was an angel…"

Wiping the unshed tears from her eyes, Malon turned, scanning the barn one more time, still curious as to what had created such beautiful music.

With a final pat on Epona's cheek and a quiet "Good night," she turned and left, quietly sliding the barn door closed behind her, never noticing the pair of cool cobalt-blue eyes that silently watched her from above.
Sulfurous winds howled through threadbare tapestries, causing the aged fabric to flutter and twist in the swirling eddies. The molten moat far beneath the keep cast an eerie ochre glow through the cracked glass windows that made up the entire south wall of the throne room, splashing across the stone ceiling and competing with the flickering yellow light of the torches spaced around the circular room.

Marble pillars ringed the expansive space, blackened by years of accumulated soot and pitted with age and neglect. Several golden symbols remained affixed to the pillars – those few that were deemed inoffensive and had been spared the smelter – further scattering the flickering light. As a result, the shadows in the deepest recesses of the room shifted and seethed like living things, working their way between the cracks and surging forward from the darkest corners, smothering and overwhelming the light before retreating once more in an endless battle of luminescent dominance.

The original marble flooring of the throne room had been torn up and discarded, replaced with a scale map of Hyrule and the surrounding kingdoms, crafted from a dozen different colors of stone. Wooden markers placed around the kingdom indicated populations, important resources, potential uprisings, and troop strengths, so that with a single sweeping glance one would be able to take in the status of the entire realm.

The throne itself was a masterpiece of beauty and comfort, carved from a solid chunk of goronite and inlaid with gold and precious gems. Plump cushions of crimson and lavender adorned its surfaces; much like the king for which it had been crafted, it boasted a thin veneer of comfort over its solid iron core. It sat slightly off center at the back of the room, its twin having been removed long before its current occupant had taken power.

The man's crimson cloak pooled around his powerful body, the same color as his close-cropped hair, and the magic-infused leather armor he wore creaked as he shifted. Three golden triangles adorned his gloved hand, their magic glow piercing through the heavy leather. The topmost triangle pulsed slowly with the dull tempo of its master's rage.

Ganondorf Dragmire, the usurper King of Hyrule, sat upon his throne, leaning to one side with his chin resting in the palm of his right hand, his fingers moving in small circles at his temples.

Thinking.

Seven years. It had been over seven years since he had stormed the castle. Seven years since he had chased the Princess Zelda and her handmaiden through the burning town and across Hyrule Field, only to lose them in the forest shortly thereafter. Seven long, aggravating years in trying – frustratingly, disastrously, unsuccessfully – to close in on their scent. But every time he managed to unearth their latest hiding place they managed to slip through his fingers and disappear into the night, and still he was not one step closer to achieving total dominion over the kingdom.

Seven wasted years...

To top it all off, he was now receiving reports that the greater demons he had summoned to lock away the power of the Sages were being vanquished by a boy bearing the mark of the Triforce. Such a thing could not be allowed to continue. If there was one good thing to come from this, at least he now knew where the Triforce of Courage had disappeared to.

His left hand pensively flexed at the armrest, crushing the velvet beneath his thick fingers. Had the
underlying foundation been made of wood instead of forged metal, he would have cracked it in half.

He sat there for some time, pondering the same situation he had been stuck with for so long, circling the latest facts and rumors his spies had delivered to him around and around in his head until it all slowly became a dark simmering blur in his mind.

Before long the sound of feet scuffing the polished floor behind him announced the presence of another being, interrupting his brooding. Ganondorf did not stir, as it took him only seconds to recognize the particular step of his vizier.

"What is it, Agahnim?" he asked irritably.

Agahnim shuffled forward to his side with a nervous gait, his hunter-green robes swirling around his feet. He reached into the folds of his robe and produced a small sheaf of parchment. "My Lord. I have a new report on those enchanted golems that you requested for the palace gates," he said, offering the papers for Ganondorf's inspection

Ganondorf made no move to reach for the documents and merely watched the mage from an angle, impatience burning in his dark eyes. "Have they managed to fix the problems that we had previously discussed?"

"Erm … not quite," Agahnim said, drawing the papers back to his chest and shuffling them in his hands. "The warlocks are still having some trouble adapting their spells to the Hylian architecture, something to do with the particular way that the composition of the granite interferes with the ley lines..." he drifted off, then continued slower, "I believe the word they used was 'hinky', Sire."

"Hinky," Ganondorf said, testing the word, the displeasure running through his voice like a sour harp cord.

Agahnim rapidly flipped through his notes. "B-but they have made some progress on the longevity of the spell. The only major problems remaining are their extreme temper and the fact that we don't know if they will reliably exhibit self-preservation. We've only be able to perform limited tests and so far they've only behaved like trapped animals, because that is essentially what they are. Of course, that's precisely the opposite of what we have designed them for, so their very nature conflicts with the restraining measures we must take until the spell is perfected."

Ganondorf was quiet for several moments as he thought. Finally, he turned his head and regarded his vizier with barely suppressed contempt. "How is it, Agahnim, that my head mage has spent months on this one problem without producing an adequate solution?"

Agahnim's flinty eyes turned hard. Maybe somewhere in there he did have a spine after all. "I would remind my Lord that my areas of expertise are elemental and transmutation magic, not anthropomorphism. I am able to maintain this keep in a suspended position above the magma pit, but if you want it to come alive and dance for your amusement, you'll have to look elsewhere."

Ganondorf snorted and waved his hand, dismissing the matter. He'd known of these details for ages and had already worked them into his plan. Patience, however, was not one of his stronger virtues, and venting his anger on such an easy target as Agahnim was … therapeutic.

He turned and stared off into the middle distance, once again lost in his thoughts. As the quiet dragged on, Agahnim shuffled his papers and swallowed nervously, obviously with something more to say, but seeing as Lord Ganondorf had not given him permission to speak he remained silent.

Finally, when Ganondorf decided that the mage had been kept waiting long enough to make his
displeasure known, he turned to his left – the opposite direction of Agahnim – and spoke to the
darkest corner of the room.

"You may show yourself, Sheikah."

At first there was no response, only the steady whistling of the roiling wind and Agahnim's confused
grunt. Then, after several long moments, the shadows swirled, shifting as a wraith detached itself
from the wall.

As the shadows withdrew, his form became more distinct. Blond hair poked beneath his wrappings
and curled around his face, revealing a solitary eye the color of fresh blood that shone with an inner
steel, belying his lithe form. His arms and fingers were wrapped in the same strips of linen as his
head, whether because of old wounds or merely for aesthetic purposes Ganondorf didn’t know. The
ancient symbol of the Sheikah was emblazoned upon his chest, as if in open defiance of all those that
had hunted their race to the brink of extinction.

When Sheik had reached a respectful distance from the throne he bowed, crossing his right arm
across his chest to touch his shoulder in salute. "My Lord is as observant as ever," he said with a hint
of amusement.

Ganondorf sneered contemptuously. "For someone who claims to be so versed in the arts of the
shadows, you do a poor job of hiding in my throne room," he said, and waved his arm towards the
windows. "Never forget, little Shiekah, that the burning sun of the desert casts the darkest shadows.
And I am intimately familiar with both."

Sheik nodded in acknowledgment. "My lord misunderstands my intentions. I was merely practicing
my arts, so that I might be a more useful weapon for you to wield. What better way to hone my craft
than against the strongest adversaries in the kingdom?"

Ganondorf snorted, amused but unaffected by the blatant pandering. "Perhaps."

"What is it you want, shadow rat?" Agahnim sneered, crossing his arms.

Sheik turned and considered the robed mage, who took a step back. His crimson eyes crinkled, an
obvious smirk hidden beneath his mask. "You're afraid of me."

"No, I simply don't trust you," Agahnim snarled vehemently. "There's a reason the Hylian King
exterminated your ilk."

Sheik chuckled sourly. "The Shadow Clan was wiped out years ago because that idiot of a King was
more interested in fabricating false evidence and digging up an ancient grudge rather than focusing
his attention on the invading Twili. Had he been a more competent ruler, the kingdom would not
have dissolved into civil war, and the Sheikah would still walk the streets of Kakariko." He shook
his head. "I may not hold any particular loyalty to Lord Ganondorf, but my people owe the royal
family a debt of blood that honor demands be repaid."

Ganondorf watched on, quietly amused as the two bickered, content to let them continue for at least a
little while longer.

"Psh, honor," Agahnim scoffed. "Your honor has not produced the Princess, nor was it able to save
your people. Your honor is apparently worth very little. I wonder if your misguided feelings for your
dead clan are so strong that it's lead you to turn traitor. Somehow the Princess has always managed to
stay one step ahead of us. Maybe you've secretly been collaborating all along with that other
Sheikhah, Impa."
Sheik took a step forward. "As long as we are agreed that the remaining Royal Family needs to be found and brought to justice, we are allies. As for Impa, we broke ties year ago when she made it explicitly clear that she would remain a lapdog to the King. I've not seen nor heard from her since."

"Then why haven't you found the Princess yet?" Agahnim asked.

Sheik's eyes hardened, and he looked to Ganondorf. "If my liege would be more lenient and allow me to focus my attention solely to the task of finding the Princess instead of sending me on simple milk runs that a handful of bokoblins could perform, I might have delivered her to you years ago."

Ganondorf was silent for several long moments, his eyes locked on that of the young man in front of him. The seconds ticked by, until finally he said, "You forget yourself, Shiekah."

Sheik blinked, then bowed, though not so low as to show true respect. "My Lord."

"And pray tell, were you successful in your 'milk run'?" Ganondorf asked. "Or have you failed me in that as well?"

Sheik reached into the satchel at his hip, withdrawing an jade-hued amulet. The core of the gem flickered with an inner magical light as he passed it to Ganondorf's outstretched hand.

"Wonderful," Ganondorf said, admiring the jewel. "It would seem that my trust in you is not misplaced after all."

Agahnim frowned at the jewel, looking distrustfully between it and the Sheikah. "If I may ask, my Lord; what is that?"

"The answer to at least one of your many problems," he said, tossing the amulet carelessly to Agahnim. The mage caught the emerald jewel, nearly fumbling it, and inspected it curiously.

Ganondorf turned back to Sheik. "You brought me something useful, for once," he said, then waved his hand dismissively. "Leave us. Continue your hunt for the Princess."

Sheik bowed, once again crossing his arm across his chest in salute, then backed away into the darkest corner of the throne room. In a swirl of shadows, his form quickly became indistinct, and he was gone.

Ganondorf stared into the darkness for several moments before turning to Agahnim. "There's something you're not telling me."

Agahnim cleared his throat. "We have reports that Impa has been sighted outside of Kakariko," he said, adding hastily, "There has been no word on the Princess, however."

"The Princess' handmaiden, alone? So close?" Ganondorf asked in interest, leaning forward. Finally, some news worthy of his attention. "How accurate are these reports?"

"Quite accurate, Sire. As per your orders, our spies are maintaining a safe distance so as not to spook them into fleeing once more. I will have a more detailed report for you before the morrow."

Ganondorf rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm, and it's no coincidence that you waited for the Sheikah to leave to tell me this."

Agahnim opened his mouth to speak, but Ganondorf slammed his fist onto the armrest, silencing him. "Ambition is commendable, Agahnim, but not at the expense of my plans," he said venomously, and pointed a finger at the mage's chest. "Am I making myself perfectly clear?"
Agahnim clutched at the amulet. "Sire, I just feel that you put too much trust in the Sheikah."

"I trust him to do what is in his best interest. Past that line, my trust ends," Ganondorf said pointedly. "The same as with you."

The message was clear. Sheik was a useful tool, but he was expendable, just the same as Agahnim if he did not produce adequate results, and soon.

"My Lord," Agahnim said, bowing his head submissively.

Ganondorf leaned forward and considered the map on the floor. He had spent many candlemarks poring over the information laid out before him, trying to deduce where the Princess Zelda might be hiding. He knew she was still within the borders of Hyrule. The Princess would not leave her kingdom, not while she still felt she had a chance to reclaim the throne.

As his eyes swept over the map, a new thought struck him. "I believe I have a solution to your remaining quandaries."

"Sire?" Agahnim said, raising his head.

"It would seem to me that the last major obstacle you are facing is that you have not been able to perform reliable tests to see if the golem will be able to operate on their own," he said, and gestured towards the center of the large map laid out before him, indicating a tiny fort on a hill surrounded by a massive open field. "I am looking to give you such an opportunity."

Agahnim was quiet as he worked his King's meaning out for himself, and scowled as he drew the only logical conclusion. "I don't see why you waste your time dealing with that sniveling shrew. Why not just kill them and take the land for yourself? Surely one of your lieutenants would be much more efficient if you were to take direct control."

"As the Sheikah said earlier, Agahnim; Old debts are meant to be repaid," Ganondorf said, then flicked his wrist as if swatting an annoying fly. "Go. Give the warlocks the amulet. Tell them to drop everything and focus on replicating it. That should take care of any obedience issues they might be running into. I must think more on this."

Agahnim bowed low, then turned and shuffled out of the doorway behind the throne.

Ganondorf remained seated, contemplating the kingdom laid bare at his feet. He flexed his iron gauntlets eagerly in anticipation. He had waited seven long years for his adversaries to make a mistake, and it looked as if his time had finally come. If he could capture the Princess' handmaiden, she would make the perfect bait. Zelda would come for Impa, and the Hero would come for the Princess.

Soon. Soon he would have the Princess of Destiny in his grasp, and then the remaining pieces of the Triforce would be his.

Very soon.
Mending the Cracks

Some days, Link felt that he was ready for anything the world could throw at him. It was as if the moment he rolled out of bed, everything just went right. A good breakfast, a quick romp through an abandoned mine or frozen cave, and back to a local inn for a hearty dinner and a soft bed. Some days it seemed as if his shield blocked every incoming blow and his sword always struck true.

Today was not one of those days.

"Gaaah!"

Link cried out as the heavy hammer he was wielding connected solidly with his thumb.

"Nice one," Navi observed from her familiar orbit overhead, stifling her laughter as Link dropped the hammer and clutched his injured thumb tenderly, moaning in pain while he jumped up and danced in circles. He proceeded to use every curse that he had ever learned, even a few of the more colorful ones that he had picked up from Darunia.

_Damnit damnit damnit…_

In a pique of rage he grabbed the offending tool and chucked it with all of his might over the edge of the windmill. It sailed at an angle clear across the expansive compound, tumbling nearly all the way to the third windmill at the southwest corner of the ranch before clattering against the far wall and into the grass. Several of the goats that were grazing in the outer pasture of the field scattered in fright.

Navi watched dispassionately as the tool arced through the air. "I'm not retrieving that for you," She said as she watched the bleating goats, then turned and regarded him quizzically. "You seem distracted. Something on your mind?"

Link sucked at the bleeding gash on his throbbing thumb, using the moment it bought him to collect his thoughts. He had avoided mentioning his troubles to Navi when she had returned the night before, instead discussing with her what little she had managed to learn about Sheik's whereabouts. It was by chance that one of the local faeries had spotted the Sheikah sneaking across the border of Holodrum several weeks back. What he was traveling there for, Link could only begin to guess.

So he had resigned himself to waiting on the Sheikah's return for the next step in his quest and decided to instead focus his complete attention on helping out here on the ranch. Now that his primary objective was truly on hold, his mind was free to puzzle out the rest of his chaotic life, and he knew exactly what was distracting him.

… Malon …

He worried about her. He hadn't known what to expect when he first met her again. So much had changed over the past seven years that sometimes he didn't even recognize what parts of the kingdom had become in his absence. He was prepared for her to be older of course, more mature, but she wasn't the same person he had known as a child. Not quite. He could see the scars hiding just beneath the cheerful mask that she presented to the world, the cracks in her armor.

He had seen it in others that he had known before he was locked away; that tired, bone-deep weariness brought on by seven years of constant war and oppression that caused their shoulders to slouch and their brightest smiles to wilt. But he hadn't wanted to believe that it could happen to his closest friends as well. Not her, not Malon.
The old Malon was still in there, somewhere. He could see it in her when she visited her favorite customers, or when she sung to her horses, the way her ordinarily forced smile would finally reach her eyes. For the most part though, when she was in public she always held perfect control over her outward emotions, never letting on that her upbeat attitude was a fragile facade that could come crashing down at any moment. Even in private, here around the ranch, she rarely allowed her true feelings to be known when he or Ingo were nearby. There was a weariness about her that hadn't been there seven years before. Sometimes when she thought she was alone her eyes took on such a lost look, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out how to restore her to her childhood innocence, to take away nearly a decade of accumulated pain.

He shook his injured hand absently and responded to his friend's inquiry, "I don't have all of the answers, Navi."

Navi blinked and considered the abrupt seriousness of his response. "You're just now realizing that?" she asked softly, flitting up to sit on his shoulder. "No one's perfect, Link. If we were, we wouldn't be fighting this war."

"I should be," he said, raising his left hand. The golden outline of the Triforce of Courage burned faintly under the noon-day sun. "I'm the great Hero, aren't I? I'm supposed to be able to fix all of this. But I can't even figure out how to help one person. What chance does the kingdom stand?"

"The Goddesses have a plan, even if we can't always tell what it is."

Link groaned as he leaned on the low wall, staring off into the middle distance across the compound. The windmills on the outer walls spun in great lazy circles as the wind swept across the plains. "Well, I wish They'd give me a clue every once in a while. I'm starting to get tired of guessing constantly."

"We're only mortal, Link. Even us faeries," Navi said with a shrug. "We all just have to muddle through as best as we can with the short life we're given."

Link smiled faintly. "Heh, speak for yourself. I plan to live forever."

After a long moment, Navi patted his shoulder. "Well, you might as well take a break. You've been driving yourself pretty hard today. Maybe a walk and some water will clear your head."

Link grunted, turning and leaning back against the wall with his elbows propped on the railing, evidently in no hurry as his thoughts swirled in his head. He tilted his head back, closing his eyes against the sun, and willed the tension from his body.

He was still leaning against the wall several moments later when the wooden ladder leading down below began to vibrate with rhythmic footsteps.

Navi flitted upwards, alarmed. "Uh-oh, time to go," she said, and zipped out of view over the edge of the palisade.

The two of them had agreed that suddenly acquiring a faerie might be fairly noticeable, and he didn't want that kind of attention from Ingo, much less Malon. Just because they didn't seem to recognize him from seven years ago didn't mean that they had forgotten about him completely, and something as obvious as a faerie flying around would be sure to spark a memory. Best to continue the facade, at least for a little while longer.

A small wicker basket appeared first, propped on the ledge and pushed forward before Malon pulled herself up the ladder.
"Morning," he said in simple greeting as she appeared.

"Actually, I think it's past noon already," Malon replied, picking up the basket and wiping the dust off her skirt. She glanced around as if looking for someone. "Were you up here talking to yourself?"

Link grinned. "Would you believe me if I said I was talking to the bugs?"

She regarded him with a wry half-smile, then shook her head. "You're a strange one, Link."

"No argument here," he said, eyeing her speculatively. His interest was piqued by her sudden appearance. At this time of day she would normally be tending to the horses. "What's in the basket?"

Malon paused and glanced down at the wicker basket in her hands as if unsure of herself, then held it out for his inspection. "I … I thought we'd eat lunch together. It's just, you've been working so hard ever since you got here and … last night, with the story you told me, it … it made me realize that we've never really gotten a chance to just talk … and …"

The blush on her face continued to deepen as she spoke. He listened politely as she floundered, searching for words. However, his quiet staring only seemed to unnerve her, as she quickly swung the basket around, preparing to beat a hasty retreat. Her words came in a rush, "But I can see that you must be too busy at the moment, so I'll just leave this here…"

She felt his gloved hand wrap around her arm, gently pulling her back. "Hey, when did I ever say I was too busy to talk with you?"

She turned around, feeling both chastised and relieved.

He lifted the lid, inspecting the contents, and peeked under the sliced loaves of fresh bread. He was pleasantly surprised to find thick slices of cucco breast, crisp lettuce, and fragrant goat cheese artfully arranged and drizzled with a local spicy mustard. Two small bottles of chilled milk were tucked in the corner.

"Wow, you really went all-out, didn't you?" He said appreciatively.

Her blush deepened. "It's only sandwiches," She said.

He gestured for her to step away from the ladder and they sat along the outer wall, facing outwards towards the massive expanse of Hyrule Field. Malon set the basket down and began unloading its contents, offering one of the bottles of milk to Link and placing a plate full of sandwiches between them.

They ate their lunches, enjoying the cool breeze and the soaring vista before them as they chatted amicably. They talked of inconsequential things, mostly about Link's steadily growing worklist and how he liked it here on the ranch or about Malon's busy schedule over the next week, until nearly all of the sandwiches were gone.

Licking a stray bit of mustard from her thumb, Malon turned to Link and asked the question that had been burning in the back of her mind all day. "Link, did you happen to hear anything last night? Say, around midnight?"

The young ranchhand seemed to think this over for a few moments before shaking his head. "Nope, slept like a log. Why?"

She thought for a moment about explaining her theory of musical ghosts, but decided against it. "No
reason."

Link shrugged, then yawned, stretching his arms out way over his head. "A good meal and a warm day. Perfect time for a nap." He flopped down onto his back, letting his eyes fall closed. He stretched again before crossing his arms under his head in a makeshift pillow.

Malon smiled, lying back and turning so that her head landed comfortably in the crook of his outstretched elbow. "You know, I think you just read my mind."

"Hmm. I can read palms too." He said, blowing a few of her stray auburn locks out of his face.

Malon giggled. "You cannot."

"It's true, I picked it up from an old fortune teller out near Lake Hylia. Said I was a real natural."

Malon shot up, turning to face him and holding out her hands excitedly. "Try me."

"All right," Link sat up and crossed his legs, and took her hands in his, inspecting them with the diligence that a master shieldsmith might inspect his latest work for blemishes or cracks. He turned them over once, inspecting the smooth backs of her hands and running the pads of his thumbs over her knuckles before flipping them over once more. His fingers sketched the lines and creases of her hands, tracing out strange archaic symbols where none could be seen.

She felt a small thrill go up her spine as one of his fingers rubbed against the tender skin of her wrist. Her pulse was quickening. It was a strange kind of magic that he was performing, one that captivated her attention completely. She couldn't tear her eyes away from his fingers as they worked their way along her hands, never missing a single spot. As his fingers ran along the lines of her palms, she had to force herself to keep them open when he occasionally passed over a ticklish spot.

Link hummed as he worked. "A good future is in store for you. Long life, good health … a troubled past, but nothing too much out of the ordinary," he paused, then leaned forward and said, "Oh, now this is interesting..."

Malon's eyes flicked up in interest, and she regained enough of her senses to remember what they were doing in the first place. "Well, what do you see?"

"I see..." Link paused, gathering his thoughts. He looked up from his work and gazed at her very seriously. "That you work very hard."

Malon rolled her eyes at him. "Well, gee, I do live on a ranch. How'd you guess?"

Link pointed at a spot on her hand gravely, beckoning her to have a closer look. "You see right here, where your lifeline and your fateline nearly merge?"

"Yeah?" She leaned in closer to inspect the spot he was indicating, seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

"You have calluses." His lips curled in a shadow of a smile as he glanced up and looked at her through his bangs. "You have calluses."

She tore her hands from his grasp and gave him a semi-playful swat on the arm, mouth opened in a perfect 'O' of astonishment. "How could you be so cruel, Link?"

"Cruel? How am I cruel?" He exclaimed. "I didn't even charge you for the fortune."
"How could you say something so cruel about a young lady like me?" She pouted. "Imagine, calluses! On these perfect, delicate hands! I'll have you know that my hands are the envy of Queens!" She spread her hands wide before her for his inspection.

Link leapt to his feet, eager to continue the game. He bowed low with a flourish and adopted a posh Noble accent. "You must forgive me for my impertinence, my Lady, for I was so blinded by your flawless, exquisite beauty that my mouth charged off before my brain could catch up." He looked up, still stooped in a bow, and offered his left hand, his right tucked into the small of his back. "If you'll permit me, your Grace, I would be most honored if you would accompany me to the royal ball this eventide."

Malon found her hands in his as he pulled her to her feet and swept her around, arms tightly wrapped around her waist. "A ball? I've never been to a ball before," She said in wonder.

"All the more reason for you to come with me." He declared, holding her hand over their heads and sending her into a pirouette.

Malon laughed as she spun. "But good Sir Link, I own nothing but the simplest of dresses, much less a gown! Whatever would I wear?"

He stopped her midspin and held her gently, leaning forward as he tipped her back, his arm around her waist to keep her from falling. Her hair fell in fiery cascades, brushing the wooden deck. "I don't think it really matters, does it?" He said softly, "You always look great in everything you wear."

The smile fled Malon's face as her eyes went wide, a crimson blush flooding her cheeks and her pulse pounding in her ears as time seemed to slow to a crawl. For an instant panic seized her heart, and she flailed, causing her feet to slip out from underneath her. Link tried to pull her upright, caught off-guard by her sudden reaction, but quickly found that he was supporting both of their weight and began to fall. He spun as they tumbled to the wooden deck, barely managing to avoid crushing Malon beneath him.

Her breath came in shallow gasps. She tried to calm herself, tried to concentrate on the world around her. Her hands, shaking now, lying splayed on his abdomen. His body beneath hers. Warm, strong, supple. His face inches from hers, his watchful eyes a heartbeat away if she only had the courage to look up. She found that she couldn't.

Neither seemed to be able to find words, nor the desire to speak them. Malons eyes swept downwards, retreating from his cautious gaze, past his pursed lips, across the gentle cleft of his chin before finally coming to rest on the sweat slicked flesh over the rapid fluttering of his heartbeat.

A part of her was terrified. She was able to recognize the irrationality of what she felt, but could do no more against it than a sandcastle against the tide. Flashes of that day when they had first met ran through her mind. The stench of unwashed bodies, the clawing desperation of those that sought to hurt her, or worse. The fear she had felt when she knew in her heart that she would soon die.

Another part of her, a dark, animalistic side of her, thought something else entirely. Again it drew her back to that same day they had first met, when she had woken up to find a handsome stranger watching over her, the dark shadows crossing his blue eyes, the winsome smile. She wet her lips nervously as she focused intently on his beating pulse.

She wondered what he tasted like.

Link shifted, his leg coming up between hers, ruffling her skirt. He felt her breath catch, so he froze. Her hands – formerly content to stay on his stomach – began their slow, inexorable crawl upwards
across his chest. Her lips, in contrast, worked to form the words, but found that all faculties of speech had fled her. She chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip.

His leg rose higher, and he was rewarded with a tentative returning push against him and a low hum of … pleasure? He felt her burning warmth against his thigh, saw the need in the supple curves of her body as she arched against him, felt the flame of desire in her gaze.

"Malon…"

And the spell was broken. In an instant she had pushed off of him and shot to her feet, retreating as far as she could to the edge of the railing, her eyes avoiding his. Link slowly stood as well, dusting off his clothes nervously before looking at her.

He struggled to find the words, "Yes, ahh … Thank you … for lunch."

She nodded mutely, her gaze only flicking towards him for a brief moment before she turned and fled back down the ladder.

Link sighed, leaning up against the palisade wall and sliding down to the floor. He sat like that for several long minutes as the adrenaline drained from his body.

He rubbed his forehead, then snorted and shook his head. "Great job, Link. Re-eal smooth…"

"Awww, that was sooo cute..." Navi cooed as she fluttered down from her high orbit. "Too bad you had to go and ruin the mood. Nice going, lover-boy."

Link glared daggers at her as his cheeks burned. "Sh-shut up, Navi."

Navi continued her merciless teasing, "Hey, I don't blame ya. She's grown up to be a real looker," She said, then paused in flight as the contents of Malon's abandoned basket came into view and gasped in surprise. "Oh, is that really cucco?"

"What? Where?" Link tensed, then sighed in relief as Navi dived into the basket with a squeal of delight. She flew out with the last of the sandwiches hanging from her diminutive hands. Her tiny wings were working overtime just to keep her afloat.

Link watched as she struggled with the heavy load, bemused. "Careful now, don't eat it all at once," he cautioned.

"My sammich," Navi purred happily, and flew off to devour her feast in private.
Falling For You

Malon had been in a sullen mood for several days, ever since they had made a delivery of several horses and nearly their entire heard of goats to one of Ganondorf's lieutenants. She had fought Ingo to keep them for as long as she could, even going so far as to attempt to convince him that there was a hoof disease spreading through the livestock, but eventually he put his foot down and decided that enough was enough; they were to be delivered in whatever condition they were in, and damn the consequences.

She was sad to see her horses go. The money was no consolation. It was barely more than what it had cost to raise the animals in the first place. Breaking even might work well for a convent, but stagnation for a ranch meant certain death. Replacements for broken bottles, medicine for sick animals, a new axle for the wagon, and of course Link's ever expanding list of maintenance and repair work … these things did not come cheaply. They were a part of the necessary operating budget that a successful ranch would have to balance, or there would soon come to be no ranch at all. Many people thought that a successful business would enable them to live a comfortable, even luxurious life, but more often than not they were just barely scraping by trying to make ends meet.

Malon was busy running their latest expenses through her head as she made breakfast, desperately trying to come up with a way that they could further trim their budget. Anemic as it was, there wasn't much she could find that they could cut and still remain afloat.

She looked down at the sizzling pan that held the last of their eggs and briefly considered selling off the cuccos, but quickly dismissed that notion. Not only would the newly repaired nest be a waste of resources, their eggs and the occasional rooster were one of the few regular sources of energy rich food in their diets. After her father had shut down windmill #3 – which had operated as their private slaughterhouse for years – and sold off the hogs, meat of any kind had become a scarce commodity around the ranch. Running a ranch was hard work, and they needed all of the energy they could get. Stale bread would only be able to carry them so far.

Her hair fell across her face as she flipped the eggs, and a thought struck her. She grabbed a stray lock and sniffed. Still fairly clean...ish. Maybe she could cut back a few baths a month, save on soap. It wouldn't add up to much, but any sliver of black in their budget would help...

Link and Ingo sat at the table, sipping their coffee and waiting patiently as Malon worked diligently over the skillet. Ingo had decided to join them for breakfast, and as usual he was making a nuisance of himself. He sharply nudged Link with his elbow, causing the farmhand to nearly spill his coffee as he brought it to his lips.

"Ah, the proper place for a woman; feet planted firmly in front of the stove. Am I right?" Ingo said, making sure he was loud enough for Malon to hear. He had been in a foul mood lately as well, though where Malon was subdued, Ingo was feeling unusually antagonistic.

Link merely sipped at his watery coffee and pretended that he hadn't heard. It seemed to be the best way to deal with Ingo when he was in one of his moods; ignore him and eventually he'd find something else worthy of his attention.

Malon finished dividing up the eggs, turning with both plates in hand, and dropped Ingo's plate none-too-gently in front of him with an irritated glare that completely escaped his notice. She set Link's down softer, then went to retrieve her own breakfast.

Ingo dug into his breakfast voraciously, as if the cuccos whose eggs he was inhaling had personally
wronged him in some manner. Link ate at a more leisurely pace, waiting politely for Malon to join them.

Breakfast that morning was a subdued affair. Ingo seemed disinclined to mouth off while there was food in front of him, while Malon nibbled half-heartedly on a piece of plain toasted bread. Her eyes flickered back and forth in thought as she chewed, as if she were reading from a ledger that only she could see.

"Is that all you're having?" Link asked.

"All we can afford right now," Malon replied distractedly, never looking in his direction.

Link felt guilt settle into his stomach, looking down at his own plate. Why was Malon not splitting the food evenly if they had so little to go around?

Ingo snapped his fingers and turned to Link. "That reminds me. You, farmhand. I want you to make today's milk run into Kakariko. I've got a list of supplies I want you to pick up too, since apparently I can't trust the woman with the wagon." He threw a nasty glare in Malon's direction.

Malon set down her toast. "Ingo, I don't think we can afford any more supplies this week," she said, massaging her temple. "We already owe the Smith family for that new axle."

"Yes, yes, the axle that you broke," Ingo said quietly, then suddenly slammed his hands down on the table, jarring their plates. Link and Malon both jumped at the sudden outburst. "Who's the one running this ranch, wench?" Ingo spat, jabbing a finger at her face. "I know our accounts better than anyone in this room. If it wasn't for your lazy, good for nothing father we wouldn't even be in this hole that we've found ourselves in in the first place!"

The sudden stillness in the room was oppressive. Link sat as quietly as he could, his eyes darting back and forth between the two of them in surprise as the electric tension began to build. 

"Uh oh, this can't end well..."

Malon rose, pushing her chair back and planting both hands on the table. "Don't talk about my father that way," She said venomously through gritted teeth.

Ingo, having finally found a sore point to needle, seemed to take this as a challenge. "Or what?" He sneered. "We both know that it was your useless father that nearly drove this ranch into the ground, and if it weren't for me, this entire place would have gone under years ago."

"My father built this place up with his bare hands!"

"Your father built this place on the backs of others. If it weren't for me and the other workers, this ranch wouldn't even exist," Ingo countered, waving a hand in disgust. "I'm just the only one he couldn't drive off."

Malon bit back a retort, her hands clenched at her sides and teeth bared in a snarl. Eventually, finally, she regained her composure enough to slam her chair beneath the table. "I'm going to go get the wagon ready," She bit out as she stormed out of the room.

The front door slammed shut hard enough to rattle the windows. "Stupid bitch," Ingo said as he turned, then performed a double-take as he finally remembered Link had been in the room the whole time. "What the hell are you doing sitting around when there's work to be done? Get to it!"

Link cleared his throat. "I'd, ah … like it if Malon could accompany me into town," He said mildly.
Ingo gave Link a suspicious glare. "The wench needs to stay here and learn her place. She can't do that gallivanting around all of Hyrule with the likes of you, especially with all of the work that needs to get done." He waved a dismissive hand. "Besides, if she went with you, who knows what dark alley she might wind up in?"

"I assure you that I would protect Malon with my life."

"I didn't mean that she's be in danger. I meant that she's a whore. A lying, filthy whore," Ingo said with a nasty smile. "You should see the way the town guards lust after her every time she flaunts her way through the market, and the way she flirts with them when she should be working." He scowled as a new thought struck him, and he stabbed an accusing finger at Link. "And don't you go and be getting any ideas about her either, ya hear me? Bad enough to have one addle-brained good-for-nothing slut around here. Last thing we need is two of them."

Link took a calming breath, then continued. "Be that as it may ... I've only ever been to Kakariko once before. I would really like Malon's help in getting to know the town better. At least until I get a better handle on things. I mean, let's be honest here, every one of those merchants is out to rob you blind, but Malon knows them all already. She could point out which ones are worth dealing with, and which ones are just trying to take us for a ride."

Ingo grunted unhappily. "Hmph. You make a decent enough point, I suppose," He said, staring off into the middle-distance. "I knew this felt like a milking day. Just knew it." He finished off his coffee, slamming the mug onto the table irritably.

"It will only be until I can get acquainted enough with the surrounding towns, and as you've seen, I'm a quick learner," Link said.

Ingo grunted. "Fine, fine. Just keep her in your sights, will you? If she sneaks off and gets knocked up, I'm placing sole responsibility on you."

Link gave him his best mock salute. "You're the boss, boss."

Ingo eyed him for a moment as if deciding whether or not to be insulted, then just shook his head in irritation and stalked towards the front door. "Just hurry up and get gone. You're wasting daylight."

Link waited a beat to make sure the man was gone before unclenching his fists. For a brief moment he had wished that his personal sense of honor wasn't so finely ingrained. A few choice tortures for that slimeball had flashed through his mind, and he found to his disgust that the thought of performing them wasn't as ghastly as they should have been.

His temper momentarily tamed, he stood and cleaned the remaining dishes on the table before heading out to find Malon.

Link made a quick detour to the loft, slipping into his chainmail and retrieving his sword and shield before heading down to the wagon. The milk crates had been loaded before breakfast, and Malon was just finishing hitching Epona when he arrived. He climbed onto the bench, setting his gear in the gap behind him.

"Here, have fun," Malon said tersely, tossing him the reins. "List's in the first box behind you. Try to get the best deals you can, and don't forget anything or you'll never hear the end of it."

"Why don't you jump on?" He said, giving the bench beside him a pat. "There's plenty of room for two."
Malon turned, hands on her hips, and gave him an incredulous look as if to say, 'Are you a complete idiot?'

Link countered with his best 'lost puppy' eyes. "Ple-ease?"

"If you honestly think Ingo would let me out of shouting range for more than five minutes, you've been spending too much time with the cuccos."

"I've already talked Ingo into letting you come along," He said simply. "As my guide."

Malon blinked, but she still wasn't buying it. "How in the world did you manage that?" She asked.

"I told him that I don't know Kakariko as well as you do, so I'll need someone to show me around in case the merchants rob me blind, at least until I learn how to do this on my own," He shrugged. "In return, he basically made me promise not to let you out of my sight."

Malon eyed him speculatively, the first hint of a smile curling her lips. "You lied to him."

"Well … yeah." Link said, as if there had ever been any question.

Her eyes darted towards the house. "And you're not just leading me on?"

"Do you think I'm the kind of person to do that?"

Malon shook her head, bemused. "Heh. All right, then," She said, holding out her hand. Link pulled her up, and she smoothed out her skirt as she settled onto the seat next to him.

With a flick of the reins, they were off.

They drove hard, taking less than five candlemarks total to reach the village and, between the two of them, deliver all of the milk. Many of the customers were wary of Link at first, but they quickly warmed up to him when Malon introduced him as the new farmhand.

Ahead of schedule and with their coffers temporarily flush with newly earned profits, Link decided that a quick stop by one of the local taverns was in order before they finished their errands. He steered Epona left at the main thoroughfare instead of right, heading towards the gate that would eventually lead them up the path towards Death Mountain. It was in the shadier part of town, but Link was friends with Baru, the owner. He was the kind of man who didn't take kindly to thugs making trouble in his tavern, and as such it was always a quiet place to trade stories and find out the latest gossip. Plus, his wife cooked some of the best fare in town.

Malon's eyes grew wide as she realized which part of town they had entered. She normally refused to sell her wares door to door here, instead preferring to let the market merchants buy in lots and resell to the … less reputable denizens of the town that might have a craving for fresh dairy products. She glanced at Link askance, but said nothing.

"Thought we could take a quick break before we head to the market," He explained. "I haven't been here in a while, so I wanted to check in and see if anyone had heard anything about my Sheikah friend."

Malon nodded. It seemed like a reasonable request.

When they arrived at the Nag's Head Inn, they dismounted and handed Epona off to a young, sleepy looking stable-girl, who perked up immensely when Link slipped her an extra ten rupee tip. She led
the wagon around back, promising to give Epona a good rubdown before they returned.

Malon was quiet as they entered the tavern, her pulse quickening and eyes wide and darting as she took in such unfamiliar surroundings. The man behind the bar was the first thing that drew her attention. His bald head nearly scraped the short ceiling above the bar, and Malon guessed he must have been nearly seven feet tall. He nodded at Link as they entered, obviously familiar with the farmhand, before turning back to the customer he had been conversing with. Dozens of people crowded the floor, seated at tables and stools along the bar, many drinking from large flagons even though it was barely after noon. The low, buzzing din of a dozen conversations dampened the steady clinking of glasses, and the thin haze of smoke hovering overhead created the illusion of stormclouds indoors.

Link nodded towards an empty table near the back of the room. "Go take a seat and rest for a bit while I grab some food," he said, then turned and disappeared into the crowded tavern, heading in the direction of the bar. Malon slowly made her way through the crowd, anxiety pulling at her feet as she made her way to the small, two-person table and sat. She fidgeted as she settled into her seat, uncomfortably aware of the many interested pairs of eyes that had settled on her as soon as she was alone. No one made a move to join her, however, and she did her best to blend into the background. She picked at the splintered table top with nervous energy, absently tracing out the random assortment of names and vulgarities carved into the ancient oak by similarly bored patrons as her eyes darted across the tavern.

As she scanned the room, an older man glanced at her, his silver-laced mustache and woolen cap giving him a distinguished appearance. For a brief instant their eyes met, and he nodded respectfully before turning back to his conversation. For some reason this eased the tension in her shoulders, if only a little. These people … they had lives of their own to lead. She knew that Ingo liked to frequent these sorts of places, but she supposed that not everyone that did should be like him. She should have realized that they weren't all womanizing drunkards. After all, it was apparent that Link came here often enough for the owner to recognize him, and he was one of the kindest, most selfless people she had ever met.

She was lucky to have met him. She hated to admit it, even if only to herself, but she had been in a depressive spiral before he had come along. The stress of day to day life had been eating away at her for a long time now, and while he hadn't alleviated the problem, he had managed to bolster her resolve, to buoy her courage like an island in a stormy sea.

As for him …

She hadn't exactly come out and asked him directly what he thought of her, but she thought that he seemed to enjoy her company. He always seemed to have a ready smile and a clever quip whenever she was around, and was always willing to help with the work around the ranch without complaint.

Her eyes lost focus as her thoughts drew her inward. That night where she had been training Arion, and he had appeared out of nowhere … She knew that she enjoyed his friendship, but had there been something more? She ran the night over and over again in her head, trying to remember just what exactly had happened. It seemed like such a blur now, less than a week later. She had been so lost in his story, and it had felt so right to lean up against him as she listened. The solidness of his frame, and the perfect feeling of his arm wrapping around her waist …

It felt stable, secure … Safe.

And the other day, when she had brought him lunch up on the north windmill. She had known that he was attractive before, but she had never let it distract her until that moment that she was lying on top of him, her body pressed up against his, his lips mere inches from hers...
Her cheeks grew warm, and her hands clenched in her lap. She shook her head and mentally chided herself, flustered at her own thoughts. Here she was, a grown woman of almost 17 winters, and she was acting like a child with her first crush, unable to even think of him lucidly without blushing, about the curve of his lips, his arms wrapped firmly around her waist, his...

_Damnit._

Apparently she couldn't be trusted alone with her own thoughts. She was just about to stand and look for Link when he materialized out of the crowd bearing a tray laden with two large, steaming bowls and a loaf of bread. He gingerly balanced the tray, placing one of the bowls in front of her before taking his own seat. She inspected the contents carefully, but tried not to appear too interested. Some sort of potato and onion soup in a thick, creamy broth. Her stomach rumbled in appreciation.

"You look like you could use a bite to eat," Link said, splitting the loaf of bread and placing the larger half in front of her.

Malon eyed the steaming bowl hungrily, saliva flooding her mouth, but she forced herself to look away. "I had some breakfast this morning."

Link gave her his most level gaze. "You had toast. Correction; you had half a slice of toast."

"It's more than I usually have in the mornings. I'll be fine," Malon said, suddenly feeling defensive. Link shook his head. "You can't live on a piece of toast for breakfast," He pressed. "You work on a ranch, so you should know what a poor diet does to a person. There were times where I've had to go up to a week without a scrap of real food, and believe me when I say I crashed, bad." He nudged the bowl of soup in front of her. "Now eat. It's my treat."

Malon pulled the bowl closer, inhaling the delicious aroma. She hesitated at first, trying to maintain a sense of dignity, but it didn't take long before she had cupped the bowl in her palms and brought it to her lips.

"Hungry?" Link asked with a barely suppressed smile.

"Ravenous."

He set a pair of utensils on the table in front of her, flicking his finger against them. "I know you civilized folks have your own ways of eating, but where I come from we use spoons for our soup."

"You barbarians," Malon smirked, pointedly ignoring the utensils as she took her loaf of bread and stirred it in the soup before taking a bite. "Tha's what the bread ith for."

"We also don't try to talk with our mouths full." He said, dipping his spoon into the soup.

Malon swallowed and rolled her eyes theatrically. "Savages! It's a wonder you people even learned how to speak our language."

"We've managed, somehow," Link said, giving her one of his crooked grins.

Malon giggled, feeling refreshed and energized. Not just from the soup, which was delicious, but from the conversation as they ate as well. It had been ages since she had had anyone her own age to talk to (not counting her earlier aborted attempts with Link at the ranch), but to be able to just sit and relax, being comfortable enough to make jokes at each other's expense ... It wasn't like her. She hadn't been this comfortable around anyone except for her father for a long, long time. Not since...
A flicker of memory tugged at her attention, causing her to frown. "Are you sure that we've never met before?"

Link had brought his bowl to his mouth, draining the last of the soup. He coughed, and lowered the bowl, eyeing her curiously. "Wha— ah, what makes you think that we have?"

She shook her head as she stirred the remains of her soup with her bread. "It's … just a feeling I have. I swear, you just seem so familiar, it's like…" She struggled to come up with the proper comparison. "It's like a favorite smell that you never forget. Like a field full of lilacs, or your mother's favorite perfume, or…" She drifted off with her chin cupped in her palm, lost in her own thoughts.

Link was quiet for several moments before giving her a needling grin. "Are you saying I smell?"

Malon laughed, reaching across the table to playfully shove his arm. "No you dummy. Just … just forget it," She shook her head to dispel the daydream as she finished off her meal, setting the bowl aside. "So, no luck with finding your mysterious Sheikah friend?" She asked.

Link shook his head sadly. "No, no such luck. All everyone's talking about is this festival that's coming up. Past that the rumor mill starts running dry," He glanced up, and his head tilted. "Huh. You know, you've healed up nicely."

Malon blinked quizzically. "What do you mean?"

Link reached across the table, brushing the pads of his fingers beneath her bangs where the thin white line of a recent scar cut across her hairline. "Right … here," He said, not noticing when Malon tensed up, her eyes going wide at the sudden intimate contact. "You were bleeding pretty badly here when I first found you, but the scar's barely noticeable now."

His eyes flicked down, meeting hers, and he tensed, suddenly seeming to realize what he was doing. He withdrew his hand, glanced away.

She was surprised to discover, for some reason, that she felt a pang of … longing, when he pulled away. She studied his face for a moment, turned in profile as he gathered his thoughts. Was he embarrassed too? Why was that? Did he … could he possibly …

After a moment, seeing that she was finished with her meal, Link cleared his throat. "Let's go finish our errands," He said, standing.

Malon nodded, then smiled, relieved as the tension dissolved. "Let's."

"I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" Link asked, turning in his seat. "Thank me for what? The soup?"

They had nearly arrived back at the ranch. The sun was setting in the west, and their wagon was half-loaded with food and a smattering of other supplies on their return trip, both for the animals and the Hylian occupants of the ranch.

Malon continued, "For allowing me to get outside of the ranch for a day without worrying about meeting a deadline or hauling around cow dung." She leaned back and rested her elbows on the slatted bench behind her, looking skyward with a fond smile. "Don't get me wrong; I love the ranch, I really do. But sometimes I forget that there is actually a whole other world here outside of those walls. Sometimes it just feels as if that's my entire life … and I love it … but I like to step outside of it every now and then. To see what I'm missing," She turned to look at him. "Does that make sense?"
Link shrugged. "Everyone needs some rest from time to time. If you push yourself too hard for too long, you can completely burn yourself out. It's only natural to take a break every once in a while, no matter how much you love your job."

She hummed in agreement, throwing him a soft smile. "That was nice. You're a smart guy, Link."

"That's what they tell me," He replied casually, and they both laughed.

As soon as they entered the grounds of the ranch, Malon jumped off of the wagon, carrying the most perishable food items with her into the main house. Link drove the wagon around the side of the barn as usual, unhitched Epona, and brought her inside of the barn.

After he finished washing the mare and feeding the rest of the animals in the barn, he unloaded the hay bales left in the wagon, and grabbed the lone bag of bread flour that Malon had left behind. The door to the house was open a crack, and as he nudged it open his senses began to tingle with alarm. One of the kitchen chairs had been knocked over, and the bag of flour Malon had brought inside was lying on its side in the middle of the room. A seam had split, sending white powder spilling out across the floor.

"Malon?" He called out, setting the bag down near the doorway, but only silence answered him. "Ingo?" He tried, but received the same disturbing lack of a reply.

He took one step inside, but paused, his ears perking back in the direction he had come. The door had been ajar when he entered, as if someone hadn't had time to make sure it was closed properly when they left.

Dusk had fallen while he was busy in the barn. The call of night insects greeted him as he stepped outside, and … something else. Heated voices? He turned towards the horse paddock, noticing that fresh tracks had been dug into the gravel near the door, as if someone had been hauled bodily away.

He edged around the corner, just in time to see Ingo returning back to the house from the direction of the north windmill, his face purple and blotchy with rage. Link ducked back into the barn, giving Ingo a full hundred-count to make his way back into the house before he left through the back exit.

He carefully stepped from the shadows, his stomach sour with worry, keeping close to the wall.

The back storage shed was attached to the northern windmill, and its foundations ran deep. Though he had yet to have a reason to venture down into its basement, he knew from his time he had spent here as a child that it had originally served as a dungeon back when the ranch used to house a military garrison. Small vents ringed the walls at ground level, which would place them near the ceiling for the cellar below. Iron bars and a single heavy wooden door that could be locked from the outside disabused anyone of the notion of an easy escape.

As he cautiously approached, he saw that some changes had been made recently. The lock was old but not as ancient as the door itself, a heavy metal contraption that was nearly rusted through, yet still sturdy enough to resist anything short of a Goron warhammer. He wouldn't be getting through the door without making a mess and a lot of noise.

Stymied, Link walked around to the back of the shed, out of sight of the house. Dozens of old milk crates were stored here along the wall, blocking his path. He shifted the boxes slightly, moving them away from one of the barred vents, and called out, "Malon? Malon, are you down there?"

"Link!" Malon's face appeared out of the darkness, scuffed with mud. She stood on a wooden bench, but even with her height she couldn't see even with the ground level. Her hair was mussed and her normally bright eyes were dull and wide with panic.
"What happened?" He asked, lying down on the cool earth to be closer to her.

"Ingo happened," Malon exclaimed. "I don't know what I did to set him off, he just snapped. Said we should have been back ages ago, and it must have been my fault, and I should be taught a lesson and punished, and I was just a s-stupid whore, and..." She waved her hand as words failed her.

Link looked at her gravely. "He's getting worse, isn't he?"

Malon's gaze darted away. "It's nothing I can't handle."

He saw the first glimmer of tears in her eyes, and she jerked her face down, shame burning on her cheeks. "Damnit. I'm stronger than this," She whispered, wiping at her eyes. "I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm a grown woman. I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm... I'm not."

"Calm down Malon," Link said, reaching a gloved hand through the bars. "Here, take my hand."

Her hands reached up and clasped around his. They seemed so small wrapped around his padded glove. He ignored the flash of rage that flooded his veins when he saw the pale bruises blossoming on her arms. Instead he forced himself to focus on her frightened face.

"Now, I want you to close your eyes."

Her eyes widened with fear. "I— I can't..."

Link inched forward, until his face was pressing against the bars. He reached out and stroked her cheek with his free hand, wiping away some of the grime. "Malon, you're my friend, and I want you to trust me on this. Can you trust me?"

Tear splashed ocean blue met cool stormy grey. "I... I trust you."

Link gave her a comforting smile. "Just close your eyes, and listen closely to my voice."

She clenched her eyes tight.

"Now breathe in."

She did so, however hesitantly.

"Ok, I want you to listen to my voice. Don't think about anything else."

"All— All right." She breathed deeply again, making a visible effort to calm herself.

"Do you remember the story that I told you? About courage even in the darkest of times?" When Malon nodded, he continued. "I want you to pretend that it's Allaya that's holding your hand. Pretend that she's giving you the courage to stand strong."

Her hands tightened almost imperceptibly on his, and the first hints of a smile crossed her lips. "You wouldn't make a very good Goddess, Link."

Link chuckled at the joke. "No, but I'm willing to give it a shot. Now start at fifty, and count back with me. Can you do that for me?"

"I think so," She replied.

"Fifty. Forty-nine. Forty-eight..."
Malon continued the count, "Forty-seven. Forty… forty-six…"

Link nodded as she counted, "Good, you're doing good, keep going. Forty…"

She clenched his hand tighter. "Thirty-nine… Thirty-eight. Thirty-seven."

By the time she reached the end, her breathing had calmed and the tremor in her voice had disappeared completely.

"Are you feeling better yet?" Link asked, running a thumb along the back of her hand.

"A little…" She admitted, sniffing. Hesitantly, she reached up with her free hand and wiped at her tear-stained cheeks. "Ah, I must look like a total wreck."

Link smiled. "Nah, you … you look good. I heard that there's something about a damsel in distress that drives all of the guys wild."

Malon scoffed, blinking away the last remaining tears. "Great, that's all I am I guess. Just some useless damsel that needs rescuing."

He tsk'ed. "I didn't mean it like that."

She smiled half-heartedly. "I'm just teasing. I know you're just trying to help."

He was about to reply when he noticed her hands tremble, and he realized her fingers were freezing. The cellar was cold at night as the earth drained the day's heat away. The walls were incessantly damp, being so close to the spring that fed the ranch. The iron manacles that had dotted the walls had long ago rusted away, for which Link sent a silent thanks to Farore. He was already pushed to his limit as it was. He didn't think he'd be able to resist giving Ingo a solid thrashing had he chained Malon to the walls.

He began to push himself up off the ground. "I'm going to get you out."

Panic seized her, causing her grip on his hand to tighten. "No! No, I … if Ingo checks and sees me missing, it'll only get worse," She said, shaking her head. "As long as I sit this one out and let him blow off some steam, things will go back to normal."

Both of them heard the implied 'For a while.' Neither had to acknowledge it.

"So you're going to sit here all night?" Link asked.

"It's better this way. Trust me."

"You'll freeze."

"I'll be fine," Malon said stubbornly.

Link looked around, frustrated, his gaze finally settling on the crates around him. Malon made a pained noise when he pulled his hand away and the warmth fled her fingers.

Most of the crates stored here were old and rarely used. One of the smaller ones had nearly rotted through, so he began breaking it down quietly and efficiently into dozens of smaller planks, thin enough to pass through the bars into the cellar.

"Pile these up near the bench, as if you were going to make a fire out of them," He said, handing her the dry planks. "Make sure they're not close enough to burn you though."
Malon blinked, confused, but did as she was told. "What do you mean, fire? We don't have anything that could start a fire down here."

"I do," When he was satisfied that she had made a suitable pile, he nodded. "Stand back against the wall, I don't want to hit you," He said as he drew his shield and tapped the small icon of a bow and quiver at the top of the inlaid scroll.

Malon backed away, but peered out curiously as an ethereal blue glow lit his features from below, then faded. In the darkness she could make out a long, slender shape in his hands. What was he planning? It almost looked as if he were about to—

For a brief instant his gloved hand burned with an orange fire, illuminating the bow and nocked arrow he was aiming down into the cellar. He aimed carefully through the bars, and in a flash the orange glow leapt along his arm and through the bow, igniting the head of the arrow in a blaze of sparks. The arrow flashed through the space between them in an instant, setting the dry, rotten boards alight.

Link nodded, satisfied. "There. It's not much, but it should help."

Her distress momentarily forgotten, Malon turned with widened eyes, awe creeping into her voice. "By Nayru … How … did you do that?"

"A little something I picked up from a friend of mine," He said, and Malon thought she could detect a hint of pride in his voice. "It's really useful on cold nights."

She shook her head in wonder. "I've … heard of people that can use magic. But I had no idea …"

"I ... try not to let too many people know," Link said, shifting uncomfortably. "A lot of them start asking for favors, and I hate having to turn them down, especially when it turns out that I can't do nearly half the things they think I can."

Malon settled back onto the bench, keeping a comfortable distance from the flames. The warmth felt good on her chilled skin. "Thank you," She said. "For trusting me with your secret."

"And you're sure you don't want me to get you out?"

Malon smiled sadly, shaking her head. "No. It … It's best this way, I think."

Link shook his head. Stubborn woman. "Hmm. Can't be helped, then." He settled down with his back against the wall. "You don't mind if I play, do you?" He asked, reaching again for his shield and leaning the bow against the stone wall.

Malon blinked and looked upwards, puzzled. "Play?" She asked.

He withdrew his hand, showing her the small blue instrument that he had retrieved from the scroll, "My ocarina."

"You play an ocarina?" Malon gasped, her eyes sparkling. She sounded not unlike a child being promised a piece of candy.

"For as long as I can remember," He said, and played a few testing notes.

Malon's eyes widened at the familiar tones, that strange sense of familiarity washing over her once more. It was that same feeling again. There was something ... calming about it. Safe.
She settled down onto the bench and closed her eyes, listening in silence as he played a sprightly, upbeat tune that would normally have her up in dance. Her thoughts were of springtime, of swiftly flowing brooks and fields full of flowering blossoms, colorful and serene. Of better times, before Ganondorf's rise to power.

The longer he played, the stronger she felt. Eventually – all too soon – the song ended, but the tranquil feeling remained.

"You're good," She offered quietly into the night air.

"Thanks. A friend taught me that one," He paused, then laughed. "Heh. I seem to be saying that a lot lately. Anyway, we used to play it as a duet during festivals," Link said fondly, then smiled. "Or whenever we just needed some time away from the other kids. We got a lot of practice in, as I recall."

"You seem to have a lot of interesting friends."

He chuckled. "Not that many, actually. I was a bit of a loner growing up. Didn't get along so well with the others."

Malon opened her eyes, glancing up at his dark silhouette. "Hmm … And are you a loner now?"

He paused, hesitant, then gave her a smile. "I suppose, in a way. Not many opportunities to make lasting friendships while I'm traveling," He paused, then added, "I'm doing my best not to be, though."

For several long moments, she said nothing, and Link thought that perhaps she had fallen asleep. Finally, she stirred, looking up at him again with the fire shimmering in her wide, liquid eyes.

"Will you … stay here, with me? Just until I fall asleep?"

"Of course," He answered without hesitation.

She listened to him play long into the night.
It happened the very next morning.

She couldn't remember when she had fallen asleep. She awoke with the dying embers of the fire warming her chilled hands, just as the morning sun burned away the last vestiges of twilight. Cojiro crowed in the distance, signaling the start of a new day. Malon stood and stretched, her muscles tight and sore from lying on the uncomfortable wooden bench all night.

She was surprised to look above her and see Link curled up just outside of the window, sound asleep. She felt oddly touched, that he would spend the night with her like this and keep her company, even when she was fast asleep. He was snoring gently, his face pressed into the curve of his shield, a tiny trickle of drool making its way down the cold steel.

She shook her head, amused. Not only asleep, but apparently deeply so. She climbed onto the bench and reached out, stretching on the tips of her toes, using every inch of her long legs that her mother had blessed her with. Her fingertips brushed aside his bangs, whisper soft, just enough so that she could see his peaceful, unguarded face.

His eyes flicked open at her feathery touch, half-lidded, and they stared at each other for long moments before he closed them again. She giggled, emboldened, and ruffled his hair.

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

Link groaned in protest but propped himself up anyway. "G'morning," He said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Morning."

He looked out towards the barn at the sound of Cojiro crowing, squinting against the early morning sun, before turning back to her. "I'd better get to work, before Ingo comes looking for me," He said, his tone apologetic.

"All right."

And so he had left, but not before reaching through the bars one last time and giving her hand a comforting squeeze.

She wasn't alone with her thoughts for very long. Barely a candlemark had passed before the heavy lock turned over and the door flew open.

She didn't stand, didn't even greet Ingo as he came down into the cellar. He was bright-eyed and sober – unusual for him, this time of day – so she didn't feel quite the same anxiety that she normally would by being trapped with him in such a small room. Ingo scowled when he caught sight of the remains of her fire, but even that didn't seem to dampen his unusually cheery mood. Unusual for him, anyway.

"Get up and make yourself presentable, wench," He said, waving a missive at her. "We're hosting a very special visitor today, and I'll not have you making an embarrassment of me." He turned and left, dropping the missive to the floor behind him, whistling a jaunty tune.

Malon retrieved the missive and exited the cellar, her steps faltering slightly as she stepped into the light. Her eyes went wide as she read. Why would he be coming here of all places?
As she hurried towards the house she noticed that Epona and the wagon were nowhere to be seen. Today was their scheduled milk run to the small settlement near Lake Hylia, so it wasn't hard to figure out where Link had likely been sent off to. Upon entering the house she noted with disgust that Ingo had left the remains of his breakfast strewn across the dining table. Her stomach grumbled since she had missed supper the previous night, but she had no time to eat if what the missive had said was true. That was fine; she'd gone longer without eating before and a missed meal or two wasn't likely to kill her. She hurried upstairs. If what the letter said was true, she didn't have much time to prepare.

And so it was that she was still trying to slip into a new pair of clean clothes when the low, mournful call of a bullhorn echoed across the plains, vibrating the windows and settling deep into her bones. The Dark Lord was approaching.

"Zoras high," Navi said, sacrificing two cards from her hand and laying them at the center of the pile. The three faeries around her groaned, two of them throwing down their hands in disgust. The third – a male with a faint yellow glow and lovely luminescent wings – narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He was cute like that. If the other girls weren't here she might have had other plans for him. Alas...

The four fairies were seated on one of the highest beams in the barn, tucked away in the rafters near the back wall. Anyone looking in their direction would see only a faint glow illuminating the nearest rafters, hopefully mistaking it for reflected sunlight. After clearing out the dust, Navi had found that it would make an excellent vantage point from which to watch the rest of the barn, and as an added bonus it was spacious enough to easily accommodate a handful of her friends.

Link would probably throw a fit if he knew there were sometimes upwards of a dozen faeries hanging around the ranch. But she got bored waiting for him to make some moves on Malon, and by her thinking what he didn't know wouldn't kill him.

The male tapped his cards thoughtfully, then finally made up his mind. "You're bluffing."

Navi blinked her wide eyes innocently, using her remaining cards to fan herself nonchalantly. "Your call, I suppose."

The male hesitated for a brief moment, then laid down his cards, grinning in triumph, before Navi calmly laid out the rest of her hand over his. The ethereal pink symbols painted on the cards briefly flared to life, easily beating his Doubles with her Full Clan, and Yellow's face dissolved into a frown. Poor guy. Once they had a bit more privacy she'd make it up to him. For now though, spoils to the victor and all that...

"Haha, gimme," Navi said, reaching for the pile of sunflower seeds and a single, plump strawberry.

A deep, resonant sound vibrated through the barn, scattering the seeds and causing the faeries to spring upwards in alarm. Navi peeked over the edge of the beam, making sure that the barn was clear and sighed as she realized that her winnings were probably about to go to waste. She zipped down to Link's loft and out of the barn through his open window. She flew to the outer wall and scanned the surrounding field, quickly finding the small caravan approaching the ranch, and felt her tiny heart freeze in her breast as she recognized the powerful figure at its lead.

"Oh, Din."

She took off for the horizon as fast as her wings could carry her.
Malon rushed the last of her prepping, barely finding time to run a brush through her tangled curls before the bullhorn sounded again. She checked herself in the small, age-pitted mirror, making sure she was at least moderately presentable, and stepped outside just as the bullhorn sounded a third and final time. She covered her ears for the sheer volume of it.

They must be right outside the gate, she thought, just in time to have her suspicions confirmed as Ingo came scrambling back from unlocking the main gate. He came to a stop beside her, bouncing from toe to toe like an eager schoolboy, and awaited what was probably his greatest idol in the kingdom.

The steed appeared around the bend first, a magnificent, powerful stallion at least 18 hands tall, heavily clad from muzzle to hoof in silver barding and red flanchards. Its coat was a deep, matte black that was almost blue, so dark it looked as if someone had taken the night sky and stripped out all of the stars. The only reprieve from the darkness was around the whites of its eyes, which were more of a deep, ruddy red rather than white, appearing almost infected.

The man riding the stallion was no less impressive. His blood-red hair was dark in the morning sun, darker than even her own copper curls. He was heavily armored, but as he moved in the saddle it appeared as if he were intimately familiar with the weight, and it didn't hinder him in the slightest. His mere presence felt like a beach's worth of sand had been poured on top of her. The sheer ... power emanating from him was enough to make her take an involuntary step backward. No wonder he had managed to usurp the previous king so easily.

Two knights in gleaming black armor followed several paces back, astride a smaller – but no less impressive – pair of dole-eyed stallions. Their coats were of a color that she had never seen before; a silvery-white that reminded her of morning mist in the forest. She couldn't see the knight's eyes within their helms, and suspected that that was probably for the best.

The Dark Lord Ganondorf Dragmire drew even with them, his stallion cantering to a stop with a powerful snort, pawing at the ground. The man dismounted, and Ingo bowed low at the waist as armored boots crunching loudly on the gravel path. He turned to regard them, silently, and crossed his heavy arms in front of his chest.

Ingo – seeing that Malon had not prostrated herself and was instead openly gawking – cuffed her sharply across the back of her head. "Bow down, wench!" he hissed, "You're in the presence of royalty!"

Malon gritted her teeth against the pain and did so, though not nearly as low as Ingo, if only because she didn't think her spine would bend quite that far.

The Dark Lord was the first to speak.

"Ingo," he said in greeting, his voice like velvet covered steel, "Sycophantic as always, I see."

Ingo looked confused for a moment, then smiled and bowed again at the assumed compliment. "My Lord, I am honored that you would grace this humble ranch with your presence."

Ganondorf turned without acknowledging the welcome. His gaze swept across what he could see of the ranch, a tiny narrowing of the eyes the only sign of disapproval at its decrepit state, before coming to rest on Malon. "And you … you must be the rancher's daughter," His eyes flickered as he searched his memory. "Malon, wasn't it?"

"Yes," She said, only remembering at the last moment to add, "My Lord." She didn't bother bowing.
"Lovely name. Your parents picked well," Ganondorf said musingly as he nodded.

Suddenly he reached out, his hand quick as a viper as his gloved fingers tightly gripped her chin and tilted her head upwards. His sulfurous eyes searched her face, evaluating, and she inhaled sharply even as she forced her back ramrod straight. She felt not unlike a mare at auction, and knew that if she were to even attempt to fight him it would end badly. The casual brutality with which he had grabbed her told her that he saw her not as another person, but as nothing more than a piece of meat, to be appraised and – if found wanting – discarded.

After several long moments, his fingers slackened and withdrew.

"You have her eyes," He said simply, letting her chin drop. He turned back towards Ingo, the irrelevant farmgirl already forgotten.

Malon blinked in shock, but held her tongue and resisted the fierce urge to slump to the ground as he strode away, her pulse pounding in her ears.

What in Nayru's good name had that been about?

"... and then as soon as he was done he turned right back around and left."

Link shook his head, his brow furrowed as he processed what Navi had told him. When his faerie companion had swept down out of the blue and told him that Ganondorf had appeared at the ranch, he had very nearly unhooked Epona from the cart – bandits be damned – and ridden for the ranch as fast as they could.

However, it turned out that Ganondorf had not stayed long. In fact it seemed as if he had only stopped by to deliver some supplies to the ranch. Not long after he had arrived, Navi reported, a small caravan began winding its way into the ranch, loaded down with several large crates. Why Ganondorf himself would do so personally was beyond anything either of them could even begin to guess.

"Good job, Navi," Link said. "Let me know if anything else happens, if you can."

Navi beamed at the compliment, gave a jaunty salute, and flew off.

Since Ganondorf and his entourage had already left, and there didn't appear to be any immediate danger, there wasn't any need for him to rush back. So they continued on their way, arriving back at the ranch within the candlemark.

He had jumped down when they arrived and opened the gate, leading Epona through on foot, when the frantic bleating of a goat caused his head to snap up. One of the goats, the last remaining buck they used for breeding stock, was baring down on him at a full charge. It was old enough that its ridged beige horns had fused together at the top to form a massive, scooping crest, and it was lowered to attack.

Time seemed to dilate, his instincts kicking in and adrenalin flooding his veins as his mind quickly took stock of his situation. *Epona locked to the wagon behind, blocked in on both sides, no way to dodge around it.* He barely had time enough to take two steps forward, brace his legs, and position his hands before the beast was upon him.

The goat's massive crest slammed into his open palms, and he felt himself carried back several feet by the creature's momentum. Twin spikes of pain bit into his shoulders, and for a moment Link was afraid that he would lose his grip on the horns, but he managed to hold on. He was able to dig his
feet in, but the buck wasn't giving up without a fight, and its pace was barely slowed.

Strength for strength, Link knew he wasn't going to be able to match the goat. But he had an advantage. His time spent with the Gorons had been incredibly educational, especially in hand-to-hand combat. If there was one thing the rock men of the mountain were good at, it was grappling with other creatures and coming out on top. Link had wrestled with the other Kokiri for fun when he was younger, but the Gorons had turned it into an art form. After they'd shown him a few moves, he'd even beaten them. Once.

The goat, being unaware of such things, never stood a chance. He twisted his hips, flexed his arms, and used his grip on the goat's horns to turn its own momentum against it. The buck barely had enough time to let out a surprised yelp before its legs slid out from under it, slamming chin-first into the dirt.

It bleated feebly from the ground, dazed and confused, and made no move to stand.

He huffed hard, shaking out his aching arms, then saw that the goat was bleeding from a gouge on its flank. A moment later he realized that his throw wouldn't have cause such an injury, and the moment after that he had thrown the gate shut and quickly began unhitching Epona from the cart. He mounted the mare, leaving the cart where it was.

Just in time to hear a throaty, feminine scream of defiance.

"Hiyah!" he cried, urging Epona forward as quickly as she could navigate the winding path. He was slowed as he came to the house. Six horses crowded the entrance-way, blocking his path forward. They stood hitched to three large, loaded wagons that were empty of riders, nibbling on what sparse grass they could reach from their harnesses. Another shout reached him, and he urged Epona through the small gap between the wagons and out towards the central corrals.

He scanned the open field, quickly catching sight of the five figures against the northern wall. He steered Epona towards them and urged her into a full gallop.

Three large, brutish looking creatures were squaring off with Malon, and he reached for his sword. She stood defiantly, waving a pitchfork threateningly as their last breeding dam cowered behind her. The creatures that had her hemmed in against the wall were dressed in leathers with rich, forest green skin and a pair of small curved horns jutting from their skulls. Their arms were unnaturally long, reaching nearly all the way down to the ground, and their forearms bulged with sinewy muscle.

The ogre on the left made a feint, laughing darkly as Malon whirled on it, causing it to quickly retreat. The one on the right used the opportunity to dart around her, utilizing its freakishly long arms to get a grip on the dam's leg and began dragging it backwards. The goat bleated in alarm and tried to scramble away, but the creature's grip was a solid vice.

Malon spun, faster than Link would have thought her capable, and jabbed the pitchfork at the creature, catching it on the forearm and opening a small gash. It dropped the goat's leg and stumbled backwards, spitting a quick burst of garbled language as it shook its wounded arm, what could only have been a surprised curse. The other two laughed at the injured one's misfortune.

The one with the wounded arm stepped forward again threateningly, reaching for a small club on its belt, but was sent stumbling back as Link arrived and steered Epona between Malon and the creatures. "*Link,*" she said, her eyes glowing.

"Back off." He growled at the creatures, brandishing his sword.
The three creatures looked at each other and began conversing in their low, gutteral language. Link was able to study the creatures more carefully, and found that they didn't seem to be the usual dumb-as-rocks monsters that he was used to fighting. Beady red eyes peered from beneath a heavy brow, rich with a fierce intelligence. Their clothes were well fitted, unlike the usual scraps that some monsters and even a few Hylian bandits were known to cobble together. He could see that all three of them carried well-maintained weapons of some sort, but none had drawn them, suggesting that not only did they have the capacity to keep their weapons in fighting condition, but the ability to recognize that not every situation required them to wield it. They didn't actually appear to be threatening Malon, only the goat behind her, but he felt that if it came to blows that they might pose a more significant challenge than he was used to.

The one in the middle said something, which caused the other two to guffaw. Then the three of them turned and began walking unhurriedly back towards the barn.

Link growled, holding his sword low, and steered Epona in their direction.

"Wait," Malon said breathlessly. "Don't kill them."

Link pulled up on the reins and turned to her in disbelief. "What?"

"Just … give me a moment."

He quickly dismounted, concerned as he looked her over. "Are you okay? You're not hurt, are you?"

"I'm fine," she said. After a moment, her arms began to tremble. She set the pitchfork into the ground and leaned on it. "At least, I will be."

He gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze. "You did good."

"Then why am I shaking like this?" she asked.

"Everyone shakes if they're not used to it," he said, then added, "Heck, even I still shake sometimes. It'll pass, eventually."

Malon nodded, then blinked as the last few minutes caught up with her. "Link … Were you riding Epona?"

That confused him for a moment. "I … yeah. Figured it wouldn't do to have you turned into monster chow. Why?"

Her bright blue eyes fixed on him. "Epona doesn't let anyone but me ride her. Not even my father."

Oh ... shit.

"I've been … practicing," he said, searching for an answer. "We seem to get along rather well." He shifted uncomfortably. "It's … not a problem, is it?"

After a thoughtful moment Malon shook her head. "No, I suppose not. It's just … surprising, is all. You must be the first person in..." she shook her head again, her eyes distant, "Well, it's been a long time since anyone else has even tried to ride her without getting thrown. Maybe she's mellowed out over the years."

"Maybe," he said ambiguously.

They were quiet for several moments as Malon caught her breath. Eventually she straightened,
hefting her pitchfork. "Come on. Let's make sure that they haven't broken into the barn to torment the other animals," she said, taking a hold of Epona's hackamore and leading her as they walked, suddenly feeling irrationally possessive of the mare. The goat followed closely behind, perhaps sensing that it wasn't smart to wander off on its own at the moment.

Link nodded his head towards the barn, indicating the ogres. "What the heck were those things, anyway?"

Her answer was dull and listless, as if she were reading from a textbook. "Bulblins, I think. From the deep south. I've heard of them, but I've never seen one before now."

"What are they doing all the way up here?"

Malon told Link everything that had happened that morning while he had been gone. Link nodded along, pretending that Navi hadn't already told him everything. "Those three followed a few minutes later in the carts. From the looks of it, they're a part of Ganondorf's personal supply system."

It took a moment for Link to process that. "Those things are mail carriers?"

"Seems like…" she said as they came around the corner and found the Bulblins in the process of unpacking, the goats apparently forgotten. The goat following Malon froze at the sight, then ducked around the corner and through the open barn door.

Ingo stood by, watching with a reverent smile plastered on his face. Several small crates had been piled to the side, but the main attraction seemed to be two large, dark wooden crates loaded individually in the front and back wagons, which the Bulblins were ignoring for the moment.

Link approached the first wagon carefully while keeping one eye on the Bulblins and reached out to rub a hand on the mahogany panels. He could feel a faint tingle run through his fingers, as if the wood had recently been near a powerful source of magic and was slowly bleeding off the residual energy. He wished Navi was here; she could probably tell him more about it. It was almost comforting, in a way. The Sacred Forest had felt much like it.

Malon's demeanor grew noticeably less joyous as she took in the full haul. "How in the world are we going to be able to afford all of this?" She rubbed her forehead in disgust. "Ingo, how much did you spend on these?"

"They're a blessing from the great King Ganondorf," Ingo said, waving the question away.

Link quickly withdrew his hand. The wood wasn't so comforting any more. "I wasn't aware that he—that the King was the kind to give something for nothing," he said carefully.

Ingo was nearly beside himself with glee. "Shush boy, and watch this," he said as the Bulblins went to work on one of the boxes with a couple of crowbars. "I can't wait to see it-it...

The top came off first and was thrown carelessly aside. Eventually the last of the nails was pried loose, and the side panels fell open, falling off of the cart with a loud clatter.

Link's sword hand twitched.

Malon gasped beside him, a hand flying to her open mouth as Epona shook her mane in agitation. "By Nayru…"

It was massive. A hulking monster made of obsidian stone and plaster, its hunched form only passingly resembling that of a Hylian. It had two arms, two legs, and a head, but that was about
where the resemblance ended. Its haunches were oddly jointed, like those of a wolfos, and a sinewy pair of wings sprouted from its shoulders. Great detail had been put into the pebbled flesh, lovingly etched over powerful muscle. Its talons were curled and viciously sharp, one claw poised as if ready to dig into someone's poor, unsuspecting back.

A single emerald jewel glowed faintly from a golden decorative mount imbedded in the gargoyle's forehead. Its mouth was open in an evil, monstrous cackle, revealing rows of carefully carved teeth. The base of the statue took up nearly the entire cart, and it must have been at least twelve feet to the top of its shoulders. That wasn't even counting its wings, which wrapped around its flanks like a protective cocoon.

Dozens of ropes were tied around it, almost as if they were binding it in place. A thick ring of metal was looped through the top of them, suggesting that the statue had been lowered onto the cart with a crane and boxed in place.

"It's hideous," Link said *sotto voce*, low enough so that only Malon could hear.

Ingo seemed much more taken with it. "It's beautiful," he murmured in awe, walking up to run a hand along its textured stone flank. "To think that the Lord Ganondorf would grant me such a wonderful gift..."

Link looked at him in shock. "Wait, this *thing* is a gift?"

Ingo nodded enthusiastically, seeming to come down to reality. "This fine sculpture was originally meant as the centerpiece of the gate to Lord Ganondorf's castle. But since we've been so loyal to our new King, we've been rewarded with this statue to display proudly over all the people of Hyrule." He chuckled darkly. "Those bastards down at the saloon won't believe me when I tell them..."

"So it's nothing more than a massive ego booster," Link muttered sourly to Malon.

"If it's free and it gets him in a good mood, do we really care?" she replied.

"Hm. Point taken."

Ingo hadn't stopped talking. "... so we'll need to set it up ourselves, of course." He glanced at Link. "And by 'we' I mean you."

"Of course," Link mimicked. "And just where exactly are you planning on placing this thing? Assuming we can move it at all, that is. Do you realize how much that thing has to weigh?"

Ingo clapped his hands in delight. "I'm glad that you're so eager to get cracking, my boy! Wouldn't want these dumb brutes going and smashing it to pieces trying to haul it to the top."

Link felt a sinking pit open in his stomach, but he had to ask, "The top of what?"

"Why, the only place that would allow all of the ranch to bathe in its glory," Ingo pointed directly at the top of the barn, with what Link assumed was meant to be a grand pose, a hand placed firmly on his boney hip.

Link regarded the barn sceptically before turning back to Ingo. "Tell me you're joking. Isn't there enough repair work to be done already?"

"What did you think you'd be doing when I hired you? Flirting with the girl all day?" Ingo sneered, then turned to Malon. "And don't think that you get to ignore your usual chores for the day just because we had a special guest. Now both of you get to work!"
It turned out to be a great deal easier than Link had initially thought.

The Bulblins weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed, but they had strength and stamina in spades. They also brought along some help. The second wagon – what Link had initially thought was just a carriage – had instead turned out to contain a rather ingenious mechanical crane.

At Ingo’s assent, the Bulblins went to work, steering two of the carts through the gateway and around to the front of the barn. Once in place, one of the Bulblins began spinning a crank at the rear of the wagon, causing the contraption to unfold, while the others were busy hooking the gargoyle up to the winch. Four large trusses folded outwards at opposite corners of the wagon, planting themselves firmly in the ground and stabilizing the crane.

The central pillar with its complicated triangular framework soared into the sky as the frames slotted together, reaching well past the top of the barn, then jerked to a sudden stop. The Bulbin turning the crank looked at the gears in confusion as they shivered in their casing. It kicked the crank case with a muttered curse, and the pillar wobbled uncertainly, then tipped over and cracked against the flat roof of the barn. The angled portion at the top folded down, forming an anchor to keep the crane steady.

The Bulblins used the hoist to shuttle two of their number up to the top of the roof, with Link following shortly after it was secured. A box full of rudimentary tools and several large timbers followed, and the Bulblins set to work. The Bulblins did most of the work themselves, but with Link's help it took less than a candlemark to construct a sturdy frame to help ensure that the gargoyle didn't go plunging through the barn roof.

The Bulblins drew a line up through the pulley system strung throughout the crane. The one holding the end of the rope looked at Link speculatively, then tossed it to him and walked towards the front. Link thought briefly of tying the rope around his waist, but the thought of the Bulblins letting go while the gargoyle was halfway up and allowing him to get dragged through the contraption stopped him cold. The term "meat grinder" came to mind. Instead he hooked the rope around behind his backside, holding it tight with both hands on either side and using his weight to anchor himself.

The Bulblins heaved together – obviously having worked on something similar before – while Link strung the excess rope out behind him. The rope came taught, and they could hear the cart below begin to creak and groan as the gargoyle was lifted into the air. Link backed up along the roof as the Bulblins pulled, stopping only when they had to tie off and let Link make his way back forward lest he fall off the far end of the barn.

It was tough, sweaty work, but soon the head of the gargoyle appeared over the ledge. One of the wings caught on the roof, cracking a shingle, but they managed to get it up and in place without further incident. They used a small, jagged-edged knife to cut away the ropes, rocking it back and forth in order to free the strands beneath it. A few thwacks with a mallet, and the statue settled into place, now a stony sentinel looking out over the horse paddock.

The Bulblins conversed for a moment before loading the tools into the cart and climbing onto the crane, scaling the wooden bars instead of riding it as they had before.

When they were gone, Link took the opportunity to survey the ranch, wiping the sweat from his face and neck. He rarely had the chance to see the entire thing all at once, and the windmills weren't high enough to afford him a view this excellent, even if the skyline was now marred by a giant snarling chunk of granite. The sun was settling low on the horizon, though there was still another candlemark before dusk, and the cool breeze felt good on the back of his neck.

A small gust of warm, damp air blew past him, the smell reminding him of the putrid rot of a peat
bog. He turned, curious as he scanned the roof, but couldn't determine what had caused it. An instant later the air was pleasantly cool once again.

He frowned and glanced back at the sculpture. Something about the gargoyle just twinged his instincts, but he couldn't quite place it.

There it was again. A glimmer of something, but when Link tried to focus on it, it was gone. It was as if he could only glimpse it out of the corner of his eye, but try to concentrate on anything in particular and it would slip away like water through his fingers. He looked up at the emerald gem in its forehead as the afternoon sunlight sparkled and danced in its depths. *Hmm. That must have been it.*

Link shivered lightly. The damn thing was starting to really give him the creeps. He had to give the stonemason credit, whoever it was. The gargoyle looked as if it was about ready to just reach out and chomp on a neck or two.

Deciding that spending much more time around the stone monstrosity was likely to start affecting his sanity, he looked about the roof for leftover scraps, gathering what he could find, and finally decided to call it a day. He climbed down the scaffolding, surprised to find Malon waiting for him instead of the three Bulblins. She offered him a flask of water, which he accepted gratefully as he looked around, finally catching sight of two of the creatures along the far wall of the ranch.

"What are they doing?" Link asked, drinking greedily.

They watched as the Bulblins made a circle of the ranch, each carrying a small paint can and brush. As they went, they would mark a small blue inverted triangle on the walls, paying more attention to that one action than anything they had yet exhibited, and continued down the wall for several meters before repeating the action.

Malon shrugged at Link's question. "The one on the crank went to go unload the other cart as soon as the statue was up. I think Ingo decided that it would have to be stored in the south-west windmill, since the crate was too big to fit anywhere else."

"What's in it?" he asked.

"Not sure. They didn't open it, but at least we've run out of places to put more statues. Maybe it's a replacement?"

Link snorted, and gestured towards the two along the far wall. "And them?"

"The others grabbed some paint cans when they came down. As far as I can tell they're hitting every building on the ranch. They even marked the cucco nest," She shook her head. "Ingo says we're to let them finish, but he couldn't tell me why."

"*Couldn't,* not wouldn't?"

"Oh, he made like he knew, but I could tell he was just as confused as I was. But Ganondorf apparently told him that it had to be done, and it's not really hurting anything," she sighed, her tone turning acerbic, "So what's the harm in letting them do as they please?"

As soon as Link was done drinking, she took his flask and walked back towards the house to start on dinner. Sure, her ranch was falling apart at the seams, but it was *her ranch* damnit, and with Link's help it was just getting to the point where she could be proud of it again. Letting Ingo install some damned statue and a handful of green-skinned goblins run around like children with finger paints rankled her nerves like few things could.
Link had just about been ready to bed down for the night when he noticed that the spot on his Sheikhah scroll that normally held the stylized icon of his bow was blank. He wracked his mind to remember what he had done with it, frustrated with himself that he had forgotten such an important piece of his equipment. The last time he’d used it had been to light the fire for Malon, which meant that it was likely still leaning against the outer shed.

He growled in frustration as he reluctantly began slipping back into his boots. Ordinarily he might have left it for the morning, but he wasn’t sure what a second night outside in the elements would do to the magic-infused weapon, and the more he thought about it the more he was sure that he didn’t want to take that chance. He yawned mightily as he finished lacing up his boots, and slid down the ladder.

He walked quickly, eager to get this last chore over with before he could finally sleep. The waxing gibbous moon hung low on the horizon behind a pall of clouds, casting long shadows across the dew-dappled field and giving him just enough light for to see by. He followed the newly painted markers around the outside wall, the freshly dried paint noticeably lighter – almost glowing – in the moonlight, and thought to himself that it might actually be a nice addition to the ranch. They made it easier to see where he was going, at least.

He found his bow leaning against the wall of the old storage building, just as he had suspected. He grabbed it, muttering darkly, then spun and tottered off back across the open field, shivering against the chilly night air. He yawned blearily as he made his way back towards the barn, his steps now shuffling and slow with his task accomplished.

As he came around the pasture and the barn came fully into view his mind ticked awake just a fraction. Something had caught his attention, but he couldn’t say what. For a moment he thought it might have been the missing wagons, but no, he’d known that the Bulblins had left earlier just before sundown. He paused, frowning as he tried to work out what his instincts had picked up on.

Link shook his head in an attempt to clear the fog of sleep from his mind, looking upwards towards the empty roof. A perfectly ordinary empty roof, just like it was every day. It was normal. But it wasn’t normal. That empty space had been replaced earlier that day with something big and ugly and monstrous.

The gargoyle was gone.

*That* certainly snapped him awake. His head snapped left and right as he surveyed his surroundings, his mind instantly filling with a thousand different scenarios, most of them influenced by old campfire stories designed to frighten children. He glanced back at the roof just to make sure that his sleep-craving mind wasn’t playing tricks on him. The sheer *wrongness* of the situation had his heart hammering in his chest.

A sound to his right, deep and guttural like the growl of a forest puma. Link whirled towards the horse paddock, holding his bow defensively and wishing to Nayru that he had had the foresight to bring his quiver as he prepared to meet whatever it was.

Nothing. Nothing but shadows and fractured moonlight.

He blew out a nervous breath, laughing to himself as the tension drained from his body. *It's all right, Link. Don't let your imagination get the best of you.*

Intense pain lanced down his left side as razor claws pierced his chainmail, raking lines of agony across his flesh.
Uncertainty

Most people seemed to think that being a hero meant that, in the event of an ambush, one would willingly turn and face any foe.

Link would gladly disabuse them of that notion.

He would happily admit that he had run from an adversary on more than one occasion. Heck, it had taken him three tries to slay Volvagia, and the fire dragon was only the most powerful example he'd yet faced. Granted, if given the chance he would always come back and finish the job once he was confidant that he could win, but he'd willingly turned tail and fled several times before if it looked like the enemy was gaining the upper hand. Being ambushed without a weapon in the dark by a silent predator made of freaking granite certainly fit that description.

He didn't even turn to face his foe as what felt like talons ripped across his left side and lower back. The sheer power behind the strike told him all he needed to know as he was thrown forward. He rolled with the momentum, came up, then sprinted as fast as he could for the barn.

Even if he hadn't seen his attacker, his mind didn't have any trouble filling in the blanks. A huff of … surprise? … behind him, and the sense of vast amounts of air being swept under leathery wings as the thing took flight in pursuit. He could feel the tell-tale tackiness of blood oozing from his wounds and sticking to his clothes, rapidly drying in the cool night air. But he refused to slow his pace, his arms pumping.

A shadow flickered overhead, passing in front of the moon. He dodged to the right as the thing swept through the space he had just occupied and scrambled through the iron bars of the central fence and into the horse paddock. He kept close to the fence as he ran, giving him a solid barrier on one side to ward off the monster. Or so he hoped. He didn't actually know if the fence would deter the creature or if it would merely take it as a challenge to getting at its midnight snack.

The back door to the barn was heavy, slow to open, and exposed, which meant that it was tantamount to suicide. Instead he dashed between the barn and the house, hoping that the enclosed space of the walkway would give him some protection.

His instincts shouted right, and instead of turning into the barn he slammed open the door to the house as the creature dive-bombed him. He felt the tip of the creature's wing clip his shoulder, nearly knocking him from his feet as he staggered inside.

Malon carefully tied off the last of the lavender thread, cutting the excess with a small dagger, and set her thimble aside. She studied the worn edge of her spare work skirt. The stitching was inexpert, and the thread was a slightly different shade than the fabric, but one would have to look closely to notice it.

Or maybe not so closely, she thought. The skirt was riddled with such minor fixes.

The lamp on the table was set low, just bright enough for her to see her work to save on oil, casting flickering shadows about the room.

She admired her handiwork, pleased. Not bad for an amateur.

Her skirt probably had another six months in it, a year if she really stretched it, but sometime soon she was going to have to replace it. She sighed. Yet another expense. If only she'd learned how to
properly sew...

The front door slammed open, causing her to jump in fright, and Link staggered into the room, leaning his weight against the door to brace it shut. His bow clattered to the ground, forgotten as he panted for breath.

Malon smiled wryly at the familiar sight. "Isn't it a little late to be harassing the cuccos again?" she asked in jest. Her eyes went wide as she caught sight of his dark, bloodstained clothes and she leapt from the table, at his side in an instant. "Goddesses, what happened? Here, come sit down and let me look at it."

Link hissed at the stinging pain as Malon helped him over towards the dinner table. The adrenalin was starting to drain from his body, and the pain was coming in at full force. His blood left a thin crimson trail behind him as it soaked through his clothes and pattered to the wooden floor. "Wasn't … the cuccos," he said, gasping for air as he settled into a hard-backed chair.

Malon turned the lamp up to full and bent low to inspect his wounds. She sucked on her teeth at the sight of his bloodstained tunic, peeling it away from his side. The chainmail beneath was broken in several places and the wounds below were seeping blood, but he wasn't gushing, so it looked like nothing major had been hit. A small blessing.

"Take off your shirt."

Link blanched. "I … what?"

"Strip," she said. "C'mon, off with the shirt. I can't look at it with your chainmail in the way." She walked into the kitchen and lit another lamp over the wash basin, then began rummaging beneath the far counter.

Link hesitated, then with a sigh of resignation began peeling off his torn clothes. At least she hadn't demanded that he take off his pants as well...

And thank the Goddesses above that I'm wearing my usual work pants… He thought ruefully. Things were embarrassing enough as they were. If Malon had tried to strip him down to nothing but his tights, he'd probably have marched right back outside and let the monster have its way with him.

He peeled his tunic off carefully, blinking in surprise when he saw the great gaping, bloody rips down its side. His chainmail must have done a superb job. Had he not been wearing it the creature would have gutted him.

The shirt could probably be fixed, but the chainmail was now a mangled mess, and he shucked it and tossed it to the side. Judging from the sad state it was in, it was probably beyond a simple repair job, and he'd have to remember to order a new one when he next went to Kakariko.

Malon returned, carrying a leather bag and a damp cloth, which she set on the table. She watched as he began to slowly peel off his undershirt, but her patience was wearing thin so she reached up to help him with it. Now nude from the waist up, Link put his hands firmly in his lap and stared straight forward, ignoring the tsk'ing coming from the redhead as she kneeled at his side and began poking and prodding at his wounds.

"Now why don't you tell me how this happened?" she said as she inspected the damage.

Her fingers were delightfully cool against his inflamed skin, soft. He tried to focus on something other than her hands on his bare flesh as he told her what had happened after he had realized that his bow was missing.
"... I'm lucky to have made it back here with my head."

Malon hummed thoughtfully. "These don't look anything like claw marks."

Link twisted in his seat and looked down. The gashes in his side were uneven, and instead of three vicious slashes as he had expected there were dozens of smaller wounds where his broken chainmail had torn the flesh over his ribs. It was mostly light damage really, and it felt much worse than it looked, even with the liberal flow of blood. He had to admit, he'd have doubted himself too if he hadn't been there.

Malon picked up the towel and began to dab at his wounds. "Riiight. The big stone statue came to life and tried to take a chomp outta you," she said, eyeing him with a coquettish smile. "You sure you didn't just stumble and catch yourself on the cucco coup or something?"

He let her work in silence, but after several long moments, he spoke. "I'm not crazy. I know what I saw." As she worked, he kept throwing glances at the front door, worried that the creature would come bursting in at any moment. The fact that it hadn't already told him something, but he wasn't quite sure what.

Malon gave a skeptical and decidedly un-ladylike snort and bent down to examine her work. "Uh huh. Next thing you'll be telling me is that there are dragons living in Death Mountain," She said as she cleaned out the deepest of the seeping wounds over his ribs, then turned and rummaged in her bag.

Link gave that some thought. "Well actually, now that yo-

"AAAAGH!" He screamed in surprise at the sudden jolt of cool, intense pain in his side and jumped out of the seat. "Sweet Farore, what in the Dark Realm did you just stick me with?" He yelped, whirling around to guard against another surprise attack.

Malon merely favored him with an innocent smile from her crouched position by the chair, offering up a small bottle containing a dark brown liquid and a blood-stained towel held up for his inspection. "Quit your crying you big baby and sit back down. You're going to rip open your wounds at this rate. This is just a special ointment to make sure that you heal correctly and don't get an infection."

She examined the bottle thoughtfully. "We normally use it on the horses, though."

Link sputtered for a few seconds, then huffed and crossed his arms. "Well, you could've warned me first," he said sourly, resisting the urge to scratch at his wound as it began to tingle fiercely.

"Sit," she said, pointing to the chair. "You're not getting sepsis on my watch."

When she made no indication that she was in a playful mood, he sat, albeit on the edge of his seat in case she pulled out any more surprises. He twitched away from the towel as she resumed her work.

Malon favored him with a patient smile. "Link, you're my friend, but if you don't sit still then I'm really going to give you a reason to squirm."

Link sighed again and did his best to sit stock still, knowing that her threat wasn't entirely empty.

Malon continued dabbing at his wounds. After several minutes of poking and prodding, and not a little bit of squirming on Link's part, she set her tools aside and picked up several strips of sterile bandage. He lifted his arms wordlessly and held on to the end of the bandage as she began to unroll the long strip of linen gauze. Another minute later and he was nearly wrapped up to her liking.

"How's it look?" He asked, twisting around while trying to get a better view.
Malon tore the last of the gauze with her teeth and tied the bandage together with all of the rapt attention that an artiste would apply the final brush-stroke to her latest masterpiece. "Well, it'll scab nicely, but I think you're going to live. Just try to keep it clean. If you go rolling through horse manure and get an infection, then may it be upon your head," She said, turning to gather her medical supplies.

Link rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks doc. I was worried there for a second."

She turned back around and patted him lightly on the side where a piece of gauze had already managed to slide down. He jumped at the sudden pressure, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

"There, done. Honestly, I don't know how you managed to do this much damage while stumbling around in the dark. You're lucky the cuts are so shallow. You don't want me trying to stitch you up. I can barely do my own clothes."

"I wasn't stumbling around. I'm telling you, it was that damned gargoyle."

"Yeah, right. I still say you tripped and fell against the cucco coup."

Link felt the fire swell up within him. "And I say I know what I saw," he said, carefully avoiding the fact that he had never actually glimpsed the creature. "Besides, there's no way a fall would have torn through my chainmail like this."

Malon pursed her lips and batted her eyes at him. "Awww, does baby want a kiss to make it better?" She asked sweetly in a sing-song voice.

Link blushed and turned away, flustered. "I'm good, thanks."

"You're not invincible, you know," she said. "I know most teenaged boys seem to think so, but you're not. You need to be more careful, or else the cucco coup will get you next time."

"Gargoyle."

"Right. Well then, let's go see this flying 'gargoyle' of yours." She said wickedly, heading for the front door. If nothing else, she was enjoying the rise that she was getting out of him.

Link was across the room in an instant, slamming a palm over her shoulder and against the door before it was open more than a crack. "Are you nuts?" He hissed.

"Aha, you just don't want me to see where you tripped," Malon said, her eyes sparkling. She leaned forward at his sudden proximity, close enough to feel the heat from his skin, and was delighted when he took a step backwards yet kept his hand firmly on the door. *He's so cute when he's flustered.*

He let out a breath, exasperated. "What part of 'blood-thirsty monster' didn't you understand?"

Her eyes darkened in challenge, but she backed away from the door. "Looks like you need to worry about yourself first before trying to protect me. Now sit down, or else you're going to bleed through your bandages."

She went upstairs, returning a few moments later with one of her father's old shirts. She figured it would be better for him to bleed on something that wasn't going to be getting much use anymore. He accepted it with a quiet "Thanks," and she turned away to give him time to get settled.

She watched his reflection in the window and was surprised to feel a tiny twinge of disappointment as he struggled to put the shirt on without messing up his bandages. He really did have a nicely
muscled back…

Ugh… She thought as she washed her hands in the sink. Down girl. No need to go losing your head just because you got to see a cute guy strip down to the waist.

She paused when she felt herself flush.

*Maybe Ingo wasn't too far from the mark…*

She shook her head, physically trying to dislodge that thought from her mind. No, damnit, she was a young woman, and she was allowed to have these urges once in a while, just as long as she didn't act upon them. Her gaze fell back to his reflection, to the powerful curve of his flexed deltoids as he finally figured out which hole was meant for his head. *Maybe…*

She tossed the bloody towel in the laundry hamper, frustrated. No, it just wasn't possible. She was a plain looking country girl, nothing more. And he … he was…

Her eyes caught on her reflection in one of the windows over the wash basin, and she leaned in closer to get a better look. Were those bags under her eyes? Goddesses, she was a wreck. Yes, she bathed as often as possible, and yes, she washed their laundry weekly so that she would always have fresh, clean clothes to wear, but she was…

What was she? A simple farm girl. Someone who washed horses and picked up cow droppings for her very meager living.

Link, however, could go on to be a modestly wealthy carpenter, or maybe even a soldier in the service of some faraway country. What would a boy like him ever see in a girl like her? His future was bright. She had no right to try to take that away from him.

Her hands clenched on the basin and she stared hard at her reflection. Link wasn't going to be around forever. He had even admitted as much, once he found this 'Sheikah' friend of his. Like everyone else that came to this ranch, he would eventually move on. She didn't like it, but those were the simple facts. So she resolved herself to enjoy the friendship that they had while it lasted, and damned if she was going to let her hormones get the best of her and screw it all up.

Malon turned, laying a hand on his shoulder as she passed behind him, then, after a moment's thought, placed a quick peck at his temple. She could allow herself that much, at least. Between friends.

"Go get some sleep you big dummy. Ingo said he's probably going to wake you up early tomorrow so you can make another milk run. You're going to need your sleep."

She walked up the stairs leading to her room, stifling a yawn. "Good night, and make sure that the scary monster outside doesn't get you."

Link merely stared after her from his seat, his face burning a deep crimson.

Link stared the gargoyle down. "You and me buddy, just you and me."

Last night, after Malon had finished patching him up, he had made a mad dash from the house to the barn. Maybe the wind was playing tricks on him, but he swore he had heard the beat of leathery wings off in the distance. Luckily he had made it back inside unscathed, and he'd stayed up for half the night listening for any signs of a gigantic flesh-eating monster attempting to rip its way inside of the barn. Eventually, finally, sleep had overtaken him without him hearing a thing.
The sky was overcast, the clouds from the previous night having moved in, and a cold-front was on its way. Since the crane was gone, he'd had to get creative in order to climb on top of the barn without using his hookshot, but had managed to find a path up along the palisade. He'd wanted to see for himself if he had missed something, but so far he was disappointed. The gargoyle was in the same position that he had left it yesterday, down to its snarling maw and the almost eager way that its front claw was raised as if prepared to strike.

He was starting to think that maybe there was a chance that Malon was right after all. Maybe in his sleep-deprived state he had had some sort of waking nightmare and somehow managed to impale himself on a loose board. Or something. He didn't know of a wood hard enough to pierce chainmail, but he had seen (and done) stranger things.

Even so, he was now determined not to be caught off guard again, and was equipped with both sword and shield. Just as a precaution, of course.

Link put up his balled fists, spreading his feet in a brawler's stance. "You want some of this? Huh?"

He shadowboxed for a few moments, his gloved fists cutting the air inches from the gargoyle's ugly carved face. When he elicited no reaction he dropped his arms, almost disappointed, and inspected the gargoyle more closely, looking for any sign that the thing might spring to life.

He idly picked at the spiny ridge decorating the gargoyle's skull with his fingernail. "I could end you right now,' he said musingly. "Turn you to powder, mix you into a nice foundation for a new building. It wouldn't take much, just a couple of good whacks and you'll be nothing but dust. I've got a brand new warhammer with your name on it. You should go ask Volvagia how she liked it."

The gargoyle still said nothing.

"Link! Get down from there before you kill yourself!"

Link turned, scanning the ground before he caught sight of Malon. She had just exited the cucco coup and was balancing a basket full of newly laid eggs against her hip. The wind was kicking up, and she brushed as loose lock of auburn hair out of her face as she watched him worriedly.

"Hey, I helped to put this up here, didn't I?" Link called out, "I'll be fine, so don't worry."

"Like you were fine last night?" she countered, her slim frame set in a way that plainly said, 'Don't test me.' "You were lucky that you didn't need stitches this time. You're too clumsy to be walking around up there. Last night you were just on the ground; imagine the damage you'll do if you trip from up there?"

"I'm not going to trip," he called back, feeling a little devilish since he knew that she couldn't reach him. "If you were so worried about me then you wouldn't have stripped me down and smeared me with itchy juice!"

"Men," Malon muttered, shaking her head before turning back to him and raising her voice. "With any luck you'll land on your head! At least then you won't damage anything important!" she called, hefting the egg basket as she turned and walked away.

Link watched her retreating form for several moments before he turned back to the gargoyle. He reached out and stirred his finger around inside the crevice that served as one of the beast's eyes. "I'll be keeping my eye on you," he promised.

The massive chunk of rock stared back blankly, silently, and unflinchingly.
A storm front had moved in later that day; a gentle, misty drizzle that lasted throughout the afternoon and quenched the parched land. Ingo had ducked inside at the first sign of rain, claiming that their financial ledgers were in desperate need of his attention, while Malon was busy in the barn tending to the cows. Neither were terribly interested in working out in the rain.

Which gave Link and Navi the perfect opportunity to take a closer look at the nasty presents that the Bulblins had left them. They started at the back of the ranch, intending to inspect the second crate that Ganondorf's minions had unloaded, but the windmill it had been stored in was locked and the windows were boarded up from the outside. Link cupped his hands around his eyes and peered through a crack in the planks, but it was impossible to make anything out in the gloomy darkness. From the layers of grime coating the glass it was obvious that the windmill had been abandoned for some time. He toyed with the idea of breaking in to check it out, but decided that if whatever it was hadn't gotten loose by now and eaten them all then it probably wasn't going anywhere.

Undaunted, they turned to the strange symbols that the Bulblins had painted along the outer walls and various buildings on the ranch. Link removed his glove and scratched at the edge of one of the symbols, chipping off a small fleck of iridescent paint. It seemed like normal paint, but the second Navi approached the symbol a sharp tingle of magic filled the air and she was repulsed with a sharp electric zap. A tiny lightning bolt arced between the symbol and the diminutive faerie, driving her back several feet.

"Hey! Careful!" Link said.

"Youch, that's nasty." Navi said, a thin trail of vapour trailing from her body. She shook herself off before carefully approaching the symbol, examining the crude artistry. "Hmm. I thought these looked familiar."

Link's ears perked at the somber tenor of her voice. "What can you tell me?"

"Well, there's only one reason these would be here, so the good news is that you're likely not crazy. That gargoyle really was trying to eat you. At least, that's the only reason I can think of that these would be here." She gestured towards the symbol. "They're warding spells," she said, then bobbed in flight, shrugging. "Sort of."

"What do you mean, 'sort of'?" Link asked.

"It feels a bit like a basic repulsion spell, but I've never seen it worked into a medium like this before..." She drifted off, thinking.

Link gave her a blank stare. "Um ... can you translate for those of us that can't speak faerie?"

"How to explain..." she tapped her fingers on her chin, lost in thought, then waved her petite hand in the air. "Have you ever tried to swim upstream from a waterfall? It's a bit like that, only instead of pushing against your physical body, it presses against your magical essence. Except it's drawing on your own magic to power the spell and turn your essence against you. The more powerful you are, and the closer you get, the more force it exerts. If you ignore the warning and get too close, you get a nasty shock for your troubles. It can be broken, but it's often not worth the trouble."

Link laid his palm flat over the symbol, eliciting a small tingle that thrummed up his arm, but little else. "I don't really feel anything."
"My guess? You're just not that powerful, magically speaking," Navi said. Link threw her a mock
offended look, and she shrugged. "It works best on magical creatures like myself. If you had fae
blood you'd probably be cart-wheeling over the barn by now."

Link grunted and pulled his glove back on. "What else can you tell me?"

"Well, they're poorly made, but the spell itself is powerful, and was somehow weaved into the paint
itself. The rune just anchors it. Whoever made this knew a great deal about magic, and made it
simple enough to apply that even the Bulblins could do it.

"This spell right here," she continued, indicating the symbol, "is usually supposed to be a means of
control, but it seems like it's just being used as a 'no trespassing' sign."

"What happens if we wipe them off?"

"That … would probably be bad," Navi said. "As in, 'expect the thing it's meant to keep out to not
care about such silly concepts as walls or ceilings.'"

Images of the gargoyle tearing the barn to confetti flitted through his mind. "You said control, but
they don't seem to be doing a very good job if that thing is trying to eat me."

"It's not changing the monster's behavior. It's just telling it what's off limits. If it really wanted to, I'm
sure it could push through the repulsion spell to get at whatever it's after," she said, then chuckled
darkly. "I suppose you could try tattooing one of these symbols on your chest, see if that would
prevent you from getting eaten."

"Pass."

He looked around, scanning the ranch and the faintly glowing symbols with new eyes. He looked up
at the open sky.

A new thought struck him. "So I suppose they're not actually meant to keep the gargoyle inside the
ranch."

"Exactly," she said. "From what you told me the gargoyle can fly, so it's not much effort to just soar
over the walls. These are more to keep it from tearing apart the buildings. Whoever made this thing
trained it well." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I find it interesting that it returns to the same spot
every night. Almost like its roosting. I think it may be territorial, like a wolfos."

"That explains a lot, actually," Link said, turning and walking back towards the barn. Navi followed
in his wake. "This isn't some strange form of harassment. This is meant to target someone
specifically."

"Like who?"

"Who else?" he replied, hooking a thumb at his own chest. "We've had Ganondorf's scouts hunting
us ever since we kicked his phantom's butt in the Forest Temple. But he doesn't have the support or
the resources to be everywhere at once. So I bet he's laying these traps around the kingdom and
waiting for something to fall in."

"It's … possible." Navi admitted. "Especially if he's hoping to get lucky and snare the Princess as
well."

Link laughed darkly. "Reinforce his will, lay traps for those he's hunting, and sew a little fear and
chaos into the mix. What's not to like?"
"So, I assume we're going with the usual plan, then?" Navi asked. "Poke it with sharp objects until it stops moving?"

Link was quiet for several moments. As they came around the paddock the barn swung into view. "I think I need to think on this a little more. This isn't some Temple off in the middle of nowhere. If Ganondorf thinks I'm protecting the ranch, it could get ugly around here real quick. The last thing I want is to have this blow back on Malon."


He waved her off. "Go back to your roost, pest. I've got chores to do."

She zipped off to the hayloft with a tinkling laugh.

He paused and sighed as he reached the barn, his hand resting lightly on the door.

_Damnit. Part of me is wishing that Malon was right and I just ran into the cucco coup._

He had at least until tonight to think of a plan that wouldn't get everyone killed. At the same time, he couldn't let the blow-back from destroying Ganondorf's pet monster come down on the ranch. In this case, saving Malon and protecting her weren't necessarily mutually inclusive.

_Why can't things ever be simple?_

At least he knew a little more about the strange symbols now. With a little thought, he could probably turn them to his advantage. It was good to know that the barn was a safe haven for the time being. Even so, he was leaving his window closed this evening.

Just in case.

_Malon had been waiting in the market all day, watching the throngs of people dashing about as they shopped and mingled. Children ran through the crowds, chasing after their dogs or playing games of tag, though none approached her. Her father had left her to the shopping while he ran the milk up to the castle, but he had been gone for some time and she was starting to worry. But she was a dutiful daughter and she would wait here at the road to the castle where he told her to until he returned. Finally she recognized a familiar face slip through the crowd, though it wasn't the one she had hoped for. Even so, she was overjoyed to see it._

"Are you going up to the castle, Faerie Boy?" Malon asked, her hands clasped together hopefully. "Can you look for my father for me? He must have fallen asleep somewhere around the castle gates."

_The boy in green stared back at her, chewing thoughtfully._

_She dug through her satchel and held out her most prized possession; a cucco box with a newly hatched rooster inside, its feathers the color of the summer sky. "Here, if you go and find him, I'll give you this to wake him up."_

_She led him towards the castle, his faerie trailing in their wake. His tiny hooves stirred up dust as they walked. They came to the cliffs overlooking the castle and stopped._

"Here you go," Malon said, gesturing towards the thick green vines growing up the sheer walls. "If you climb these, you can sneak past the guards. They'll never know if you keep quiet."
His long furry ears flicked back in agitation. He began chewing on the nearest of the vines.

She panicked. "No! If you eat those, you'll never be able to get in!"

He studiously ignored her, his whiskered jaw moving rhythmically as he chewed. She was about to step in and attempt to stop him when his faerie swooped down out of the sky and bleated harshly in her face.

Malon awoke at the sound, blinking groggily in confusion. It took her several long moments to clear the fog of sleep from her mind. She looked out the window, surprised to see that it was still pitch black outside, and swung out from under the covers.

What a bizarre dream...

It had been years since she had dreamed of her old childhood friend with the faerie. Months since she had even thought about him. He had been important to her, once upon a time, but after disappearing seven years ago he had slowly faded from her memories. What had his name been?

Link?

No, she was sure that wasn't right, that her woozy mind was only fixated on the name because of the new farmhand. But if it wasn't, what had it been? The more she thought about it however, the more their features started to meld in her mind. The clothes were … similar. Sort of. A forest green tunic, with a ranger's cut. Maybe they were from the same village. They might have even been brothers, if she were able to put the two side by side. But the more she thought about it the less similar they seemed. The boy asleep outside in the barn had hair a few shades darker, and no faerie.

Of course, if her old friend looked like a goat in her dreams, maybe her memory wasn't all that reliable.

She was about to go back to sleep and forget her strange dreams of Faerie Goat when an animal cry pierced the night. She was up and across the room in an instant, her delicately pointed ears perked and straining.

There it was again; the shrill bleating of a panicked goat.

What in the world?

She looked out the window, but with the clouds covering the moon she couldn't see anything past the barn. The goat was close though, not much farther than the paddock from the sound of it.

She slipped into her sandals and quietly slid from the room. The snoring from Ingo's room reassured her that he wasn't still awake, though she made her way carefully down the hallway and down the stairs.

The rain had let up earlier in the evening, though scattered clouds still criss-crossed the sky, scattering the moon's light. The wet grass tickled her feet as she made her way into the central hub of the ranch.

She rubbed at the wound on her arm thoughtfully as she scanned the compound in the dim starlight, remembering the shock and sudden pain a few days ago as one of the Bulblins had come up behind her and slid a sharp knife across the back of her arm. They'd managed to similarly slash one of the goats before she could defend it, but luckily she'd be able to hold them off from harming the other. Link had shown up soon after – riding Epona, no less – and drove them off.
She'd seen the fire in his eyes then, a simmering heat that she had never seen before, and hid the wound from him in case it incensed his anger even more. The Bulblins hadn't pressed their attack after all. It was almost like they were testing something, though maybe she was just giving the creatures too much credit. Maybe they were just spiteful monsters that enjoyed sticking sharp objects in people. But she'd not wanted to see what Link would do to them if he'd found out they had hurt her.

She checked near the cucco coup first, one of their usual sleeping spots, but the goats were nowhere to be seen. The two goats they hadn't sold off were her favorites, and she was almost positive that the doe had become pregnant in the last few weeks. If their luck held out, they'd have a fresh litter to replenish their losses once spring rolled around.

As she walked back towards the paddock the male dashed around the corner of the barn, bleating in agitation as it ran past.

"Bucky! Hey, slow down!" She called out, but the animal didn't listen as it ran towards the back of the ranch. She watched it go, then turned and glanced around, dread settling in her stomach. Bucky was a coward, but it wasn't like him to run at shadows.

"Where's Maybelle?" She asked the empty field.

No one answered, the only sound that of the wind gently rustling through the trees.

She hurried towards the barn, her steps cautious, but as she came around the corner the female was nowhere to be seen.

Strange. They were usually inseparable.

She laid her fingers on one of the gently glowing runes on the barn as she looked around, taking comfort in the soft light it cast. The wagon was a mass of scattered shadows in the darkness, but there was nothing she could see that would have spooked Bucky. She poked around for several moments, but found no sign of Maybelle, and was about to leave when a small alarm went off in the back of her mind.

At first she wasn't certain what had caused it, but as she neared the palisade wall she could see that parts of it were darker than the rest, as if someone had splashed paint across the worn wood.

Paint...?

She glanced back at the wagon, at the reddish-brown streak of paint splashed across the side, then back to the wall in front of her. It was too dark to tell for certain, but it looked similar.

She reached out tentatively, her hands shaking as she touched the wall. Her fingers came away wet, sticky.

Warm.

She swallowed nervously, licking her lips as her eyes darted around. Fear coiled in her gut like a viper, and her breath hitched in her throat. She followed the gently oozing trail with her eyes, up, up...

Something sat on top of the wall, a hulking black shadow outlined against the star-speckled sky. At first she wanted to believe that it was only a trick of the shifting clouds, but no, something told her that this was no illusion. She froze, not daring to move, barely even managing to breathe. For several long moments nothing happened, but then the massive shadow shifted, subtly, and something slipped
loose.

In fear she danced backwards. She felt something wet splash across her bare shins, her unprotected face as the mass sloughed across the ground with a sickly wet splatter. The mass was unrecognizable, misshapen. Something glinted red in the moonlight.

She brought her clean hand to her face, wiped at the wetness on her cheek, and stared at her shaking fingers. The smell, though faint, was all too familiar.

She couldn't, wouldn't, accept it. What was this? Blood? Where…

How…

Why?

She felt bile burn in the back of her throat, and suddenly she was eight summers old again, watching in horror through a dusty window as one of the farmhands slaughtered pigs in the old windmill at the back of the ranch. The sounds they'd made as they struggled, then the cold stillness, and finally the stomach-churning agony as they were ripped open, broken into pieces.

No matter how horrified she'd been then, she hadn't been able to turn away, just as she couldn't now.

The clouds shifted again. Ivory bone – shattered and broken, slick with blood – pierced the mass of shredded gristle before her.

Somewhere in her mind, a small, frightened part of her knew what it was. What it had once been. A greater, equally frightened part knew that something was responsible for this, and her eyes once again were drawn skyward.

The moonlight continued to shift, allowing her to piece together the creature in her mind even if she couldn't see the whole. A savage maw, rows of glinting teeth, rippling muscle and massive black wings. It craned its head back and spread its jaws wide, impossibly wide, and a greasy black tongue drew the hindquarters of what remained of the goat down its throat, hooves and all.

The crunching as it chewed was the worst part.

For a long moment it seemed content to sit there, full from its feast, then it turned, cocking its head to stare down at the ground. A hungry, alien intelligence burned in its dark obsidian eyes. Considering her. She stared back, frozen to the spot. What else could she do? Anything that could catch one of the goats would surely make short work out of her.

Again it took its time, an apex predator that knew it didn't have to work very hard for its next meal. Malon began to back away slowly, almost daring to believe that it hadn't seen her when it shifted, drawing its powerful haunches beneath itself and spreading its wings, enveloping her in a cloak of night. It dropped from the palisade, the sheer weight of the creature causing the ground beneath her feet to tremble as it landed a mere meter in front of her.

She backed away quickly as it settled but instantly froze as it growled, a low, earthy rumble like two boulders being rubbed together by a giant. She began slowly backing away again as the growl died. The creature prowled toward her smoothly, easily keeping pace as she backed away. Almost as if it were toying with her.

She continued to back away until finally she bumped into the barn wall. Her heart was pounding in her ears, her hands pressing flat against the wood as a rune glowing softly over her left shoulder.
She had no weapons, nothing in reach that she could even pick up and shield herself with. Even if there were, she knew it would be senseless to face something like this. This was no simple bandit attack. She had nothing to fight monsters from her worst nightmares.

She pressed her back against the wooden wall, and closed her eyes.
Tears slipped down her cheeks as she sent a silent prayer to the Goddesses.

*Please, Farore, please ...*

The chill night air was still and quiet. No insects called out from the grass, no wind stirred the trees, as if the world was holding its breath, waiting. Malon felt the creature pause in front of her and dared to crack open her eyes.

The faint iridescent glow emanating from the rune behind her illuminated its jagged features, highlighting the severe shadows that ran across its chiseled snout. With a flash of recognition she felt an absurd spark of amusement pierce the paralyzing fear in her heart that Link had been right after all. It was the gargoyle, alive, breathing.

Hungry.

And it was going to kill her.

It seemed so much more massive than when she had first seen it uncrated. Now that it was a living thing, a vicious monster crouched before her, the sheer power running through its coiled muscles was terrifying to behold. It must have easily outweighed two of their stallions, its wingspan larger than their wagon even furled. Ivory teeth flashed in the scattered moonlight, stained dark with the remnant of its last meal. Its dagger-like talons flexed as it studied her, drawing long furrows in the soft soil. The decorative jewel imbedded in its forehead sparkled faintly, igniting from within with an emerald fire, then went dark once more.

It cocked its head – not unlike a bird – and stared at her with a single coal-black eye. She shuddered at the cold, calculating malevolence that stared back at her. This was no animal instinct in that gaze, nothing so simple. It judged her hungrily with an intelligence that she had never before seen matched in a four legged creature.

"Please..." She whispered.

The gargoyle shifted and prowled towards her once more. She clenched her eyes and bit back a scream, pressing her back against the solid wood paneling behind her.

She flinched as she heard it inhale deeply barely a foot away from her face, realizing that until that moment she hadn't heard it breathing. She felt great intakes of air pull at her hair as it scented her, then a single acrid huff of agitation and … disappointment? She felt rather than saw the almost imperceptible shift as it began to turn away. Confusion swept through her, relief, but terror still rooted her firmly to the spot.

A sharp crack and a brilliant flash of light exploded in front of her, like lightning without the rolling thunder. Had she not had her eyes clenched shut, she would have surely been blinded. She barely had time to register the sound of running feet before the monster roared in surprise, drowning out all else, and suddenly she felt a sharp tug as strong fingers clasped her wrist.

"*Move!*" Link shouted at her, and instinct drove her feet as they fled.

Link led her around the side of the building to where he had left the rear door cracked open. They dashed into the dimly lit barn, both throwing their combined weight against the door as the gargoyle
shook off its initial confusion and charged after them. They slid it closed, Link barely managing to secure the bolt in time before the creature slammed into it.

The solid wooden door rattled in its braces, but mercifully held. Even through the heavy wood he felt the familiar static tingle of the rune on the outside of the door as it activated, causing the hair on his arms to prickle, far more powerful than when Navi had strayed too close. A sharp *crack* of magical discharge could be heard and the creature roared in pain, vibrating the walls and echoing into the distance as it took flight.

They both leaned heavily against the door for several moments, panting as they caught their breath, their bodies trembling as the adrenalin burned through their veins. Link pressed his ear to the door, but heard nothing. He knew that it had to possess the physical strength to simply tear its own entrance through the walls, but for some reason chose not to. Apparently Navi had been right about the runes after all. Satisfied that the gargoyle had been driven back, he pulled the flickering lantern from its post, then turned and placed a gentle hand on Malon's waist and lead her deeper into the barn.

"Goddesses … Oh, Goddesses ..." She panted as she hobbled forward on unsteady legs, her eyes distant with shock.

She allowed him to steer her back to one of the empty horse stalls, the farthest away from the barn doors. They barely managed to make it inside before her legs collapsed beneath her and she fell to the hay-strewn floor, nearly dragging Link down with her. He gingerly set the lantern down and crouched beside her, concerned but unsure of what to say, his hands outstretched yet not touching her trembling frame.

Malon's hands clenched in the hay as she shook, fighting to bring her breathing under control. Finally she turned to Link, her eyes wide with panic. "You—" She gasped, "You were right! Goddesses, you were *right!*" She pressed against him, causing him to rock back against the wall, finally sliding into a seated position. Her arms wound tightly around him and she buried her face in his chest as her body began to tremble uncontrollably.

"Hey, hey, you're safe now, you're safe," Link said, whispering soothing, meaningless sounds as he ran a comforting hand down her back. Her shaking arms tightened, squeezing his midsection, surprisingly strong for a girl her size.

Eventually the trembling began to die down, her fingers unclenching from his tunic as she pulled back, wiping at her tear-stained cheeks.

"You okay now?" He asked.

She tensed as panic once again began to well up inside her. "We have to get out of here," She said. Link held up his hands in a calming gesture. "It's fine, it's fine. We're safe here, I promise."

She pulled back sharply in disbelief. "How can you *say* that? Did you even see that … that *monster*?"

"Just try to calm down. We'll be fine in here. If it wanted to get inside it wouldn't have waited until tonight to try," He explained.

"I … I …" She swallowed, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply, steadying herself. "I guess you're right. Goddesses, it … it ate Maybelle. It *ate* … " She groaned and rocked forward, clenching her fists to her eyes.
Link watched in silence as she grieved. He didn't claim to feel the same kind of connection to the animals that Malon did, but he could understand it. He propped an arm on his knee and waited patiently.

Suddenly her hands slammed onto the floor, startling him. "Bucky's still out there!" She exclaimed, standing.

Link leapt to his feet and held his arms wide to block her from leaving. "Do you really want to be out there searching for your goat while that thing's flying around? I'm sure Bucky'll will be fine, but I'm not willing to bet your life on it."

"I can't let him stay out there with that monster! He's …" Her shoulders slumped. "He's all alone, now …"

"In all of the time that it's been here, this is the first time I've seen it try to eat something." He waved his hand. "Benefits of being stone for half of the day, I suppose; It doesn't seem to get hungry very often. He should be safe for tonight."

"Are you sure?" She asked.

"Trust me."

Malon stared at him, evaluating, then slumped to the floor once more. "Okay," She whispered, tears brimming. She laid down in the hay on her side, drew her legs up against her breast, and closed her eyes.

She laid there for some time. Link watched her, concerned, but said nothing. Malon's hooded eyes fluttered back and forth, her mind racing. She looked up in panic when he stood but he waved her back down. When he returned with a horse blanket she was back to her catatonic state and refused to acknowledge him when he offered the blanket to her, her eyes flickering like a metronome. He propped his sword and shield against the wall, then put the blanket down against Malon and laid beside it.

Eventually her eyes began to settle and her breathing began to slow. She wiped at a stray tear, sniffing, then seemed to realize that she was being watched. She glanced up at his worried face and saw the concern in his eyes, then rolled over and put her back to him.

He frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I … I don't like you seeing me like this," She admitted, her voice muffled. "It's embarrassing."

Link went quiet, surprised. He'd learned a great deal about Malon in the past couple of months. She was confidant, prideful, intensely stubborn at times, but also vulnerable, lonely, afraid of what the future might hold. Not for herself, but for her father's ranch, for the animals on it. Every day he learned a little more about her, discovered some captivating new facet of what made her uniquely her. The more he discovered the more he knew he still had yet to learn. The more he wanted to learn.

"I think it's good that you can still cry after all these years," He said softly.

For a moment there was no response, but in an instant the dam inside her broke. Her shoulders shook, her head bowing forward as grief wracked her frame with silent sobs.

Link had known his share of pain in the past year. He'd been held underwater for so long that every muscle in his body screamed for oxygen. He'd felt cold so biting it felt as if he had been set on fire. When the Great Deku Tree had died, he'd not only felt the loss of the only father figure he'd ever
known, but an illogical sense of betrayal that had cut him to his core. In his travels cleansing the
temples he'd been stabbed, burned, crushed, electrocuted, and swallowed whole.

He had never known a deeper pain than sitting there, impotent, watching the girl in front of him
suffer in silence. It felt as if an icicle had been driven between his ribs, inches from his heart.

He peeled off his gloves, frustrated at his own body's weakness when he saw how badly his hands
were shaking, and reached out tentatively, willing his hands still. His fingers brushed against the
curve of her scalp, feather light. She tensed at first, her body going still, but soon the tension in her
shoulders relaxed fractionally as he ran a soothing hand through her hair, letting the crimson tresses
flow like water between his fingers. He continued, glad to see that he had not been rebuffed.

Soon she had stopped shaking completely, though Link continued to stroke a hand through her hair.
He smiled to himself as he watched her. *This is what I'm fighting for,* He thought. *So that my friends
can be safe. I don't want to see her scared anymore.*

She surprised him by rolling and facing him once more. Her eyes were hooded, her face flushed. She
 glanced at him, briefly, the blue of her eyes bright in the flickering lamplight, then closed her eyes
and leaned into the pleasant comb of his fingers even as her blush darkened. Her lips parted and her
breathing slowed as the tension fled her body. He drew his fingers around a delicately pointed ear,
traced the line of her jaw, down her chin. Watched as a cascade of golden hair spilled over her
shoulder, pooled in the hollow of her throat. She breathed deeply, relishing the sensations brought by
his questing fingers, and finally rewarded him with a hint of a smile.

"You're way t' good at this," She said, her voice heavy and slurred with sleep as she nuzzled into the
crook of her elbow. "You m'st practice this with all of th' girls."

Link chuckled. "Not much chance to practice where I've been. And the last girl I've spent any time
around had fins instead of hair."

"Tha's a shame," Malon drawled. "She d'sn't know what she missed."

He paused in his ministrations, but only for an instant, feeling a sudden welling of pride at the fact
that he had been able to do something to lift her spirits after all.

He continued for a while longer, Malon dozing as he watched the soft shadows that outlined of her
face. A soft flicker of white light illuminated the barn through the air vents and they both glanced up
at the distant rumble of thunder. Rainfall pattered against the roof, a distant white noise breaking
through their perceptions as it increased in intensity.

"It's raining," Malon whispered.

Link picked up the folded blanket and tossed it to her. She let out an *oof!* of playful protest as the
weight landed on top of her. "You're staying here tonight," He said and waved a finger at her when
she began to speak. "I don't want you even trying to make a run for the house. No arguments."

"Okay," She said with a resigned smile, fingerling her cotton garments as she propped herself up. "I
guess it's a good thing I have my nightdress then." She unfolded the blanket and bundled herself up
like a cocoon until only her head was showing.

Her gaze flickered about the barn as she settled back into the pile of hay. "It's been a while since I've
slept out here with anyone," She said, her eyes going distant as she kicked off her sandals. "Just like
old times."

Link watched her silently, unsure of what to say. Eventually her gaze focused on him.
"How are we going to get rid of it?" She asked, her voice soft.

"I'm working on a plan," He said, then admitted, "It's … a work in progress. I'll have something ready by tomorrow night."

She nodded thoughtfully, then pounded her fist against the floor. "Damnit, Ingo..."

Link propped his cheek in his palm. "We don't know that this is his fault. Or even if he knows about it."

"No … No, I suppose not. It would be just like him too, to accept something like this without questioning it," She huffed, then looked up at him and said, "It's too dangerous. It has to be gone by tomorrow night. We can't afford to lose any more of our stock."

"Like I said, I'm working on it. The only problem is, if I were to just go up there with a sledgehammer during the day, Ingo would be furious and he'd probably just send for another one."

"Then we have to destroy it and make him not want another one," Malon said.

Link held up a finger. "Not only that, but we have to make the person who sent it not want to send a replacement."

"Ganondorf," Malon said, the name a curse on her lips. "He did this on purpose."

Link nodded, letting her work out for herself what he and Navi had already discussed. Malon counted on her fingers as she ticked off their options. "So, we can't kill it during the day when it's most vulnerable. We can't let either Ingo or Ganondorf know we killed it. And we have to figure out a way to kill it so that neither of them will want a replacement." She looked at him questioningly. "Is that all?"

"That about sums it up."

Malon locked her gaze with his. "We're doomed, aren't we?"

Link gave her a smile that was all teeth. "I've been in tougher spots before," He replied casually.

She sighed, then said, "Can't you just shoot it with those fire arrows you showed me?"

He clicked his tongue. "The thing about arrows is that they don't just go in a straight line forever. They've got to come down somewhere eventually. I'm good with a bow, but I've never tried hitting something that can fly this fast. If I miss, I don't think you want me lighting one of the windmills on fire."

They fell silent as lightning flashed again, followed quickly by a peal of thunder. The storm was moving closer.

"We could wait for it to erode, I suppose," Malon said sullenly as she stared at the ceiling.

Link chuckled and reassuringly patted her hand. "Don't worry," He said. "I've still got some tricks up my sleeve. I'll figure something out."

Suddenly the timbers overhead groaned as a massive weight landed heavily on the roof. Their eyes tracked across the roof beams as the old wood paneling groaned with the weight. The noises traced a pattern across the roof, moving from side to side as it slowly made its way forward.

Link frowned. He and Navi had basically worked out that the gargoyle's creators had made it so that
it couldn't tear down buildings just to get at the juicy morsels within. But what happened if it found an open window? Was it searching for an opening now? He wasn't too worried since he had already made sure that the barn was locked up tight, but would it be able to attack them if it found a hole big enough to fit through?

"What's it doing?" Malon whispered, sleep and terror straining her voice.

"Just flapping around," He lied, running a hand down her arm in what he hoped to be a soothing gesture. "Don't worry, it can't get inside. If it could, I would have been a midnight snack days ago." He glanced down, noticing how tired she looked. "You really should get some sleep. You're not going to be in any condition to work tomorrow morning if you don't."

"Can't sleep..." She murmured, her eyelids drooping. She inhaled deeply, snuggling up against him and laying her head on his shoulder. "Soft..."

Link smiled to himself. He didn't know if she meant his shoulder or the hay beneath them. "Yeah," He said, simply agreeing with her.

Malon was still for several long moments, the only sign of movement being the steady rise and fall of her breast. Link hummed the royal family's lullaby quietly, hoping that some of the calming magic that the song held would work through his voice as well as it did his ocarina.

The beast outside gave a particularly loud thunk against the roof and Malon jerked wide awake, eyes scanning the interior of the barn nervously. After several moments she released the breath that she didn't even know she had been holding and sank back into the hay.

Her head found her makeshift pillow once more. "Play your ocarina," She begged, snuggling up closer against him. "I really like it."

Link gave a short laugh. "I should start charging for it."

Malon smiled, never opening her eyes. "Nah, you'd never charge me for a song..."

He exhaled. "No, I suppose I wouldn't," He said, his voice softening. "I'll need my other arm, though."

She adjusted her position and laid her head against his chest. Link withdrew the ocarina from the cloth satchel on his belt, running a loving finger over the mother of pearl gilding before putting the instrument to his lips.

He played through his repertoire of songs, mostly those that he had learned as a child from Saria and avoiding those with magical properties that would have certain adverse effects. The last thing that he wanted was to bring the thunderstorm inside of the barn or to be suddenly teleported to the heart of an active volcano.

Even so, his mind was tired and before long he found himself half-way through the Sun's Song. It was one of his favorites, never failing to remind him of dawn breaking over the forest meadows. Coupled with the fact that he so rarely heard it since he didn't particularly like the song's power, it was tempting to continue, but he brought himself to a close before the ocarina's magic could be activated.

Malon had dozed off long ago, but the sudden silence caused her to glance up. "Why did you stop?"

Link thought about it for a moment, then decided that there would be no harm in the truth. "Would you believe me if I said the song was magic?"
She laughed softly, propping herself up. Her hair fell in crimson rivers around her shoulders. "Really? I get a bedtime story too?"

He spread his hands out before him, painting the scene. "It was a dark and stormy night, just like this one. There I was, standing in the middle of the Kakariko graveyard..."

"Ooh, a ghost story," Malon cooed, her eyes wide and bright.

He told her about using the song of the royal family to prove his loyalty and enter the grave, about the pits of acid and the restless dead that guarded the darkest depths of the crypt. About the phantom composers who continued to serve the royal family even after death.

Malon listened with rapt attention as he spun his tale, gasping at all the right moments, her lips parted in awe. Even if it wasn't much of a story to tell (since he was in and out in about ten minutes) she somehow managed to make it seem more exciting than he remembered.

"A song that causes the sun to set, hmm? You have the best stories," She said with a contented sigh, laying her head back down. "Do you know any more songs?"

"Maybe later. You really should get to sleep."

"Not tired," She said, though the lie was evident in the weight of her voice.

"You're going to be as cranky as Ingo tomorrow," He warned.

"Nuh-uh."

Link sighed. "Fine, one more song," He said, acquiescing. She squeezed his midsection like a stuffed animal in glee.

He played the royal family's lullaby. Malon's breathing grew deeper as he played, but as soon as he blew the final note her head popped up and she watched him with tired eyes.

He tsk'd and stared accusingly at his disobedient ocarina. "Damn, I thought that would work."

"Play?" Malon asked in a cutesy voice, her hands outstretched expectantly like a child.

Link snorted in amusement, and let her take the ocarina from his hands. She mimicked his hand positions and inspected the instrument closely, then brought it to her lips and blew a tentative note. She giggled at the sour tone and allowed him to better position her hands.

"The trick is to keep your airflow steady while you're blowing," He explained. His mind wandered back to the lessons that Saria had given him all those years ago. "After that it's all just practice and memorization. You don't even really need to learn the proper—"

Link glanced down as the ocarina slipped from her grasp, falling to the straw-strewn floor at his side. Malon's head was tilted to the side and resting lightly on his chest, her lips lightly parted as she breathed slow and deep.

He ran his fingers fondly through her hair and smiled. She shifted slightly, pressing into his touch even as she slept, her hand on his chest curled in his tunic.

"Goodnight, Malon."
Break Dawn

The next day was unusually tense. Though they tried to go about their work as usual, Malon couldn’t keep from throwing quick, furtive glances up towards the gargoyle whenever she went outside. The stone creature was framed by an overcast sky, radiating an ominous feeling of dread over the whole compound. Apparently its attempts to ram the barn door the night before had injured it, as a dark rippling scar could be seen crossing over one shoulder and down its sculpted chest. Luckily for them there had been scattered showers throughout the day, so Ingo hadn't remained outside long enough to see it.

As evening approached, Link gathered his equipment and bedding and moved it all into the second windmill at the northern corner of the ranch, the farthest from the main house. Old ropes and rigging hung from the rafters, long abandoned and forgotten. The blades had been left to spin freely, but the mechanical innards of the windmill had all been stripped out years ago from lack of use. Now the building’s sole purpose was to store their unused milk crates. The massive central grindstone that they had once used to mill wheat into flour was all that remained of its original design.

The grindstone now served as a table for most of Link’s tools and weapons that he had collected over the past several months. Or was it years? He still had trouble wrapping his head around the whole time traveling aspect of his quest. Best not to concentrate on that now.

His fingers tapped a nervous pattern on the stone as his eyes swept over his equipment, gauging the strengths and weaknesses of each item as he walked through his options once more.

He'd opted to wear his chainmail. Damaged as it was, it would still provide some measure of protection in case he was caught flatfooted. His hookshot would be invaluable, as were his bow and ocarina. He'd make sure that all three were within easy reach when it came time to face the gargoyle. His bomb satchel might come in handy, but that was unlikely given that the creature seemed to prefer attacking from the air. The Goron warhammer he had recovered from the Fire Temple was heavy and slow, but would probably pack a hell of a wallop if he could stun the gargoyle long enough to use it. His slingshot was probably next to useless against its stony hide, though in a pinch he could use some deku seeds to try and blind it. Maybe...

"That's quite the arsenal you have there," Malon said from behind him as she approached, startling him from his reverie. He hadn't even heard her enter the windmill.

Her eyes swept over the table. "It must get dangerous for a traveling farmhand, being out there all alone." She picked up his hookshot and hefted the heavy tool in her hands, surprised at the weight. "What's this?"

"Something that's saved my life more times than I can count," He said evasively. "You here to wish me luck?"

Malon replaced the hookshot but didn't meet his gaze. "I've just finished locking up the rest of the animals. Even the cuccos aren't getting out of their coop tonight. I told Ingo I thought I saw a fox running around the back field, so I don't think he suspects anything."

His eyes fell to half-mast. "Uh huh. And the reason you're out here instead of safely locked up in the house is because...?"

She finally looked at him. "I'm not going to let you spend the night alone out here."
Link carefully considered his response before he spoke. "Some guys would take that in a rather suggestive way," he finally said.

Malon flushed and lightly backhanded his arm. "You know what I mean, baba."

"This isn't your problem," he said.

"I'm responsible for this ranch, so yes, it is my problem," Malon replied heatedly, then sighed and laid a hand on his forearm. "Look, I know you don't like to talk about your past, but I'm not an idiot. I can put together the pieces. I know I don't measure up to your fighting skills, and I don't know the first thing about magic, but let me help with what I can. What happens if you get hurt out there? What happens if you need help?"

"I've been hurt plenty of times before," Link said, locking eyes with her. "I've patched myself up more times than I can count. Trust me, this is what I'm good at."

"You want me to trust you? Then trust me." She replied, fierce determination burned in her eyes. "You almost never give me a straight answer when I try to learn more about you. You think you're protecting me, I get that. But I'm not some helpless maiden from a faerie tale waiting in a tower for her knight in shining armor. I'm going to protect this ranch – with my life if necessary – whether I have your permission or not."

He blinked, his gaze wandering to the distance. I have been keeping her at a distance, haven't I? He thought sourly.

After several long moments he sighed in frustration, then turned back to her and said, "You're not to leave the windmill for any reason until the gargoyle's taken care of," he held up a finger before she could speak. "Any reason. If for some reason I can't kill it – if I'm injured, hell, if I'm dead – I want you to wait until morning to come find me. I don't want to have to worry about protecting you as well while I'm trying to kill the damn thing."

She held up three fingers. "Gerudo's honor," she said with a coy, satisfied grin.

He glared daggers at her, then sighed and shook his head as he cast his eyes skyward. "Din save me from stubborn women," he muttered, then turned back to her. "Go grab a blanket and whatever else you think you'll need. I'll shuffle some boxes around."

"I'll bring us back some dinner while I'm at it," she said with a mischievous wink.

As she turned and ran out the door he called after her, "Just don't let Ingo catch you!"

He watched her go, her auburn hair billowing behind her as she ran. He felt conflicted about her request to spend the night in the windmill; trepidation for what would happen if she were to be hurt, but also relief that he wouldn't be facing this one entirely alone.

The melodic tinkling of faerie wings above him announced his partner's return. He glanced up as Navi resumed her usual orbit around his head. "Well, this is a problem," she said.

Link lifted his cap and ran a nervous hand through his hair. "You're telling me. The last thing I need is to be worried about her getting hurt while I'm trying to kill that monster."

Navi bobbed in acknowledgment. "Well ... yes, there is that, but I meant that if you want to keep up this little charade you have going on then I won't be able to help you out in this battle."

"Oh," he said dumbly. The thought hadn't occurred to him. "Well ... dammit." He kicked the
millstone in frustration.

"Cheer up partner, it's not all doom and gloom." Navi said and alighted on his shoulder, crossing her legs. "So, have you figured out what you're going to do yet?"

He nodded. "The way I figure it, my first priority is to get it away from the ranch. If I can do that, it should be an easy matter of just doing what I do best."

"My thoughts exactly, though I think the hard part will be drawing it away. It's like a guard dog protecting its territory," She leaned back, resting her hands on her knee. "It's amazing work, by the way. Top grade magic. I'd love to know who made it."

"If we ever run into Ganondorf again maybe you can ask, pick up some pointers."

"Har, har, har," She said, tweaking the lobe of his ear. "Just be careful. It doesn't have any obvious weak spots that you can exploit. I think your best chance is to try and crack open that scar where the stone is weakest. If you can get close enough without getting eviscerated, that is."

"Always the optimist, aren't you?" He teased, then sighed and leaned heavily against the millstone. "I've backed myself into a corner, haven't I?"

Navi was silent for several moments before she spoke. "You know this is a stupid plan, right? Going into battle without your partner to back you up?"

"Yeah," Link replied. "But what choice do I have?"

"The things we do for friends," Navi said with a thoughtful sigh, then patted him on the cheek. "Good luck, idiot. Stay safe."

"You too, pest."

--- Mini-Boss: Grayrg ---

Thunder rumbled in the distance. A strong wind was blowing in from the southwest, bringing with it the heart of the storm system that had been sitting overhead for several days. A gentle drizzle had started just before the sun had dipped below the horizon, and had quickly swelled into a full blown rainstorm.

Link shivered as he stared out over the parapet, his shield propped between the crenelation to form an umbrella over his head. His preparation were complete. Now all he had to do was watch, and wait.

*Couldn't have picked a worse night to do this,* He thought with a resigned sigh. Visibility had been cut to almost nothing and he could barely make out the shape of the gargoyle on the other side of the ranch. Only the occasional flicker of distant lightning allowed him to be sure that the creature hadn't yet moved from its daylight slumber.

Malon and Navi were both settled cozily inside the windmill beneath him, asleep. Or at least they should have been. Who was he kidding? They were most likely both awake, fretting about how this battle would turn out. He'd be doing the same if their roles were reversed.

The transformation took longer than he expected, and his patience was wearing thin by the time he first noticed movement. He was toying with the rather seductive idea of going back down inside and
taking a nap when he noticed that the shadows around the gargoyle shifted, and the creature seemed
to slouch for a moment as stone became flesh. Eventually the monster stretched and spread its wings
wide, and Link imagined he could hear the popping of its joints from his position. Finally it shook its
head and silently leapt into the air.

Link blew out a nervous breath and reached for the unlit torch he had stashed beneath his shield,
using a fire arrow as a quickstarter. "Here goes nothing..."

He slid his arm through the shield's straps as he stood from his crouch and waved the torch high
overhead, a sizzling beacon in the pouring rain. What little visibility he had was cut even further as
the brilliant torchlight destroyed his night vision.

"Hey ugly! Over here!" He called out.

The gargoyle was reduced to a mass of shadows floating against the stormy sky. The beast circled at
a distance over the heart of the ranch, not approaching but close enough to keep an eye on him. It
had to have seen him, but didn't appear interested in approaching.

Link shifted impatiently as the gargoyle made another pass. "Come on, ugly," He muttered to himself
as he waved the torch. "What're you waiting for? Chase me."

As if in answer the creature growled low on its closest approach, but continued to circle. It seemed
wary of their last encounter, and the scarred flesh on its shoulder seemed to be giving it trouble as it
flew.

Fine, I've got other ways to get your attention.

Link laid the torch down as he drew his bow. He squinted against the rain as he sighted the creature
and felt a familiar tingle of magic work its way up his arm. The gargoyle growled again as it circled
near, sensing the buildup of magic.

"Oh yeah, you remember me, don't you?" Link called, taunting the creature as the arrowhead burst
into flames. "Ready for round three?"

He waited until the gargoyle was past the barn and over empty field before releasing the flaming
arrow. He knew his chances of hitting the creature in this weather was minuscule, the chance of
actually doing damage with an arrow even smaller, but his immediate goal was just to get the
monster's attention.

It worked. The gargoyle drew up short and cried out in surprise as the burning missile sped
harmlessly past its stone snout and off into the distant field. It turned and roared, its massive wings
tearing at the air as it swung around and sped towards him.

Link barked out a curse as the gargoyle dived with unexpected speed. He dropped his bow as he
turned and sprinted in the opposite direction, dashing across the softly glowing green sigil he'd laid
on the stone roof and grabbed ahold of the length of rope he had tied to the wooden turbine shaft of
the windmill. The gargoyle roared behind him but he didn't look back as he leapt the battlement and
ran along the shaft. His feet nearly slipped on the rain-slick timber but he spread his arms wide and
managed to keep his balance until he reached the end. He jumped, spinning in midair as the last of
the windmill disappeared and the air opened up beneath him. He had just enough time to see the
creature barreling towards him – its claws outstretched and vicious maw wide – before he fell
beneath the level of the roof.

The gargoyle flashed by mere inches above him, its razor talons sending chips of stone flying as it
carved deep furrows in the stonework. Link clenched the sodden rope tightly in his gloved hands as he slid downwards, once again cursing the foul weather. He barely managed to keep ahold of the rope during his rapid descent and by the time he reached the bottom his palms were hot from the friction. His gloves weren't meant to take this kind of abuse.

The creature swung around and dived. Link ducked between a pair of boulders and waited as it swept low overhead. He'd picked this particular windmill for a good reason; just below it along the outer wall lie a small, flat outcropping that jutted out from the ranch, too low to have been a part of the original fortification, but a perfect place to spring his trap.

He stepped out into the rain after the gargoyle passed and waited for it to swing around. It tried to dive-bomb him again but he simply hid between the boulders once more, then resumed his position once the danger had passed. The gargoyle roared in frustration and began slowly circling overhead.

"Come on down, ugly. You're not going to get me by flying around up there," Link called, spreading his arms wide. "I'm right here!" He took a step forward, daring the monster to attack.

Lightning flickered high overhead, followed quickly by a peal of thunder. Link imagined he could see the gears turning in the monster's mind as it watched him with cold obsidian eyes. It banked and began a slow, circling decent, finally landing on the edge of the outcropping, trapping him with the ranch's high wall at his back.

"Just how he wanted it.

Its wings furled and it prowled forward, no longer hurrying, content that it had finally cornered its prey.

The worst thing was how eerily quiet it was. As far as Link could tell its body moved like flesh, but the faint sound of stone rubbing together could be heard as it moved. Apart from that, he couldn't even hear it breath.

It paused in front of him, seemingly confused that he didn't attempt to run. Finally it lowered its head and growled menacingly, low and deep.

Link held his shield up in front of him and snarled back at the gargoyle. Lightning flashed again, reflecting off of his shield, drawing the beast's attention. "Yeah, you like shiny? I've got something shiny for you."

He reached into the pouch on his hip and drew an entire fist full of deku nuts. The creature was smart, there was no longer any doubt about it, but it didn't have the intelligence to close its eyes as Link dashed the nuts across the rocky ground. Miniature pops of lightning exploded before him, brilliant against his closed eyes even behind his raised shield.

The creature roared in agony, shaking its head violently and clawing at its face. Before it could recover, Link moved onto the next phase of his plan.

Farore's Wind had a number of uses. It would allow him to teleport short distances that he could see, but it could also be used like his Ocarina to teleport him over larger distances, provided that he established the magic sigil first. He never entered a dungeon without setting a marker outside first. (Not that it had helped him in the Forest Temple.)

He tapped the glowing green gem imbedded in his gauntlet, willing the magic to carry him back up to the top of the windmill where he had placed the sigil earlier.

He felt a tiny fizzle of magic, then nothing.
He glanced down at his glove, his heart sinking as he tapped at the jewel in panic. "What the hell?"

His plan had been simple. Get the gargoyle down on the ground outside of the ranch, stun it long enough to use Farore's Wind to teleport back up to the top of the windmill, and drop every bomb he had on the monster until either it stopped moving or he ran dry.

Everything had worked perfectly... until now. For whatever reason the gem had fizzled, leaving him stranded on the ground with a disoriented, extremely pissed half-ton monster. Its wings began beating at the air as it snarled and slashed at the shadows swimming across its vision. It slowly began to rise into the air, though it was obviously still too stunned to attack.

_Time for Plan B,_ Link thought, and beat a hasty retreat back towards the outer wall. He drew his hookshot as he ran and fired upwards. The head pierced the wooden mast of the windmill and yanked him skyward as it retracted. If he was fast enough he could be out of range and still be able to drop a cluster of bombs on the creature's head before—

The gargoyle flashed by overhead, startling him. It ripped the hookshot's head from the wooden post with its teeth as it passed. The chain began to spin out wildly with a buzzing whrrrr.

"Oh shi—" The chain tightened and he was wrenched violently to the side as the gargoyle sped away. Before the thought 'Let go!' could pass through his mind, he was flying through the air.

The gargoyle flew on, seemingly unconcerned with its new passenger. Its heavy wings beat great gusts of wind into Link's face. He squinted his eyes against the bursts of wind and looked down. The ranch laid below, a rapidly shrinking cluster of buildings that spun out of view as the gargoyle swung in a wide circle over Hyrule Field.

Link's mind flashed rapidly through his options, and he looked up. His only choice now lay above him. He gripped the handle tightly and drew himself towards the gargoyle. Just as he drew even with the creature's flank its wings flapped downward, blocking his path forward. He reached out with desperate hands, relinquishing his hold on the hookshot, and barely managed to hook a leg over the creature's spine as he grasped at its wing.

The hookshot kept retracting even after he let go, smacking the gargoyle in the jaw. The beast shrieked in shock, releasing the heavy tool and sending it spinning off out of sight. It finally seemed to realize that it had a wayward passenger,hooking a surprised look over its shoulder. It snarled in fury, spread its wings wide, then turned and dived for the ranch.

Link clenched his legs tightly around the gargoyle's waist. Its rock hard muscles ground painfully between his thighs, but he managed to hold onto the creature's wing with his right hand while he drew his blade. He spun the sword in his hand and waited for the gargoyle to level out. As soon as it pulled up he held the Master Sword over his head in a two-handed grip and aimed it directly at the creature's scarred shoulder.

"Hyahh!"

The sword cut deep, easily piercing the creature's broken hide and lodging between the rocky armored flesh. Black ichor hissed and bubbled from the wound as the blessed blade began to burn through the creature's dark magic. The emerald jewel in its forehead flared with a brilliant fire, and with a sharp crack it shattered.

The gargoyle let out a mighty roar and began to buck wildly. Link kept his legs clenched and used the creature's wild motions to his advantage as he twisted the blade, pressing with all of his weight to drive it deeper towards the gargoyle's heart. _Just a little farther..._
"Land, damn you!" Link yelled at the beast, twisting the blade once more. The gargoyle shrieked in agony, then flipped and dived at a sharp angle, nearly causing Link to lose his tenuous grip. He barely managed to keep from being thrown by releasing his sword and grabbing ahold of the gargoyle's wings, pressing himself against its undulating back. The blade remained stuck in the monster's shoulder, though it wobbled wildly as its powerful magic began to burn away the creature's flesh.

Suddenly the gargoyle shrieked and pulled up violently. Link looked up and felt his heart freeze at the sight. The creature had been so distracted by the sword burning through its shoulder that it hadn't paid attention to where it was flying. He reached again for the sword, hoping to use it to steer the creature away, but his fingers barely managed to brush against the hilt before they slammed into the imposing edifice that rose before them.

Malon stared out at the darkness through the open doorway, her hand clenched tightly around the dragon's head woggle over her breast. She'd seen the monster earlier as it dived towards the top of the windmill, but after that, nothing. Only the sound of the pouring rain and occasional flickers of lightning reached her.

She glanced nervously at her crossbow laid on the milk crate beside her. Link hadn't noticed when she'd sneaked it in earlier with everything else; he'd been far too interested in the sandwiches she'd brought to care. She knew that it probably wouldn't do a damned thing against a monster made of stone, but if she didn't see something soon, she was about to say to hell with her earlier promise to Link and rush outside to find him. She wasn't about to let her only real friend die out there alone.

Suddenly the stone wall on the second floor exploded inwards, sending masonry flying in all directions. Malon cried out in surprise and ducked beneath the loft just as the gargoyle tore its way through the bulk of the hanging ropes. Shrapnel pelted the loft above and a rain of splinters fell from the ceiling.

The creature roared in pain and rage as it fell. Its limbs and powerful wings quickly became tangled in the remaining ropes hanging from the rafters, but it flew on, barely slowed by the added weight. The ropes were torn from their moorings, splintered wood spinning in a wild maelstrom. Malon thought she briefly glimpsed a sodden green form plastered to the gargoyle's back before it rammed the far wall and blew through the opposite side of the windmill.

"Link!" She cried out, and ran hard for the ladder to the roof.

Link barely managed to get his shield in front of him in time. Everything happened too fast for him to process. He felt chunks of masonry wrench painfully at his shoulder as he managed to block most of the falling debris. The rest slammed across his exposed back and thighs.

A length of rope weighted down with a heavy post swung wildly around the gargoyle's shoulder, flattening the shield against his head. He felt other ropes wrap around his waist and lower leg, pinning him to the wildly bucking creature. The powerful wings kept buffeting him as they tumbled through the windmill, slamming his head down repeatedly into the stony hide of the creature.

He gritted his teeth against the spiking pain in his skull and forced his head up, just in time to see the gargoyle collide with the second wall. A falling piece of masonry struck the Master Sword's hilt, wrenching the blade from the beast's shoulder. Link barely managed to twist his body aside as the sword flew past his head, and a bright flare of pain lanced down his calf. He glanced back, briefly relieved to see that the wound was fairly shallow, but felt his heart sink even further as the sword disappeared into the darkness.
The gargoyle hadn't made it out entirely unscathed. It was now wrapped in a web of rope and broken timbers, and its left wing was hindered, cut short from its full span.

The gargoyle shook itself violently, clawing for altitude as it tried to free itself from the ropes. It tore at its own body with its front claws, leaving shallow furrows across its chest and neck. Finally it managed to work its wing free, but in the process the anchored rope snapped back, catching Link across the shoulder and dragging him sideways off the gargoyle's back. He cried out in surprise and pain as his fingers slipped from the stoney wings.

For an instant he was sure he would fall to his death, but was wrenched to a sudden halt as his leg was pinned at the knee by another rope. Pain lanced through his thigh, muscles and tendons screaming in agony from the strain, his arms pin-wheeling wildly as he tried to right himself. He hung upside down, staring at a great clawed foot as it kicked at the air inches from his face. The monster's shin cracked hard against his skull, and for a moment he saw stars.

The gargoyle swung around the windmill, allowing him to see full extent of the damage as they spun. Two entire walls would have to be replaced, and it was only a matter of sheer luck that it hadn't collapsed entirely. For one absurd moment he felt a spike of despondency about all of the extra repair work that he was going to have to put in.

*If I somehow manage to live through this, that is.*

A flash of color caught his attention. The trap door on the roof of the windmill had been thrown open, and Malon stepped out into the pouring rain. She scanned the sky, finally finding them as the gargoyle continued to circle. He imagined he could hear her gasp of surprise. Then he heard her voice.

"Link! Play the sun song!" She cried out, cupping her hands to her mouth to be heard over the storm.
"The sun song!"

Realization struck him like a bolt of lightning. Yes, that was it! He reached for his belt, finding his one last hope as his fingers found the pouch containing his ocarina. He hauled himself up, using the rope around his shield arm as leverage, and managed to bring the ocarina to his lips.

He didn't need anything fancy, just the eight basic keys, twelve notes total. One of the easiest songs he'd ever learned. It felt like ages since he'd learned it. Certainly it had been months since he'd last played it. His fingers found their familiar place, and the world fell away.

He played.

For an instant it was as if the world held its breath. The gargoyle's wings grew still, the thundering rain silent. Link was sure that he had somehow misplayed the song, perhaps forgotten the correct notes. Malon looked on from beneath her sodden bangs, her heart pounding in her breast as she watched from below, impotent.

"Link!"

In the next moment the power of the sun split the heavens around them, illuminating the entire ranch. A bubble of pulsating blue energy formed over the walls of the ranch, only visible to those caught within. Everything outside of the bubble became a muted blur of colors and sound as the world skipped ahead without them.

The bubble dissipated. The storm had passed during the night, leaving only a faint trail of clouds hovering over the eastern mountains. There was a brief roar as the rain trapped inside of the bubble
finished its fall, followed by a sudden deafening silence. Twelve candlemarks had passed in the blink of an eye, carrying Link and Malon and the whole of Lon Lon Ranch away like a great ship down the currents of time.

Malon shielded herself against the early-morning sun hovering low on the horizon, her eyes watering as she became accustomed to the sudden light after hours of darkness.

"Wow," she breathed. There was a part of her that didn't believe that it would work, that his story had been some fantasy he had invented to try and soothe her. If his ocarina had the power to command the sun itself to rise at will, what other wonders did it possess? Even if this was its only trick, she considered herself thoroughly impressed.

Link wasn't quite as impressed, not at all. He was currently hovering approximately thirty meters in the air over what appeared to be a small copse of trees and very, very hard ground. He thrust his ocarina into the safety of his Shiekah scroll and began pulling desperately on the rope twined around his leg.

The gargoyle screeched at the sudden appearance of the burning golden orb low on the horizon. It tried turning, clawing at the air, but the sudden appearance of the sun was sapping its strength. Its wings began to stiffen, flaking off small pieces of stone as it tried desperately, futilely to reach a safe landing spot in time. Exposed sinewy flesh transformed into brittle flakes, brittle flakes turned into cragged pebbles, pebbles became small shards of rock.

The gargoyle gave one last scream in pain and defiance, giving one last desperate flap before— with an earsplitting crack—both of its wings snapped off near the body. It screamed in pain and rage as it plummeted towards the earth.

Link didn't scream as he fell; he was too busy praying to whatever deity might be listening that the fall wouldn't break too much of his vital skeleton. He crossed his arms in front of his face—by far his most vulnerable feature—and let gravity take him. He prayed it would be gentle.

"Link!" He heard Malon call his name, distant, echoing across the plains. Then all he was aware of was the rustling of leave and clothes and the angry snapping of branches. At least, he hoped the only thing snapping was the branches. He couldn't really tell, since his entire world was agonizing, blinding pain. His chainmail took the brunt of the force to his torso, but his limbs were not quite so lucky. More than once he felt a branch pierce an arm or leg and imbed itself before snapping off, allowing him to continue his fall.

Suddenly, he stopped falling. Years or seconds later, he couldn't tell, but he knew it ended quickly, because the abrupt sensation of not moving was a lot more painful than the tearing branches had been.

He rested there for some time, drifting in and out of consciousness, content to simply focus on breathing. He felt more than saw Navi appear, the tingle of her magic as she tried to patch the most grievous of his wounds, though he knew from experience that he would need far more than what his companion could offer. Unfortunately neither of them had the strength to lift his shield and retrieve the healing potion that he kept for such emergencies.

Still, he appreciated the effort. She stayed with him, fanning him with her wings for a short while, before disappearing with a whispered apology.

The next thing he was aware of was the sound of galloping hooves and a high pitched nicker as a horse cantered to a stop barely a yard from his head. He was aware of someone calling his name and
two light pressures resting gently on his chest. At least they didn't hurt.

… Quite as much.

"Link, are you ok? Answer me! Link!" Malon cried as she ripped the twigs away from his body. She probed with gentle fingers around his neck and, finding no broken bones, lifted his face and gently slapped at his cheek. "Hey, hey, listen to me now, you have to open your eyes! Don't go to sleep, you have to wake up!"

Link's eyes cracked open, his swimming, unfocused gaze finding her relieved face. The morning sun framed her head, a softly glowing halo illuminating her golden hair. "Goo' mor-in'," He mumbled as he struggled to prop himself up on his elbows.

Malon let out a relieved laugh as twin pinpricks of tears formed in her eyes, mixing with the rainwater that had soaked through her clothes and flattened her hair. She cupped her hands over her mouth in relief as she inspected his torn clothing. "Oh, Goddesses, you're a wreck. You're bleeding everywhere."

Link looked at her with bleary eyes, then down at his own battered, bloodied body, then back up into her worried face. He sighed as he closed his eyes and his head fell back in exhaustion, suddenly disheartened.

"You're going to use the itchy juice on me again, aren't you?"
Link slowly swam up to consciousness. As his senses gradually returned he slowly became aware of his surroundings. A gentle breeze blew across his face; cool, soothing, the air fresh and clean from a passing rainstorm mixed with the musty animal scents of sweat and fur.

He felt the touch of soft hands on his body, running from his neck to his bare chest, then down over his legs, heard the quiet rustle of movement. Gentle fingers ran along his aching joints and muscles, searching, probing, every so often tapping at a certain spot with practiced precision before moving on. He relaxed, enjoying the sensations, but hissed in pain as those searching fingers brushed against something foreign that was jutting from his thigh.

"Sorry, sorry," Malon whispered, continuing with her inspection.

Only after the sharp stab of pain diminished to a dull throbbing ache did he open his eyes. He found himself lying on a mattress of old, threadbare horse blankets in one of the empty stalls near the back of the barn. Dust motes danced on soft morning light that filtered in through the air vents near the ceiling, illuminating the lower half of his body.

Malon sat next to him, her clothes rumpled and her blouse stained with dark patches of drying blood. Crimson locks spilled over her shoulders, determination mixing with trepidation in her eyes, in the set of her shoulders and the nervous way she chewed on her lower lip. A small satchel of medicines sat beside her, along with a pail of water and a pile of torn strips of off-white sheets; old bedding that she had retrieved from storage. Her posture was tired but alert as she meticulously probed his body for broken bones, ruptured organs, anything that she might have missed.

He laid quietly as she worked, his eyes half-lidded, watching her. After the pain and violence of battle, after all of the death and ugliness, she was something gentle and beautiful, and he was content to simply lie there and drink in the sight.

Malon worked diligently, satisfied only when she found that nothing important had been broken or torn. She'd seen her fair share of wounds over the years, and by necessity had learned how to treat many of them. Working on a ranch could be dangerous work and the nearest doctor was all the way in Kakariko, not worth the trip for minor injuries and too far for anything life threatening.

Her fingers danced across his skin, tracing a spiderweb of crisscrossing scars and pockmarks, across wounds both new and old, most of them barely visible against his sun-darkened skin. Most were fairly minor, but several looked to have been very serious injuries in the past, deep or riddled with scar tissue. Her fingers paused at the intersection of two wounds; one bright red and seeping ruby droplets of blood, the other faded, nearly a decade old.

Was this the price of his courage, the cost of everything he'd done?

"I'm glad you're awake," Malon said, wringing a damp cloth in the bucket beside her and using it to wipe away the blood on his arms. "You had me really worried for a minute there, ya know." She paused in her work, shaking her lowered head. "Goddesses, do you know how that sounds? Like I wasn't worried the whole time you were fighting that … thing..."

She wiped a stray rivulet of blood that was running down his neck, then set the cloth aside. "I barely managed to help you up onto Epona before you passed out. I don't think I would have been able to drag you back here myself, and getting you out of your chainmail was a nightmare..." She blew out a nervous breath as her hands moved to his leg. He looked down, his eyes widening slightly at the
broken stub of a branch protruding from his leggings, imbedded deep in the thigh muscle.

"You're not going to like this next part," Malon warned, her fingers tightening around the branch. "Try to hold still."

"Wait," he croaked, his throat dry. "Potion."

Malon turned, pushing his sweat-matted bangs back from his forehead. "What was that?"

He wet his lips and tried again. "In sh—In my shield." He reached over towards where his shield lay, propped against the side of the stall.

Malon looked back and forth between him and the shield, her brow furrowed with worry, but she stood and retrieved it. She set the pointed bottom on the ground next to him and waited, curious at the artwork adorning its back.

Link reached out, spinning the shield on its axis until the Sheikah scroll faced him. He drew his fingers down the stylized icons of all of the equipment he had collected in the last several months until he found the item he was searching for.

"*Adeat,*" He whispered, and a pale blue glow washed over him as a bottle of cherry-hued liquid formed in his hand.

Malon's blue eyes widened at the sight, but she said nothing as he worked the stopper loose and took a long draw, wincing at the sickly sweet, slightly rancid taste. He coughed, and she wrinkled her nose at the cloying smell of apples left to rot.

The potion wasn't a cure-all as some people thought. It merely drew out the body's natural healing ability and accelerated it a hundred fold, but the energy required still had to come from somewhere, and with his magic reserves tapped he didn't have a lot of options left. He knew from experience that he'd pay for it later if he didn't get a good meal in him, and soon.

Link sighed and relaxed as the potion worked its magic on his battered body, sealing ruptured blood vessels and stitching together skin with thin lines of scar tissue, then steeled himself for what was about to come.

"Okay, go ahead."

Malon set his shield aside and wrapped her hands around the branch once more. Her eyes flicked to meet his. "Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," He said, blowing out a nervous breath.

"On three, okay?" She said, and he nodded. "One ... two—" She yanked hard, causing him to yelp in pain. Dark blood began to bubble forth as soon as the branch was removed.

"Three."

Link flattened his leggings around the hole and poured a generous dollop of potion into the wound. He bit back a curse as the wound hissed and frothed with white foam. After several moments the foam began to evaporate, leaving a deep, puckered crater still seeping blood but far smaller than it had been.

Malon whistled appreciatively, tossing the branch into a dark corner of the stall. "I could use a whole bucket of that stuff."
"Makes for some nasty scars, though." Link said, then drained the last of the bottle before replacing the stopper and setting it aside. He sighed and relaxed as the pain began to fade. "So, did I win?"

"The gargoyle's strewn out in pieces along one of the ridges to the west of here," She said with a smile. "Yeah, you won."

"Good," He said, and brushed his fingers along the hem of her blouse. "How did you get these bloodstains?"

"They're yours."

"Ah..." He looked down. "Sorry for the mess."

Malon gave something between a laugh and a sob and dropped her head, her hair softly brushing his chest. "Don't..." She drew a steadying breath, her hands tightening on his forearm. "Just don't do anything like that again. Please."

He smiled wanly and closed his eyes. "I'll try to work on it."

His chainmail had protected him from the worst of it, but his ribs felt bruised and he had a headache that reminded him of the first time he had tried the mead at the Nag's Head Inn in Kakariko. He hadn't taken a beating like that since the Fire Temple, but at least then he'd had the Goron healers to help him recover.

Malon watched the soft rise and fall of his chest. After a moment she trusted herself to speak. "Well, you know what comes next," She said, withdrawing a familiar brown bottle and forceps from her medicine pouch. Link groaned but said nothing as she went to work.

After she finished with the arm closest to her she helped him sit up for a time, first cleaning out the cuts across his neck and shoulders before wrapping him up in linen bandages. He managed to sit still through most of it with little complaint, but she playfully threatened him anyway when he squirmed, just to keep up appearances. When he laid back down and she was working on his other arm she paused in her work, again running her fingers through his bangs. "How come I always seem to be patching you up, anyway?"

Link shook his head wordlessly, his mind wandering back to the fight. He was a little surprised that the gargoyle hadn't dissolved into a purple mist as usual, but the fact that it had crash landed on the outside of the ranch was a blessing. Even Ingo wouldn't be able to accuse them of sabotaging his favorite statue.

"Better me than you, I suppose," He finally replied, wincing as she dabbed more of the stinging liquid onto angry red wounds. As an afterthought, he added, "Besides, I think it only works one way."

It took her a moment to answer, as she was concentrating more on the task of bandaging his bicep. "How's that?" She asked, half-listening.

He turned his head and favored her with a wry grin. "There's no way I'd be able to get your shirt off every time you got a little scrape."

That earned him a light smack across his exposed stomach. He grunted and winced, his sore ribs protesting, but decided that it was worth it. "I don't strip you down for kicks you know," Malon said heatedly as her cheeks flushed, irritated and embarrassed at his very self-congratulating grin.

Link stuck his tongue out at her. "Li-ar. You know you just want to see my bod-ehg!" His taunt
ended abruptly as Malon pulled a bandage tightly across the worst of the wounds on his arm.

"It's not funny!"

"Oh … oh, it is," He wheezed, grabbing his ribs. "B-but it hurts too much to laugh."

"Serves you right," She said, propping his leg up and rolling his torn leggings past the knee. "You
know, if you keep this up you're not going to have any clothes left. My sewing skills only go so far."

He sighed. "I'll ask Ingo for a raise."

"Good luck with that. In the meantime, you can still wear my Dad's old work clothes until you go
into town tomorrow for our weekly Kakariko run," She paused, then shook her head. "Or today, I
guess … Goddesses, that was…"

"Very ancient and powerful magic," He said, sobering. "I don't like using it if I can help it."

Malon smiled. "I keep thinking I have you figured out, but then you go and pull some new amazing
trick out of your hat." She moved to his other leg, glancing up as one of the cows at the other end of
the barn mooed. "The poor animals are going to be so confused. Would it be a good idea if you
played the song again? We'd lose a day, but we wouldn't have to adjust very much."

He held out a shaky hand and willed the magic to form, but nothing came. After a moment he shook
his head. "No such luck. I'm completely spent."

She clicked her tongue as she finished and moved back up to sit beside him. Her eyes swept over her
work, finding nothing amiss. A few of the bandages were already starting to darken with blood, but
far less than she would have thought. "That's probably for the best, then. How do you feel?"

"Like I went a few rounds with a Goron," he replied. "But better now. Thank you."

He found the strength to reach up, cupping her cheek in his palm. She stopped in her inspection, her
eyes finding his and widening in surprise. A soft smile curled her lips and she leaned into him,
closing her eyes as he ran the pad of his thumb along the gentle curve of her jaw. Eventually,
hesitantly, she reached up and drew his hand away, clasping it within her own.

"Go ahead and rest for a while," She said, then turned and began to pack her medicine bag. "When
you're feeling up to it, stop by the kitchen and I'll fix you something to eat. We still have work to do
today."

Link nodded, leaning back. "No rest for the weary," he muttered to himself as she stood and left.

He laid there for half a candlemark after Malon left, dozing in the warm morning sunlight and letting
the potion work its way through his body. Eventually though he forced himself up, standing on
unsteady legs, and went to find his lost equipment. Navi joined him as soon as he was outside of
the ranch, having already scouted out where he had dropped his sword and hookshot. It didn't take
long to retrieve them, though his sword was lying on a high ledge just outside of the wall, imbedded
in the soft earth. By the time he found it his muscles were aching fiercely and he was walking with a
slight limp as he made his way back towards the main house.

He passed the low ridge where the gargoyle had fallen on his way back. Most of the pieces were
unrecognizable, the stone statue having shattered on impact. Its upper jaw and the spiny crest of its
skull was still in one piece though. The fractured green jewel in its forehead had completely burned
out, turning an ugly shade of brown. Navi speculated that it was what had been controlling the
creature, but admitted that they would likely never know.

His bow would have to wait until later. He didn’t feel up to climbing a ladder all the way to the top of the windmill. After dropping his gear in the barn he found Malon working in the kitchen. She uncovered a plate of toasted bread with a double helping of eggs and put it at his usual place on the table beside a cup of tea. Link sagged into his chair, reveling in what little pressure it placed on his wounds.

"I woke up Ingo but I don’t think he believed me when I told him it was morning. Silly man has his blinds drawn so tight he can’t tell if it’s daylight or not," Malon said. She poured herself a cup of tea and cupped it in her palms, blowing on the steaming liquid. "We’re going to have our work cut out for us."

"Don’t worry, I don’t think it’ll be too hard to convince him. After all, how in the world could we possibly drag something the size of a statue out into the middle of Hyrule Field?" Link said, and dug into his food.

Malon stood by the window as she sipped at her tea, a contemplative, almost pensive look on her face as she stared out at the ranch. Occasionally her gaze would wander back to him as he ate, though she said nothing.

He glanced up, and saw her eyes instantly flick away. "Something on your mind?"

"No, it’s nothing." She paused, her features softening. "Well … It’s just…"

She turned and sat down in the chair across from him, setting the teacup aside. Her eyes didn’t meet his. "I think I’ve finally figured out why you seem so familiar. You remind me of someone, someone that I met a long time ago."

"A friend?" He ventured.

She nodded. "Yes. My best friend, I guess you could say."

He looked at her cautiously, his heart suddenly racing. "Whatever became of … her?"

"Him," Malon corrected, and he felt a yawning pit open in his stomach. "I … don’t really know. We played a lot when we were younger. When I first met him he stayed here for a couple of weeks, but he said he had some important business up at the castle to do. After that he would come by every few weeks and visit for a day or two. We had so much fun together, we were always causing trouble for the other farmhands. Especially Ingo." She laughed, her eyes dancing. "In fact, this one time…"

She trailed off, the smile disappearing from her lips. She shook her head somberly and continued. "Anyway, we were inseparable while he was here. I was such a child back then; I always cried whenever he left, made him promise to return as soon as he could. But he said he had an important mission to take care of. I wasn’t sure I believed him at first, but he always came back with new stories of his adventures, of places I had only dreamed of. Whenever he stopped by he’d entertain all of us with tales of Goron cities hidden deep in the mountains or of a fish that was larger than the barn. Then one day he just—" She spread her fingers wide. "Poof. Disappeared into thin air."

Oh hell, she does remember. "Why didn’t he come back?"

"I really don’t know. I remember that he said something about going to see the Princess, that his mission was almost done. I always figured that maybe he met with her and decided that he didn’t want to bother with me anymore."
She sighed, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "I couldn't blame him, really. Even though I was just as excited as he was, I don't think I really believed him when he said he was going to meet with the Princess of all people. But, you know, what if he did? Why would he want to bother with a simple commoner like me if he got to spend so much time with royalty?"

She reached for her tea, taking a sip before she continued. "Or maybe he was killed when Ganondorf took over. It was just before his rise to power after all. That's what Dad used to say, anyway. Not many people made it out of Castle Town before… Before." She drifted off as her thoughts wandered. "It's probably simpler than that though. I don't want think that he was killed in the purge. Maybe he moved on, forgot all about me. It was stupid to think that it would last forever."

Link folded his hands beneath his chin, resting his elbows on the table as he studied her. Eventually he spoke. "I think that he really did want to return, but something beyond his control wouldn't let him. Maybe his duty prevented him from coming back."

Malon turned to him with a sad smile. "You really think so?"

_I know so_, he thought.

"I know I would," Was what he said.

They sat quietly for several minutes as Malon contemplated his words. Eventually she drained her cup and stood to refill it from the teapot on the stove.

"You remind me of someone I knew a long time ago too," Link said as she returned to her seat.

She looked up, curious. "Oh? Like who?"

"Her name was Saria, and she was like a big sister to me. We were friends for as long as I can remember."

She seemed to mull this over. "Did you love her?"

He blinked, surprised at the question. "I suppose I did, but only as a sibling. We were just children anyway, there wasn't even a chance for a romantic relationship to start."

"Hmm…" She nodded, taking a sip from her tea.

"You would have liked her, I think. She was like you; always looking out for the animals and the other children. We stood up for each other, since we didn't have any parents," he said.

This caught her attention. "You were both orphans?" She asked.

He nodded slowly. "You could say that, but we had each other, and that was all that mattered."

They both looked up as the door to the upstairs landing creaked open. Ingo stood at the top, bleary eyed as he peered down into the kitchen.

"Morning, boss," Link said cheerfully, earning a scowl from Ingo as he descended the stairs.

Ingo grunted and began digging through the kitchen cupboard. "F'ssn mr'nin."

"Hell of a storm last night, huh?"

"Whut storm?" Ingo grumbled, turning to glare at him.
"Link blinked innocently. "You didn't hear the tornado last night?"

"Tornado? What tornado?" Ingo replied, then squinted, finally taking in the bandaged farmhand. "And what the hell happened to you?"

"A thunderstorm blew through the area last night, and a tornado came down right over the ranch. I had to run outside and lock down the barn shutters, got a face full of splinters for my troubles. It almost carried away the cows, and I think one of the goats is missing," Link said. "We suffered some pretty heavy damage around the walls, too. I don't know how you managed to sleep through it."

Ingo's brow beetled together. "What kind of damage?"

Link held up a hand and began counting off his fingers. "Well, let's see. Just from what I've seen, there's some tiles missing from the roof, a couple boards loose on the outer wall. Oh, and it looks like it threw your new statue straight through the north-west windmill. So that's gone now."

"WHAT?!" Ingo screamed, snapping alert. He charged through the front door and out into the sunlight.

"You're getting too good at that," Malon said, suppressing a smile.

"It's a gift," he replied. They waited a moment and, sure enough, a keening wail of despair cut through the air. He gave her a wink. "I think we're in the clear with this one."

Link set his fork down, his head tilting thoughtfully. "So what about you? You've mentioned your father several times, but you didn't seem comfortable talking about it at the time. What happened to your parents?"

For the longest time she remained quiet until he was sure she wasn't going to answer. Eventually she took a sip of her tea which seemed to calm her thoughts, and she spoke. "My mother died in a fire when I was very young. The old barn caught fire, and she was trying to save the animals that were trapped inside when it collapsed." She breathed out, her breath hitching gently, but pressed on. "My father took her death hard, harder than the rest of us. He…" She drifted off, lost in her own thoughts.

"What happened?" He prompted.

She leaned forward, wrapping her hands around her tea, and stared into the steaming cup as she spoke. "He's … sick. Very sick. He's been bed-ridden for years, and hasn't left home in ages."

Link blinked in surprise. "He's here? On the ranch?"

Malon nodded, gesturing up towards the second floor. "He's stayed in his room the whole time you've been here. I used to help him outside occasionally, sit him at the edge of the corral while I worked with the horses, but eventually he couldn't make it down the stairs because of the pain. Now he can barely sit up without my help."

Link stared at her in shock. How had he not known, all this time? But the more he thought about it the more that seemingly random events began to make a little more sense. How Malon would always spend more time on the evening meals, or how the food they bought in town never seemed to last quite as long as it should.

Malon continued, "After my mother died he turned to drinking, he became forgetful and began sleeping in later, taking naps at odd hours. But he always managed to keep this ranch running, even after Ganondorf's rise to power and the other farmhands began to leave. Eventually though, as I grew older, he started to get better. At least, we thought he was." She smiled. "He used to say that I
reminded him of my mother more and more each day. I thought he was taking strength from that, that if I could become more like her that he wouldn't be sad anymore.

"But then suddenly he just started sleeping longer and longer, and at all hours of the day. He would nod off while riding a horse or milking the cows. At first we didn't think anything of it; at that point we had become used to it, but when he fell asleep for over two days straight and woke up weak and tired we knew something was wrong."

"What happened then?" Link asked.

She shook her head. "We brought him to Kakariko, to see a doctor, the potion brewer, an alchemist, anyone who might be able to help. No one could tell us anything. It was almost as if he'd just ... lost the will to live."

She leaned forward, her eyes fixing on him as exasperation seeped into her voice. "But it just doesn't make any sense! Why now, after he was starting to get better? Why not ten years ago when my mother died?"

Link was quiet for a moment as he thought it over. He'd heard of animals, even some people, who gave up on life after their mate died. Could something like that be happening to Talon? "Maybe ... some part of him knew that he still had to take care of you. Maybe, once you'd grown and were able to look after yourself, he just started to let go."

"I don't believe that," she said, then shook her head sadly. "I don't want to believe that."

He watched her as she nursed her tea. All this time? How had he not known? Why hadn't he asked before now? He felt a spike of self-loathing for being so callous, for not even bothering to find out what had happened to Talon.

Eventually she stood and began gathering the dishes on the table. Link imagined he could hear her shields locking back into place as she reached for his plate.

He laid a hand over hers, stopping her. "Let me take care of it for once. You can go get started with the animals."

She looked at him in surprise, but nodded. "I guess I'll have to go inspect the windmill before I let the cows out to graze. I don't want it collapsing on top of them."

"Take it easy today," he warned. "Your body isn't going to adjust to the time change for another couple of days."

"I was about to say the same to you." She waved him off. "I've gone longer without sleep. If I do get too tired I'll find a quiet corner to take a nap in. There's still got a few hiding spots that Ingo doesn't know about."

He watched her go, unsure of what to say.

Ingo returned as Link was busy emptying the water in the wash basin. His face was crestfallen, his shoulders slumped even more than usual, and Link found he actually felt a little sorry for the poor man. It wasn't every day that the ruler of an entire kingdom acknowledged your existence, even if it turned out that he had an ulterior motive.

The lanky man sat at the table for some time with his head buried in his hands, lost in morose contemplation. Eventually he glanced up at the clock and immediately jumped to his feet, muttering
under his breath about how late in the day it was.

Link didn't think anything of it at first when Ingo began preparing a kettle for tea, but after the older farmhand poured himself two cups and heading back upstairs Link began to realize that something about the scene had bothered him.

Normally at this time of day Ingo was busying himself with the horses, not staying inside, and to his knowledge he had *never* seen the man make his own food.

His curiosity piqued, he decided to wait a five-count after the second floor door shut before he turned and followed.

At the second floor he glanced around, but Ingo had disappeared into one of the many rooms lining the hall. He continued down the hallway, pretending to head into the washroom when he heard Ingo emerge from his room behind him, muttering to himself under his breath. Link glanced back down the hall and saw that Ingo had stopped in front of Talon's old room. He noticed briefly that Ingo was still carrying both teacups, now balanced on a tray, and pulled a key from his trouser pocket. He unlocked the door and stepped inside.

Link waited in the washroom just long enough so as not to seem suspicious, but Ingo hadn't left yet. He could hear muffled voices on the far side of the door as he passed, but didn't want to chance pressing his ear to the door if Ingo were to emerge unexpectedly. At least now he had confirmed where Talon had disappeared to.

He took his time cleaning the kitchen. When Ingo came back down the stairs and deposited two empty tea cups in the washbasin, Link waited until the man left then went to go gather his equipment.

He had a stop to make first before he set off for Kakariko.

The window slid upwards with a quiet *shhhk*, locking into place at its apex. Link hoisted himself inside and gingerly crawled over the low dresser, moving carefully so as not to make too much noise. His hookshot remained imbedded in the awning outside. Hopefully no one would bother to look up.

His eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom. He'd only ever been in this room once or twice before when he was younger, but his mind began to pick out an unfamiliar layout of shadows and match them to distant memories. A tall dresser in the corner, pictographs of people and landscapes hanging from the walls, a small nightstand, and a well padded bed at the far end of the room, large enough for two people to sleep in comfortably.

There, beneath the covers – looking thinner, weaker, but very much the same – lie Talon.

Goddesses, had he really been here this whole time? No wonder no one mentioned him. He was skin and bones, little else. He'd never exactly been fat; working on a ranch all day has a way of keeping you fit. But he had once been tall, barrel chested. Proud. Seven years ago, middle age and alcohol had reduced the man from his prime somewhat, but he had always struck an imposing figure when work needed to be done. His smile had won over many a customer and his laugh had once echoed across the fields.

Now though...

"Who's there?" Talon called out.

At first Link didn't respond. He wasn't sure he wanted to, or even what he would say, but eventually
he knew he had to speak up. "It's me Talon. Link," he answered. "Remember me?"

The old man was quiet for several long moments, before tentatively asking, "Little Faerie Boy?"

Link felt an involuntary smile flash across his face at the old nickname. "Yeah, Faerie Boy."

Talon struggled to sit higher, the seemingly minimal effort causing him to breathe heavily. His eyes were groggy, unfocused, but as he studied Link they began to take on a certain sharpness. "I thought … that you'd died. You've been gone for so long…"

Link swallowed at the sudden swell of fond memories that Talon's familiar rustic accent brought, his *Is* and *you's* closer to *Ah's* and *ya's*. Link took off his cap and kneeled at his side, fighting back the sudden surge of conflicting emotions.

"Well, I'm certainly not dead," Link said, giving him a firm pat on the shoulder. "And I'm glad to see that you're still sticking around with your usual gusto."

Talon waved his hand weakly. "Nah, Death ain't gotten his mitts on me yet, an' I don't plan on making it easy on him either."

"I'm glad to hear that. You always were a fighter," Link said.

Talon wheezed out a laugh, then looked him over with an appreciative eye. "Well, y've certainly grown."

Link nodded, acknowledging the compliment. "What happened to you?" He asked. He'd already gotten the story from Malon, but he wanted to hear Talon's side as well.

Talon shook his head weakly. "Don' think I rightly know. One day I was perfectly healthy, and the next I was fallin' asleep at all hours of the day, even if I was standin'. Doctors and witches couldn' figure it out." He blew out an annoyed breath. "Quacks and shysters, all of them."

They fell silent for a moment, Link allowing Talon to regain his breath. It pained him to see his old friend in such dire form.

"Link?" Talon said.

"Yeah?"

"You remember … that promise that you had made … all those years ago?"

_An odd change of conversation_, Link thought to himself. "What promise is that?" he replied.

Talon wet his lips before continuing. "That you'd … that when you'd grown up that you would wed my daughter?"

A wry smile crossed Link's lips at the memory. "I had almost forgotten about that," he said, smoothing the rumpled sheets. "Silly thing, really, promising your daughter's hand off in marriage just because I helped you around the ranch for a couple weeks. You always were a lazy old man."

Talon seemed to think this over before nodding to himself. "Yeah … yeah, I suppose I was…" He chuckled to himself before continuing. "But you look like yu've grown into a fine young man. I don't mind, you know."

"Mind what?"
"If you two wan'ed to get hitched," He said, raising his hand and gesturing to his dresser. "I'd …
even written a formal letter… for her betrothal to you if you accepted. I've kept it in … that drawer
… Never thought I'd need it. Had forgotten about it, really."

Link glanced across the room, his thoughts jumbled. A letter from Talon giving him permission to
marry Malon? Seven years ago he'd not given the old man's offer a second thought, assuming it had
been one of his many bawdy jokes.

Talon laid a emaciated hand over his own, drawing his eyes away from the dresser. "Even though
you were so young, I could see that you'd grow up to be a fine man. Now y've returned, and Malon
deserves more than what life has given her. At this rate, I probably won't be around fer much longer.
I'd like you ta at least consider it, if you would."

Link felt his face grow warm as he replaced his cap and stood, but forced a smile even as his throat
threatened to constrict with emotion. "Go back to sleep Talon. You're just having a dream."

Malon hid a yawn behind her hand as she set the tray on the nightstand and gently shook her father's
arm.

"Wake up, Daddy. Time to eat."

Talon stirred, blinking against the amber light of the setting sun filtering through the windows.
"Good evenin', sweetheart," He said in a tired voice.

"Do you feel up to feeding yourself today?" She asked.

"I think I can manage," he replied, struggling to sit up against the headboard. Malon helped, placing
an extra pillow against his back before returning with the tray. She sat on the edge of his bed and set
the tray before him.

"Here's your water and here," she said, holding up a bowl with a large spoon. "Is your soup."

Talon grunted in appreciation. Malon watched apprehensively as he struggled to bring the shaking
spoon to his lips, ready to step in and help at any time. The soup was mainly cucco broth and soft
vegetables, sometimes with spiced noodles if she'd recently made the long trek to Kelto near Lake
Hylia, healthy and easy for him to digest. They'd found out long ago that anything more substantial
would be quickly rejected. Unfortunately that also meant that there was little substance to his meals,
and his gaunt appearance was testament to the toll it was taking on him.

He leaned back, letting the spoon drop into the half-finished bowl. Malon's heart constricted as she
watched him struggle to swallow. After a moment he regained his breath. "I heard you singing the
other night," He said. "You inherited so much from your mother. No surprise, I s'pose, given..." He
wandered off, his eyes closing in exhaustion.

She wet her lips. "I dreamed of her, the other night. I haven't dreamed of her in so long," She
admitted, nervous and a little ashamed. "I couldn't ... I can't remember her face."

He looked at her sadly, his eyes tracing her features. "You look like her. Got my ears though, which
surprised us to no end, but you've got her eyes." He smiled weakly. "And both of our stubborn
natures."

"I do not," she said, and he smiled at her joke.

As he ate she filled him in on what she had accomplished throughout the day, just as she always did.
She decided to forgo telling him about flesh eating flying terrors, but did mention that the previous night's storm had damaged one of the windmills.

Talon was quiet as she finished. Malon thought that he might have nodded off while she was speaking – it wouldn't have been the first time, after all – but he stirred and cleared his throat before he said, "Link was up here today."

She blinked in surprise. "Link? Link was up here? How did he get in? I thought you keep your door locked?"

He waved a weak hand past her shoulder. "Through the window. Scared me somethin' fierce; thought Death himself was coming for me at first…" He shifted, pushing the covers up away from him.

Malon was already across the room, checking the window. Unless he could jump four meters into the air there was no way that Link could have reached the second story. Then again, he was always pulling surprising new tricks out of his hat... "Are you sure he came in through the window?"

"Yeah … I was so glad when he said he remembered the promise he made me."

Malon was already halfway out the door with a promise of her own forming in her mind; that of a swift and painful death for the hired help. "Promise? What promise?"

"After he came back from the castle, that he agreed to marry you when he grew up."

She froze in her tracks as her mind made the connection.

That's right, she thought as long lost memories began to bubble to the surface. Faerie Boy. I was right the first time. They do share the same name, don't they?

She turned to face her father, a sad look in her eyes. "No, no, different Link, Dad. That Link's dead. You said it yourself, that he died years ago. Remember how I told you we finally hired someone new to help out around the ranch? It's not the same person."

Is it?

Talon shifted again, adamant in his resolve. "I thought that I was dyin' when I saw him. 'Cause that's what happens, right? When you die? You start seeing other dead people." He inhaled deeply before closing his eyes again. "But he was real. I could feel it. It was really him."

Malon reached across the bed and felt her father's forehead. It was warm. Too warm. He had already exerted too much energy. "I think you're seeing things Dad. Your fever is spiking again. Just drink your water and get some more rest, and I'll come up and check on you before I go to bed." She leaned down and gave his forehead a loving kiss as he settled back into the pillows.

"Goodnight Dad. Please get better soon."

He grunted softly, his eyes heavy as exhaustion took him. "I love you sweetheart."

"I love you too, Daddy."

Link returned from Kakariko just after sundown. He made sure to put everything away himself, waving Malon off from helping. She didn't notice the spare, large package he withdrew from the wagon's secret compartment, which he hauled up into the loft and buried behind several stacks of
After a light dinner and a quick bath, Malon still felt wide awake, so she decided to show him one of her father's favorite games. She set a fire in the hearth for extra light and brought him to their small bookshelf, reaching up towards the highest shelf.

Link glanced at the aged-cracked leather bindings lining the shelves as she reached for the box. Most were on animal breeding or veterinary medicine, but there were a few other dusty tomes with interesting titles mixed in. Someone had had eclectic tastes in reading material.

*The Daylight War... Hyrule Hystoria... One Flew Over the Cucco's Nest...*

Malon strained, but even with her height, she had some trouble reaching the box. Link stepped forward and was about to grab it when her fingers brushed against the chess set, sliding the box towards her. She gave him a coy smile as she pulled it down, and her eyes crinkled as she brushed past him, as if to say, "I don't always need your help." Her hair was still damp, with the faintest hint of cinnamon from her soap. Link chuckled as she passed, properly chastised, and followed her to the sitting room.

"My father used to play this with my mother all the time," she said as she opened the box and laid the pieces out on the checkered black and white board. "It was sort of the communal game, actually. Back when we had a dozen people living here, most of the farmhands would take turns playing with me, but Ingo never enjoyed it so I haven't gotten a chance to play in a while. I might be a little rusty."

"I'll try to go easy on you," he replied, though he didn't recognize the game.

Malon quickly arranged the pieces as she gave Link a brief overview of the rules and general strategy. Before long they were sending pawns charging to their inevitable doom.

She was surprised by how quickly Link caught on, even given how long it had been since she'd last played. He lost the first game badly, but the second game was much closer, and it was only one badly placed rook that cost him the third. He moved offensively, never castling even after he was shown how, and Malon was able to draw him into some bloody ambushes. He rarely made the same mistake twice though, and she found it harder and harder to counter his rapid assault and strike back with her own.

"No luck finding your friend today while you were in town?" Malon asked as they reset the board for a fourth round.

Link shook his head, electing to move a pawn before he answered. "No. I swear he's disappeared into thin air."

"Well, they say the Sheikah are good at that sort of thing," she said with a coquettish grin, sliding her bishop out from behind her lines.

"Don't I know it," he replied, moving his knight. Her rook slid past his line of pawns and began wrecking merry havoc. "You still don't believe that I know a Sheikah, do you?"

Knight takes rook.

"Two of them, if I recall correctly," she said, her voice carefully neutral.

Bishop takes knight.

"And you're still not sure that you believe that," he pressed, watching her carefully as he slid his
queen across the board, sending her bishop to stand with the ranks of the honored dead.

Malon smiled ruefully. "I just have a hard time trusting people, I guess. Between Ingo, bandit raids, and cut-throat merchants, I don't exactly have the best relationship with most of the people I know. You have to admit, it's rather hard to believe that you're friends with people from a race that's been extinct for almost two decades."

Knight takes queen.

Link clicked his tongue at the mistake and leaned forward, trying to concentrate more fully on the task at hand.

Malon leaned back in her chair, allowing him to gather his thoughts. His eyes carefully swept over the checkered board as he studied his options. She watched his face attentively, fascinated by the subtle shifts of emotion that flickered across it as he picked through his options; evaluating, searching, discarding.

"But you said a few days ago that you trust me," he said as he finally chose his move, his eyes flicking upwards to lock with hers.

She fought to keep her breathing steady, her fingers gripping the worn arm of the chair. It was strange how piercing his eyes could be in the firelight, dark as a lake at night. She leaned forward, carefully meeting his gaze as she thought about her next move.

"I do trust you, Link," she admitted. "More than I've trusted anyone in a long time."

She breathed deeply, pushing aside her sudden nervousness. "We haven't had anyone else here in so long. After everyone left, it all fell on my father, Ingo, and me. And now my father..." She shook her head sadly.

"There's just too much ranch to run with only two people. And Ingo isn't exactly the kind of person that will sacrifice to ensure it stays afloat, if it comes down to that. We're standing on the edge of the abyss here, and one small push is all it will take to ruin everything that my parents built. I don't want to be the one responsible for letting that happen."

She swallowed nervously. Her heart was beating faster, and she felt the faint burn of a blush working its way up her cheeks. She fought to keep her eyes on his as she spoke. "If … if it turns out that you can't find this friend of yours, that you can't continue this … whatever this journey is that you're on ..."

She slid her queen into place, and said quietly,

"You could stay here, you know."

Checkmate.
The next day was blessedly uneventful.

While there was little chance for Link or Malon to truly relax, they at least had a chance to catch their breaths as life on the ranch slowly returned to normal. Tired though they were, they'd both agreed to try and push through the day instead of relying on the ocarina's magic, thereby confusing the animals even more.

It was a miracle that the gargoyle hadn't struck any vital support beams on its way through the northwest windmill. The old tower was ruined, but stable. It would take more lumber and stone than they could currently afford to make a full restoration, but with a few creative suggestions on Malon's part they found that some of the larger crates could be dismantled to be used as a temporary patch, and the repair work was progressing quickly. It would keep the rain out, at least until they could afford a mason. Link had found that he was quite handy with a saw and hammer, but stonework was beyond him. He made a mental note to send a letter to the Gorons the next time he got the chance.

Unfortunately, Ingo had started becoming more erratic. The destruction of his new statue had sparked a paranoid streak, and more than once had Link seen him throwing evaluating looks in his direction while he helped with repairs. Though he didn't comment on it, Link was sure that he noticed that the hole in the wall on the outside of the ranch was higher up than the one facing the barn. It seemed like the man hadn't completely bought Link's tornado excuse after all.

After midday Ingo had abandoned all pretense of assisting in the repair work and disappeared into the southwest windmill, even skipping the evening meal. Navi volunteered to scout the place more thoroughly, but all she could report was a curious lack of magical energy where the ward wall seemed to end. The windmill had been well and truly sealed shut. Ingo only reappeared after sunset when it was time to leave for his weekly trip to the ale house.

That evening Link stayed up and played memory games with Navi long after everyone had bedded down for the night. When he felt that it would be safe to move about unnoticed, he lit a lantern and dimmed the flame, then retrieved the package he had brought back on the last trip to Kakariko and carried it towards the main gate.

As Malon stepped out into the pre-dawn morning, she was surprised to see Link already standing by the gates leading into the compound, his arms crossed as he patiently waited. More often than not she had to go and prod him awake before she started breakfast. She hefted her egg basket and strode forward to greet him.

"Still having trouble sleeping?" Malon asked. She was still having trouble turning her schedule around after Link had played the sun song.

Link shook his head. "Not that. I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday before we started work today."

"I—" She stopped and blinked in surprise. She was sure she'd never mentioned it in front of him before, and since Ingo didn't care in the slightest she had resigned herself to celebrating another year by herself. It hadn't seemed important enough to tell anyone else. "How … how did you know?"

"Come now, you can't keep something like that to yourself," he said with a secretive smile. "Besides, I wanted to apologize for tearing holes in your ranch. I thought you'd appreciate a nice birthday gift."
He gestured upwards.

Malon gasped in surprise, the basket dangling from her elbow as her hands went to her lips. There above their heads was a brand new sign welcoming them to Lon Lon Ranch. Whereas the old one had been a simple wooden frame straight across the gate, this one was worked brass, the words 'Lon Lon' arcing proudly above the emblem like the rays of a rising sun with 'Ranch' sitting as the foundation below. A replica of her dragon's head woggle had replaced the old steer in the center, its mouth open in a defiant roar.

As she stood admiring the crest she saw Link start to fidget out of the corner of her eye. She waited a moment to let him stew, then turned with a warm smile.

"We're going to have to change the emblem on the milk bottles," she finally said, then lightly gripped the arm of his tunic, pulling him down and planting a quick kiss on his cheek. "Thank you. It's beautiful."

Malon was humming to herself as she started breakfast. Her spirits were lighter than they had been in a long time. Just the thought that Link had done something so thoughtful for her sent a special thrill up her spine.

_Maybe he's thought about my offer to stay? _she thought, feeling her cheeks warm. She hoped he would.

Of course, she should have known that such a good start to her day couldn't possibly last. Ingo plodded down the stairs just as she was finishing the eggs, his hair unkempt and smelling of last night's ale.

She took a steadying breath before she turned and greeted him. "Good morning, Ingo."

He grunted in response as he filled his mug from the coffee kettle, then slid into his usual seat at the table. She put together a plate and set it in front of him, and wasn't even surprised that he didn't bother with a simple 'thanks' before he dug in. She turned back to the stove to begin cleaning before Link arrived.

Ingo had nearly cleared his plate before he finally spoke. "I've decided that I'm going to take Talon to Labrynna today."

At first Malon had thought that she'd heard incorrectly. "What? Why?" she asked, turning in surprise. "Last night I got to talking with some people in a caravan passing through. They said they've met a witch outside of Lynna City who can supposedly heal anything," Ingo said, draining his mug. "So I'm going to go drop him off there for a couple weeks to see if he gets better."

Malon felt horrified at the prospect. Her hands were clenching and unclenching themselves at her sides. "What are you saying? You're just planning on abandoning him with some witch?"

"We'll see how it goes," Ingo said, standing to refill his mug.

It was a moment before Malon could find the words to speak. "What are you really after, Ingo? Not once in the past two years have I seen you so concerned for my father's health." She speared him with a suspicious glare. "How is this benefiting you?"

Ingo seemed nonplussed by the accusations. "Frankly, I'm sick and tired of him. He was a lazy, good-for-nothing slob to begin with, but for the past two years he's been nothing but a drain on my
wallet." He shrugged. "I won't put up with it any longer."

"So that's it?" Malon asked. "You're just going to up and kick him out of the house and hope for the best? He needs his bedrest!"

"What he needs," Ingo countered, his voice rising as he finally lost his temper. "Is to get his fat, lazy ass out of bed and do some damned work for once in his sorry life!"

Malon slammed her hands on the table. "How dare you! If it weren't for my father this ranch wouldn't exist!"

"And who's been running it for the past two years?" Ingo sneered. "Time to face facts, bitch, because daddy ain't getting better."

"He will! He's been getting stronger. You just have to give him more time."

Ingo's laugh was cruel, cutting. "The old sod hasn't shown a trace of good health since he fell into bed. If he were a horse you would have put him down years ago."

Malon's nails dug into the tabletop. The pain was the only thing keeping her from leaping across the table and clawing at his face. "He's not a horse, damnit, he's my father!"

"Which is why I'm willing to drive him clear across the continent to Labrynna," Ingo sneered, sensing victory. "To try and cure him, out of the kindness of my heart."

"You don't have a heart," Malon seethed.

The front door creaked opened and Link strode in. He froze upon seeing the two of them squaring off across the table like wolves.

"What did I miss?" he asked cautiously.

Ingo waved a dismissive hand as he turned. "Just get the cart ready, wench. I'm leaving with your father before midday."

Malon had become increasingly sick with worry about her father in the three days since Ingo had left with Talon. She found herself distant and distracted, and her mind was wandering as she milked the cows that morning.

What if her father took a turn for the worse on the road? What if they were attacked on the way to Labrynna? And all the while her thoughts kept drifting to what Ingo's true motivation was. She didn't believe for a second that he was doing this for the good of the ranch. Ingo was only motivated by what would serve him best.

What is he really after?

The animals weren't faring much better. The cow that she was milking gave an agitated bellow as her fingers clenched too hard around its teats.

"Oh, I'm sorry Peyla," she said, running a soothing hand along the cow's flank. Peyla sniffled, sidling away when she reached to continue the milking.

Malon cupped her forehead in her hands and clenched her eyes shut as frustration finally overwhelmed her. Get ahold of yourself, girl...
"Hey, Mal, have you—" Link said as he stepped into the stall. He froze upon seeing her, his brow drawing together with worry. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked softly.

"I'm fine," she lied, sweeping her hair back. "Just tired. Did you need something?"

He studied her for a moment before speaking. "Well, I had planned on waiting until a little later, but... Since Ingo's taken the wagon and we can't deliver the milk until he gets back, I was thinking that maybe we could take a short holiday?"

She laughed, turning on her stool to face him. "A holiday? Are you sunsick? For the last two people on an already overworked farm to take a holiday?"

"One night. Twelve hours at the most, just enough time for you to clear your head. Then you can come back and milk the cows to your heart's content." He put his hands together in supplication and gave her his best puppy eyes. She still looked unconvinced, but he saw the faintest hint of a smile tugging at her lips. "I promise you, it'll be worth it," he pressed.

She sighed, shaking her head. "What did you have in mind?"

Link smiled. Another win for puppy eyes. "Remember a couple weeks back when we went to Kakariko? They were gearing up for a big festival, and I've been keeping track of the days. It's supposed to be going on right now."

Malon looked up, her eyes going distant. "I suppose it is that time of year again, isn't it? Huh." She shook her head, surprised that she could have forgotten. First her birthday, then the harvest festival. The days were just starting to blend together.

"I don't really have anything to wear to a festival, though," she said, then paused as an idea struck her. "Unless..." She chewed on her thumbnail thoughtfully as a plan began to develop in her mind. Yes... that could work...

"Unless what?" Link prompted.

Malon looked to him. "Do you think we'd have time to stop by a tailor?" she asked.

Link nodded, smiling. "I'm sure we could find one. I'll go saddle up Epona while you get ready."

Malon adjusted the small satchel slung across her shoulder as they rode across Hyrule Field. It had taken her longer than she would have liked to pick which of her mother's old dresses to take with them. She wasn't the sort to worry about her appearance the way some girls would, but this was a special occasion and she wanted to make the most of it.

You just want to look good for Link, a small part of her whispered. She found that she couldn't disagree.

She'd carefully packed it into a saddlebag instead of wearing it, for two reasons. First, because she didn't want to risk ruining it on the ride to Kakariko. Second, and most importantly, because when last she'd tried it on it hadn't quite fit properly. Her mother had been tall and elegant, and Malon's frame hadn't filled out in quite the same way. Hopefully they could find a tailor that would be able to adjust it for her.

She shifted uncomfortably, her arms tightening around Link's waist. It felt so unusual to be riding behind someone once again, especially since she was the sole person responsible for breaking in and tending to the horses on the ranch. She hadn't been a passenger on a horse since her father had taught
her to ride all those years ago.

Still... I suppose this is kinda nice...

She inhaled deeply, enjoying the fresh smelling wind blowing across of Hyrule Field. It was midday, and the sun was high in the sky, but the early autumn breeze kept them comfortably cool as they crossed the vast, wavy ocean of grass. She breathed deeply again, enjoying the familiar scents of grass and horse and...

She leaned forward slightly, resting her forehead against the young farmhand sitting before her, her eyes closing as a slight thrum of pleasure ran up her spine. He had such a clean, masculine scent, of straw and horses and sandalwood, not like that brute Ingo who always seemed to smell of alcohol and cheap cigars even when he hadn't been near a bar in a week. She found it hard to describe, and wondered how Link always managed to keep himself smelling so fresh even when he came into the house for dinner drenched in his own sweat after a hard day's work.

Must just be healthy living.

She felt him shift slightly. "You falling asleep back there?" he asked. She could hear the smile in his voice.

Damn, busted.

"Just bored," she countered, lifting her head. Her arms tightened fractionally around his waist. "It's been a while since I haven't had to steer. Don't really know what to do with myself."

He patted one of her hands over his waist. "We'll be there in no time, I promise," he said.

"I know," she replied, letting her head fall forward again and inhaling deeply.

She was in no hurry.

They arrived at Kakariko Village in good time, a full two hours before sundown. The low background roar of a festival already underway could be heard even before the village gates came into view.

"I haven't been to one of these in ages," Malon said, leaning over Link's shoulder to get a better view.

"We used to have something similar back home," Link replied. "When the deku nuts began to turn red we'd put out paper lanterns on all of the trees to celebrate the end of summer. I've never been to one in a place like Kakariko before, though."

"Never?"

He shook his head and steered Epona towards the main gates.

Large banners flew from the palisade walls. The guards were their usual prompt selves in raising the portcullis, but Malon noticed that many of them wore armor that had been shined to a fine polish. The gates themselves had been decorated with flower and tassles.

"They're really pulling out all of the stops, aren't they?" Malon said, turning in the saddle.

Link steered Epona around the outskirts of the village to avoid the raucous mass of people that had clustered near the main thoroughfare. Ever since Ganondorf had come to power and Castle Town
was burned to the ground, Kakariko had been transformed from a sleepy backwater up in the foothills to a major center of commerce. Hundreds of people had traveled from neighboring villages for this event, eager for trade.

They left Epona at the stable behind Baru's inn and headed back towards the center of town. The festival had started early that morning, but the celebration was still going strong. Malon hooked an arm around Link's elbow to avoid being carried away by the crowd as she took in the sights. He steered them through the crowd, simply content to take in the sights since they had no real destination.

Jongleurs pranced by in twos and threes, brightly colored balls sailing through the air as others played pipes and tambourines. Towering above the crowd were children on fathers' shoulders, faces sticky with smeared paints and pudding.

The air smelled of fried sausages and onions, of churned mud and the ripe stink of manure. Through a glass window they passed they could see the fiery glow of an open oven as a heavy-set woman pulled out fresh steaming loaves of bread.

A man's hand jerked out, barely managing to grab the sugarloaf that had slipped through his fingers. A seven-year-old girl sitting on top of a stack of crates gnawed contentedly on a turkey drumstick as large as her forearm as she watched the crowd with wide-eyed interest. A bald, barrel-chested man wore tomato sauce like war paint as he called for another bowl of stew.

Young men and women strolled through the crowd, many with fingers laced and wearing matching armbands of blue silk to signify their betrothal in the past year. Malon watched as one such couple passed, their smiles bright as they laughed at some private joke. She glanced down at her arm hooked around Link's elbow, then ever so slowly lowered her hand until her fingers were entwined with his, and was thrilled when he didn't pull away.

The wind snapped blue and gold banners decorating the local militia recruitment tent, while steely eyed sentries patrolled the crowds, ever watchful for thieves. Merchants called out from dozens of stalls, rivaling even the old Castle Town marketplace in scale and selection. A chimney sweep advertised free exorcisms with every cleaning.

Two recently sheered sheep lay in their pen. One was draped with a bright yellow and orange crosshatched quilt, while the other shivered nearby, nude. Their owner was busy knitting a second quilt, this one a garish brown and purple.

"Kittens!" Malon cooed with delight, he eyes dancing as she pulled Link towards a large basket full of mewling newborns. The old man selling the kindle nodded his head at Malon's hopeful look, and she reached into the basket with eager fingers and plucked out a soft grey kitten with a stub tail. Link watched in amusement as the redhead cuddled the tiny creature, answering the kitten's tiny squeaks with mews of her own. Sadly their cucco flock would have the poor thing for dinner if they were to bring it back to the ranch, and Malon reluctantly put the kitten back with its siblings. She cast a wistful look over her shoulder as they moved on.

As they wound their way through the village the crowds began to die down. Stalls for food and games slowly gave way to more specialized shops advertising such things as ceramics and metalwork. Malon steered them towards the end of a line of merchants where a large pavilion had been erected and was filled with racks of clothing.

A bored looking man sat to the side, his heavy boots propped up on the seller's table. He looked up from his book as Link and Malon stopped and, seeing their interest, pulled a cord hanging beside him. A silver bell jingled overhead, and in seconds a wizened old woman in flowing maroon robes
swept out from behind a curtain in the back.

"Welcome, welcome," the old woman said. "How can I help you youngsters this evening? We carry everything from tunics to trousers to turbans, if it strikes your fancy."

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me with this," Malon said, lifting the flap on her satchel and pulling out a length of fabric. The dress glittered in the fading sunlight, a deep cobalt blue with silver highlights.

"Ahhh." the old woman's eyes widened as she ran an appreciative hand over the fabric. "Blue shimmersilk. Very rare, very rare indeed, and extremely delicate. Not many people know how to work with it properly. You have fine tastes, my dear."

Malon's shoulders slumped. "Does that mean there's no way to make it fit?"

The seamstress clucked her tongue and waved a chiding finger. "I've spent decades of my life learning my craft. When you've successfully mended terrorpin turtle-skin, shimmersilk is but a minor challenge." She gestured to the side of the stall, where a small tent had been erected. "Come inside and change, and let's see what we have to work with."

Malon set the satchel on the small table to her left as she entered. A lantern hung from the top of the large free-standing mirror that had been set against the far wall, providing enough illumination to see in the enclosed space. Shutting the curtain behind her, she began to disrobe. After removing her top and skirt she pulled out the dress, pressing it to her body as she studied herself in the mirror. With a start she realized that the cut of the dress would plainly reveal her brassiere if she were to wear it. Reluctantly – and with several furtive glances towards the entrance – she quickly stripped down to her undergarments and slid the dress over her head.

She looked into the mirror at her slender form, admiring the way that the dress clung to her curves yet left enough to the imagination so as not to be indecent. The bodice felt a little loose to her, but the rest was snug yet flexible enough to not restrict her movements too much. It had been years since she'd last tried it on. Perhaps she'd grown into it after all. If not for the bodice it would have been a perfect fit.

"All of that farm work I suppose," she thought, pulling the bodice tighter against her chest, examining the way the cloth folded snugly around her breasts. "Those village girls outside don't have to perform as much strenuous work as I do, she thought bitterly. "They have time to sit around and grow fat and happy…"

Still … she didn't think she was unpleasant to look mother must have been a vision in this dress at her age.

"I wonder if Link prefers larger chests…"

The old woman poked her head into the tent. "Ah, you do look lovely, dear," she said, stepping inside to get a better view.

Malon turned to her. "Thank you, but … it doesn't quite fit."

"That's all right, dear. That's what I'm here for," the seamstress said. She reached into her robes and withdrew a worn leather satchel, then spread it out on the table. Dozens of needles and clips glittered in the lamplight, along with spools of thread of every color. "All it needs is a little hemming and it'll fit like a glove." She grabbed a handful of pins and turned back to Malon.
"Now, let's see where it doesn't fit," she said, spinning Malon slowly to inspect the dress for herself.

"Mostly around … here…" Malon said, gesturing vaguely to her chest.

The seamstress noticed Malon's discomfort and gave her arm a reassuring pat. "Don't you worry sweetheart. Not all women are built the same. I'm guessing that you've never worn this dress before?" She smiled at Malon's hesitant nod. "It's much easier to tuck cloth away than it is to add it on. We'll have this fixed in two shakes, that we will," she said, then turned and selected several of the smallest needles.

Malon waited patiently as the seamstress began pinning the fabric around her sides, content to watch the old woman work her craft. She had only a basic understanding of sewing, but she recognized a master at work when she saw it, and hoped that she could pick up some of what she saw.

It took longer than she expected, but she managed to hold still as the old woman worked. Her feet were just starting to ache when the seamstress stepped back and began repacking her satchel. "This is only a temporary fix, mind you," the old woman warned. "Shimmersilk requires much more care to cut than to fold and tuck. If you want me to make the changes permanent, you'll need to leave the dress with me for a day or so. But I expect you'll want to wait until the festival is over for that."

"I'm happy with whatever you can do for me," Malon said, turning to study herself in the mirror. "Yes, this looks beautiful. Thank you very much."

The old woman ran an appreciative hand through Malon's hair. "And it goes so well with your hair. Such a rare color you have. What do you condition it with?"

Malon gave an apologetic smile. "I don't even know what that means."

"All the better for you I suppose. Some girls have all the luck," the seamstress said, clucking her tongue. "Now, let's see what we can do to make your boyfriend's jaw wag."

Malon's cheeks flushed. "He's not my..." She was too embarrassed to finish the sentence.

"Oh? Such a shame," the old woman said with a bawdy grin. "I think I have just the thing to change that."

Link stared up at the cloudless evening sky with a bored expression. "Does it normally take this long?" he asked the man sitting beside him.

The short, balding proprietor merely shrugged, never looking up from his book. "They're women, they've got to make every little thing perfect or else they're not happy," he said, flipping a page. "My wife once spent an entire morning getting herself prettied up for a trip to Lake Hylia. Never mind the fact that the wind and the bumps in the road on the way there completely undid everything she had done."

"Hmm…" Link closed his eyes as he slouched forward, resting his chin in his hands.

After a few minutes he looked up at the sound of cloth rustling. The seamstress had stuck her head out of the tent flap and was gesturing to her son. "Marke, I've an errand for you, boy."

"Boy?" the older man muttered, but he set his book aside and went to consult with the old woman. After a moment he turned and ran off towards the market square.

The woman turned to Link. "Patience, young man. It'll be worth the wait," she said, then
disappeared back into the tent.

Link leaned back and closed his eyes, settling in for the duration.

Eventually the sun had set behind the tall mountain peaks, bathing the village in twilight. Torch runners began lighting the sconces scattered about the main thoroughfares and across the marketplace. The shop owner returned and passed a small package into the tent, then settled up the cost with Link. After he’d counted out the appropriate amount of rupees he went back to dozing in the chair as the older man resumed his reading.

*I wonder what Navi's gotten up to,* Link thought.

He felt a little guilty for keeping her cooped up on the ranch, so he'd told his faerie companion before they set off that she should find something to amuse herself with while they spent the evening in Kakariko. She'd taken off towards town without so much as a backwards glance. Hopefully she wouldn't get caught stealing too much food.

"All done."

Link opened his eyes as the seamstress exited the tent and stepped to the side.

"Stand up, boy," the old woman snapped, causing Link to leap to his feet. "It's not every day that a pretty girl dresses up for you."

Malon poked her head out of the tent, clutching the fabric tightly to her face. "Promise not to laugh," she said with a worried expression.

He blinked in surprise. "Of course not."

Malon chewed on her lower lip nervously, then ducked back into the tent. With a sigh she flipped open the tent flap and stepped out into the torchlight, avoiding his gaze.

The dress was boldly cut, with a fitted bodice that hooked around her neck but left her pale, freckled shoulders bare. The fabric of her dress shimmered in the torchlight like liquid lapis lazuli. A tea-length skirt flowed around her long legs as she stepped forward, ending just below the knees. Instead of her usual knee-high boots she wore simple laced sandals, taking nearly an inch off of her usual height.

Her crimson hair was tied back in a simple style and plaited, letting her bangs fall loosely around her heart-shaped face. A single white lily was tucked above her left ear, and her cheeks were rosy with a rather becoming blush.

Finally her eyes found Link. She crossed an arm behind her back, rubbing at her elbow with nervous energy as she dipped her head and watched him expectantly through her bangs.

"Wow," Link said, his mind going blank as he took her in. "I, uh ... I don't know what to say."

She frowned nervously. "Is it really that bad?"

"No!" He said in a panic, waving his hands. "No, no, it's not that! You just look ... wow..."

"I think he likes it," the old woman chuckled. "Go on then, girlie. Have fun at the festival." She gently nudged Malon from behind, causing her to reach out and catch herself on Link's raised hands. He helped her steady herself, keeping ahold of her elbows.
Link struggled to find something to say. He glanced down, running an appreciative thumb over her sleeve. "I think blue is your color."

Her blush deepened. "Th-thank you…"

He swallowed nervously, suddenly realizing that he was staring, and took her hand. "Come on, let's go see the rest of the festival."

"But I haven't paid yet," Malon said, turning.

"I already took care of it," Link replied. Malon tried to protest, but he waved her off. "Think of it as another belated birthday gift."

The old woman slipped Malon's satchel over Link's shoulder, now filled with spare clothes. They both thanked her one last time before they turned to leave. "Have fun you two," she called after them.

She gave a satisfied sigh as they disappeared into the crowd. "Ah, young love…"

They'd nearly come full circle through the village, so they left Malon's satchel in Epona's stall before continuing. Malon kept close to Link as they walked. Occasionally she would recognize people in the crowd, or men would turn and stare as they passed, and she would duck her head against Link's arm, her cheeks burning.

Link looked down at her, concerned. "Why would you wear that if you're embarrassed to be seen in it?" he asked.

For you, dummy, she wanted to say.

"It's a festival," she said. "I'm supposed to dress up."

Link looked down at his own usual green tunic. "I guess I didn't think about that. Should I have bought something nicer back there so that you weren't the only one dressed up?"

"No."

I like your tunic.

"No?" he asked, puzzled. "Just, 'no'?"

"No," she said firmly, taking his hand and leading him towards one of the many the outdoor eateries. "Come on. Maybe I'll feel better once we've eaten."

They found a café on the edge of a courtyard where a large crowd had gathered. A small three-person band had set up on the edge of the fountain, a bongo and violin keeping time with a pipe player. They sat on a low wall at the periphery of the crowd as they ate a light supper and clapped along as the performers played an upbeat set that had many people dancing. The crowd would applaud after every song, many throwing spare rupees into a small wicker bowl at the foot of the pipe player. If the band kept at it, the bowl would be overflowing by the end of the night.

They listened for several songs until the bongo player traded his drums for a simple harp, and the melody turned slow and gentle. Those in the crowd that had been drawn by the upbeat tune began to disperse, but others began to gather as couples began to pair off, dancing slowly under the light of the sconces.

Malon noticed a smile forming on Link's lips as they watched the dancers. Her eyes widened as he
stood and took her hand.

"Come on," he said, pulling her to her feet. "Let's dance."

Her lips parted in surprise, but she allowed herself to be led into the crowd. A part of her wanted to go back and sit down, and her feet felt leaden as they made their way through the crowd. But another part of her saw the dancing couples as they swayed to the music, and wanted to experience what they felt so badly that it made her heart ache.

They passed dozens of dancing couples, finally finding an open space closer to the band. Link wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her close. She wet her lips nervously, then drew her hand up his arm, clenching the fabric of his tunic.

It was awkward at first. Neither had had any formal lessons, but they were both fast learners. Awkward steps and stumbling feet soon found a steady rhythm, enough to keep from stepping on each other's toes at least.

They weren't the only ones dancing, but still Malon felt out of place. She was a simple farm girl, not some courtesan from a storybook. She knew as much about dancing as she did about flying. What if she didn't do it right? She glanced around at other couples to try and see if she was doing a decent job of faking it, but that only served to make her more nervous. Her heart was pounding in her breast. She laid her cheek on Link's chest, surprised to find that the soft, rapid beat of his heart matched her own.

"Nervous?" he asked.

She laughed gently. "I'm just not a very good dancer."

"Don't worry, I'm pretty terrible myself." He held her out and brought her back close, mimicking some of the couples around them. "Maybe we can learn together."

"I … I feel like everyone's staring," she replied.

"Then don't look at them," he said. "Look at me."

After a moment she forced her head up and found him staring down into her eyes, his nose nearly brushing her own. His breath tickled against her lips, and she was reminded of their brief encounter on the palisades at the ranch. Of the night they had taken shelter from the gargoyle. Goddesses, it had barely been two months since they'd met, but she felt like she had known him forever.

She buried her face in the hollow of his throat as they swayed to the music, if only to hide from the intensity burning in his eyes. Her breathing was becoming ragged, her pulse roaring in her ears like a swelling tide. Was this what it felt like to fall in love? Goddesses, she'd never felt so frightened, so exhilarated. It was as if nothing mattered but the feel of his hand cupped around her waist, the rough fabric of his tunic beneath her cheek.

She pressed her lips against the rapid beat of his pulse, tasting the sweat on his heated skin. Not a kiss, not really. Not even when she did it again, and again, soft as a butterfly's touch.

The world around them had completely fallen away. No dancers, no performers, no one to judge this lost little farmgirl playacting in her mother's dress. There was only him, the feel of her hand in his, his breath inches from her pointed ear. He shifted, turning towards her, and rested his forehead against her own. Her hand came up to rest on his cheek, and he answered by gently nuzzling her nose.

She felt as if she were falling – soaring? – as she studied his face. His hooded eyes. His parted lips.
Goddesses, she wanted to taste those lips.

"Mal … I ..." he whispered, unable to find the words.

The music ended, and the dancing couples around them broke into applause as the performers took a bow.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the flute player spoke, raising his voice to be heard over the crowd. "We will be starting the fireworks in a candlemark's time! If you're a Kakariko resident, we'll be drawing the Harvest King and Queen beforehand. Take the time to refresh yourselves and please don't make us check all of the inns like last year's Harvest King." A low rumble of laughter passed through the crowd as everyone slowly started to disperse towards the dining stalls.

Though the spell had faded, Malon's eyes had never left Link's. Finally she closed her eyes and breathed deeply to steady her heart, then took ahold of his hands as she stepped back a pace.

"Let's walk for a while," she said, smiling.

They wandered away from the crowds, towards the residential side of the village. Lamplight burned in dozens of windows, illuminating their path as they walked with their fingers clasped.

As the sounds of the festival receded into the distance, she decided to speak her mind. "Have you thought any more about my offer to stay?" she asked.

Link was quiet for a long while as they walked. Her heart sank with every step that he didn't answer her. Was it really such a hard question?

Finally, he spoke."I still have..." He sighed, trying to find the words. "An obligation, that I have to fulfill. I can't just abandon that now."

She glanced away to hide her disappointment, but was surprised when he pressed on.

"Afterwards ... I can't be sure," he said, giving her hand a comforting squeeze. "But I think I'd like to."

Malon nodded in understanding, her heart swelling with an old, unfamiliar emotion: hope. They wandered down a dimly lit path, passing beneath the high boughs of an old oak.

"Whatever you decide, I just want you to know... I've never really had a ... a real friend ... until you came along," she said, her words hesitant as she turned and took his hands in hers. She studied their laced fingers, using them to focus her thoughts. "I never used to play, or to have fun with other people. Even before my father became sick, I only had myself to rely on. It's been nothing but work for the past seven years." She looked up into his eyes. "But you changed that. I haven't felt this happy, this ... complete ... in so long. I never knew what it was like, to have a friend like you."

Link took a steadying breath and closed his eyes. After a moment's thought he made his decision, and dove in head first."Oh? What about seven years ago? I thought you used to have loads of fun jumping from the hayloft and bugging Ingo."

Malon nodded, a fond smile gracing her lips at the memories. "It was fun, back then. I never dreamed the world could turn out like this."

"You never liked it when I threw deku nuts to scare away the cuccos though," Link continued, studying her expression. "You were always so protective of them..."
Malon blinked and looked up, realization slowly starting to dawn in her eyes. "… and I would always threaten you with no supper, and you would stop…"

His eyes locked with hers. "And how about when we would let the goats out of their stall in the mornings?"

"And Ingo would have to chase them down."

"…and we'd always share lunch up…"

"…up in the hayloft," she finished.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked into his eyes, searching for something, something that she had thought that she'd lost over seven years ago.

She found it.

"Faerie Boy?" she whispered.

He favored her with one of his maddeningly bright smiles and said simply, "I'm back."

*SLAP*
Revelations: Part II

The world spun, and Link felt his head snap to the side at the force of the blow. He ran tentative fingers along his jaw as stars shimmered before his eyes.

"I … suppose I deserved that …" he said, eyeing the incensed redhead carefully in case a second blow followed.

Malon was suddenly in his face, prodding at his chest with an accusing finger. "Where have you been all this time?!

He felt his legs shift involuntarily, taking a step backwards from the fury of her words. "At the ranch?" he half-asked, blinking in confusion as his mind attempted to catch up with his mouth.

Malon slammed her palms against his chest, driving him back against the oak. "Din, are you trying to turn this into a joke?" she asked, swiping at an errant falling leaf.

Link huffed in frustration as the shock began to fade. There was no easy answer to her question. "No, no, of course not. I've been … away," he said evasively, not meeting her fierce gaze.

She stared in shock for a moment, her mouth forming a perfect 'O' of disbelief.

"Away?" she whispered. "Away?!" she nearly screamed. "That's all you can say to me after all this time? You were away?!"

Link threw up his hands, suddenly feeling defensive. "Hey, look, it's … complicated, all right? I just —"

"You just what?" she snarled.

"I…" Link licked his lips, panting as a flurry of answers came to mind.

I was locked in a temple for seven years.

I opened the gateway to another realm that allowed Ganondorf to come to power.

I have to find the Princess.

It was all my fault …

"I had to go away for a while," was what he finally said.

Dumbfounded silence greeted his answer. He ran nervous fingers through his hair, turning away to avoid the look of betrayal in her eyes. His pulse was pounding in his ears in the way that only a Temple guardian could cause, and the only sound to be heard above the dull background clamor of the festival was her panting breath.

It was several long moments before Malon found her ability to speak again, and even then it was barely a whisper.

"What gave you the right?"

He tried to take another step back but only pressed himself further against the oak trunk. The waves of anger flowing off of her were nearly palpable. There were tears in her eyes now, twin pinpricks
moistening those soft blues, glittering in the torchlight.

His hands worked nervously at his sides, desperate for a weapon to fight this new enemy. He could charge forgotten fortresses and slay monsters with the best of legends. He could deflect gales of fire and parry blades that were larger than he was tall, but this ... this wasn't right. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. He couldn't defend himself against her tears.

"Come again?" he asked, trying to buy time to think.

"I said, what gave you the right, you bastard? What gave you the right to run away and disappear for all that time while we had to stay here and suffer?" Malon demanded, her blue eyes blazing. "What gave you the right, Link?!"

"You think I ran away?" He turned, finally confronting her as he felt his own anger bubbling to the surface. "You think I hid in a corner and waited it all out?" He waved his arm wide, indicating the decrepit appearance of the town around them.

"Didn't you?" she accused.

"No! I..." he paused, started over. "I had no choice. I couldn't stay. I wanted to, but I couldn't. I was only able to ... to return a couple of months ago."

"Don't lie to me, Link." she snarled. "I know you well enough to tell when you're dancing around the truth. All these months you've spent with us and not once did you see fit to tell me you were the boy from seven years ago! You've been leading me around by the nose with a lie all this time!"

"Well what about you?" he countered. "How long were you going to wait to tell me about your father?"

"It wasn't your concern! None of it was!" She laughed suddenly, disbelieving, her eyes losing their focus as the memories of the last seven years flashed before her. "I guess it never was, really. Any of it."

"That's not fair," he replied.

She pressed a palm to her breast. "Oh, I'm the one who's being unfair? Where were you when Ganondorf turned Castle Town to ash? Would you like to know where I was, Link?" Her voice grew strained. "I was standing on the ranch walls with my father, and we watched as thousands were murdered as they burned Castle Town to the ground. I could hear them, Link. I could hear them."

She gasped, her hands reaching out to clench at his tunic as she fought back tears at the memories, her lips trembling. "Do you know, I still wake up at night, crying, because I can't get the sounds of their screams out of my head?"

Link felt his anger deflate, suddenly defenseless. How could he explain to her that he had been there? That he'd been nearly trampled as Ganondorf pursued the Princess Zelda across the drawbridge, had seen it all as the town was overrun by moblins and other dark creatures, had been forced to run through the still smoldering ruins of the marketplace to reach the Temple of Time? Would she even believe him if he told her the whole story?

He felt as if the ground was giving way beneath his feet. His shield was buckling, his fighting instincts screaming at him to regain the offensive. Parry, deflect. "What does that have to do with me?"

"It has everything to do with you! I thought you'd abandoned us!" Her voice turned soft, lost. "I
thought you had abandoned me…"

His hands reached up unconsciously to comfort her, but in an instant the fury came roaring back and she was screaming in his face. The hands that had clung desperately to him now fist ed in his tunic and dragged his face down towards her.

"Seven years, Link! Seven. Fucking. Years. You left us all behind and went Goddesses know where for the better part of a decade while the rest of us had to live through every single moment of this Din-forsaken Hell! Explain to me how that wasn't cowardice, because I could use a good laugh!"

She pushed him away once more and turned, knowing in her heart that if she kept looking at him she would not be able to hold back from slugging him. Or kissing him. She hadn't really decided which yet, and the indecision just inflamed her all the more. Her shoulders were trembling from rage, adrenalin, and ... relief. So many emotions swirled inside of her, a maelstrom that threatened to tear down from the inside all of the walls that she had carefully constructed around her heart over the years.

*I will not cry. I will not. Not over him.*

Link watched as she turned away, his hands still held up to comfort her, helpless. He wanted to reassure her, to wrap his arms around her and whisper to her that it was fine now, that he was back and he was going to do what he had to in order to make things right. But that wouldn't make up for the years he had spent away. Instead he fell back on what he knew best, lowered his hands, and tried to push forward.

*Riposte, thrust.*

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you…" he finally said, then gave a small laugh. "I'm not sure I even believe half of it myself. If you'd told me seven years ago that this is where I'd be standing..."

There were tears staining her cheeks now as she turned back to look at him. Pain, anger, and sadness mixed in her voice. "Won't you at least try?" she asked, begged.

"I..." he shook his head, frustrated. "I just don't know how."

"Link, you are such an insensitive _prick_!" she yelled, slamming her palms once more into the chest before she spun on her heels and fled.

"Malon!" Link called after her. "Malon!" She turned a corner and disappeared into the heart of Kakariko before he regained his footing.

*Damnit damnit damnit...* He ripped his cap from his head and swung it at an invisible enemy. A dark storm of emotions roiled in his gut and he cursed himself for his failure. He lashed out at a loose cobblestone in frustration, his mind racing as it clattered off into the darkness, trying to figure out where it had all gone so horribly wrong. A stray mutt perked its ears as the rock skipped past and watched him with dispassionate eyes.

The gentle tinkling of faerie chimes came from his left. "Cat's out of the bag now, huh?" a voice softly asked.

"And it's pissed," Link agreed, then glanced up and frowned as he realized who he was talking to. "Have you been stalking us?"

"Oh, 'stalking' is such a _strong_ word," Navi cooed demurely. "I thought it was getting cute before you had to go and ruin it. You'll remember that I tried to talk you out of this, but no-o-o," She beat a fist against her diminutive chest and her voice deepened. "Me Link. Me know best..."
He grimaced and glanced away. "I didn't mean for it to happen like this. I was trying to avoid getting her caught up in this, and I only made things worse. I wanted her to be happy."

"Hm," Navi hummed quietly, spearing him with a sly look. "Looked to me like she was happiest when you weren't holding her at arm's length. So the question now would be: Why aren't you chasing after her?"

Link's hands clenched at his sides, his eyes snapping up to the empty street corner where Malon had disappeared from view. "Damnit all..." he muttered to himself, then jammed his cap back on his head and took off running.

He finally caught sight of Malon several streets over, threading her way through the lightly crowded thoroughfare towards the center of town. Her pace was relaxed now that she had calmed somewhat, and she didn't appear to have a destination in mind, taking turns at random.

Link hurried after her, his footsteps soft but rapid. He gained on her slowly, relaxing his pace whenever she turned and he caught sight of her profile. Her head was down, one arm crossed beneath her breasts and a hand clenched to her lips as she worried at a nail. He edged closer, trying to keep his steps silent, dodging around a laden cart and a handful of revelers who had decided to start their drinking early.

Something in her peripheral vision must have tipped her off. He saw her glance back at him for only a second before her eyes widened. In an instant, she turned and darted off.

"Malon, wait, please!" he called, and took off after her.

"Stop following me, Link!"

"I'm sorry, all right?"

"You don't get to be sorry!" she called back, then squeaked in surprise as she turned back and narrowly avoided a collision with a love-struck couple by ducking beneath their entwined arms. "Just leave me alone! You've already had your chance!"

A large group of revelers were gathered at the end of the lane, several of them giving the impassioned redhead appreciative glances as she tried to slip through the crowd. Link used the opportunity to close the gap. *Din, she moves fast in that dress. *I'm not going to stop until you talk to me!"

The street rapidly became more crowded as the chase carried them towards the heart of the festival. Malon ground to a halt as the avenue closed in around her, then veered to the left and leapt up onto a wide masonry wall bordering the town's retaining pond. Her arms pinwheeled for a moment to regain her balance, then she continued forward. "You had your time to talk, Link, but you wasted it Goddesses-know-where. For all I know you were probably gallivanting around the countryside with some floozy!" Her mind hitched on the idea, and her cheeks flamed with embarrassment. Sweet Din, after everything that had happened and here she was worried about him spending time with some other woman! "Just ... just leave me alone!"

Link managed to reach the wall and rapidly closed the rest of the gap, trailing several steps behind her. "No! Not until you settle down and let me explain!" He reached out, attempting to snag a flap of her dress to slow her flight. "Now stop running!"

"I said leave me al-AHHHHH!" Malon cried out as she lost her footing. Link lunged, managing to grab a fistful of fabric to try to pull her back, but her momentum dragged him across the low stone barrier
and into the pond with her.

They sprawled in the muck, Link finding himself draped unceremoniously across Malon's legs. Malon sat up, spluttering as muddy water ran in thin rivulets down her face. She slammed her fist into the muck, exasperation straining her voice. "Ooh, look what you did to my mother's dress." She slapped a spray of water at Link.

Link spluttered, catching her wrist to prevent another swing. "What I did? You were the one who—"

She jerked her wrist out of his grasp and crossed her arms, turning away from him. "Look, just apologize already and save yourself the trouble. You're already in enough hot water as it is."

Link huffed. "I'm sorry."

"There, see? That wasn't so bad, now was it?" she asked.

He eyed her thoughtfully. "How did I end up apologizing for something that you did?"

She twisted farther away, her cheeks burning. "I'm a lady. A true gentleman wouldn't need to ask."

Link had to laugh at the absurdity of it, then glanced up as he noticed the murmuring of the crowded lane. "Let's get out of this pond. People are starting to stare."

Malon stood at a comfortable distance from the laundress' shop, still debating on exactly how mad she was at Link. Memories of the past three months tumbled about in her head as she ran a brush through her damp hair, pulling at her tangled curls. The easy rapport he'd had with Epona, his casual familiarity with the ranch. So many clues that she'd all but ignored. It would be so easy to just push him away and not take a second look back, but she found that in her heart she couldn't find the inclination to stay angry at him.

Mostly she was just mad that she hadn't guessed sooner. She hadn't dared to hope that it was her old childhood friend returning, and what did that say about her? Had she lost her hope after all these years, her ability to dream?

The smell of lye and soap was thick in the air as Link handed payment over to the washerwoman. "I'll try me best, but ah can't promise it'll be in the same shape as before. This is very delicate material," she warned.

"I'll pay extra if you can pull it off," Link promised.

The older woman grunted and turned away, their bargain struck. After helping her out of the pond they had returned to the stable where Epona was housed so that she could change back into her riding clothes. Baru had pointed them towards the best laundress he knew, and Link was more than happy to foot the bill, if only to try to earn himself back into Malon's favor.

She was still tallying up the brownie points he'd earned when he turned and approached her, his head held low. She focused her attention on him, and had to fight the urge to smile. He was adorable, like a scolded puppy who'd chewed through a new pair of shoes, but his hangdog expression didn't make up for all of the half-truths he'd told her.

Not much at least.

Link thrust his thumbs into his waistband and eyed her warily. "So," he said, unsure of where to start.
"So," she replied.

He grinned sheepishly. "Can I try again?"

Malon rolled her eyes at him. "Do you have to ask?" she said, tucking her brush away in her apron. She hooked an arm around his and steered him back towards the festival. "It's nice to see you again."

He bit out a nervous laugh. "Yeah, you too."

They walked side by side, following the main thoroughfare until they reached the stone bridge that spanned Kakariko's largest river. Malon remained quiet, letting him gather his thoughts as she focused on the solid feel of his arm against her.

"I'm sorry for ruining your dress," Link finally said.

Malon shook her head. "No ... no, it's my own fault. I was acting like such an idiot..."

"I wasn't sure how to break it to you," he continued. "I'm not so good with other people. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't want you getting caught up in everything that's going on, and by the time I realized how stupid I was acting it was too late."

Malon shook her head. "And I should have realized... You rarely asked questions. You knew things that you couldn't have possibly known otherwise." She paused as they reached the apex of the bridge, gently pulling him to a stop. Torchlight glowed softly from the nearest lampposts, scattering on the surface of the lazily flowing river. "I thought you were... I knew you looked familiar. It's just been so long, I didn't think there was a chance you were ever coming back."

"So you did remember me?" he asked, hopeful.

She turned to him, her eyes going wide. "Remember you? Goddesses, how could I forget you?"

His cheeks warmed and he ducked his head, avoiding her gaze. "Well, I never actually lied to you," Link said. "I just ... kinda fudged the truth a little." He glanced away at her accusing glare. "Okay, okay, more than a little. I didn't want to hurt you, or scare you, or..."

"Maybe you should start from the beginning then," she said.

He drew his hands down the length of her arms and clasped her hands in his, resting his hip against the railing beneath a softly glowing lamp. "Just be patient with me. I need to figure out how to put it into words." He took a steadying breath, held it, then began to speak.

She studied his face as he spoke, his head bowed, never meeting her eyes as he told her his tale. How he came to find his destiny in the heart of the Great Deku Tree. How his quest to access the Temple of Time led to the exact dark future that he had been trying to stop. How every temple unsealed and every Sage awakened brought him one step closer to righting the wrongs of the past.

It was a ridiculous tale. Like something from a storybook, something to tell children as they're tucked in at night. Princesses and fire breathing dragons, magic swords and underwater fortresses. But the quiet passion with which he spoke made her believe. She had seen more amazing sights in the last three months than in the last seven years. She had seen him face down bulblins and an animate gargoyle, had seen him pull weapons and tools from a magic scroll on his shield. Things that she would have once passed off as mere fiction were coming true all the time with him around. Who was to say he hadn't met a Zora princess and freed her from the gullet of a minor god?

Link ran his thumbs over her knuckles as he spoke, possibly not even conscious of the act, igniting a
whisper of longing deep in her belly. She found her eyes lowering to his lips, studying the gentle nuances of his face as he spoke. The pain at his failure to rescue all of the gorons from the Fire Temple. The bemused relief of learning that his watery betrothed had needed to call off their engagement to awaken as a Sage.

Her teeth tugged at her bottom lip. His shoulders slouched slightly, as if the weight of the world had settled around them. Would it be in bad taste to throw her arms around his neck and press her mouth to his? Would it ease the burden in his heart?

No … No, best to let him get this off his chest, she decided. He needed – nay, deserved – to get everything out in the open.

"... and even after all of this I still don't know how much farther I have to go. But when I found you by the side of the road, all I wanted was to make sure that you were taken care of. That you were happy. I'm … sorry, Malon." Link said softly, reaching the end of his story.

There was so much in his apology, more than she would ever know.

Slowly, tentatively, she withdrew her hands from his and held one up, open-palmed. His stance tightened, awaiting the coming blow.

She clenched her fist, and lightly rapped him on the crown of his head.

"Dummy," she said softly, then ruffled his bangs. "You could have avoided all of this and told me straight from the beginning."

Relief flooded through him, and he finally met her gaze. "There were a lot of good reasons not to," he said. "Granted, I can't remember what half of them were now, but..."

"Promise me this," she whispered, threading her fingers back through his. "Promise me that you won't run away again, not without at least telling me first."

He nodded in relief. "I'm back for good this time."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart," he said, miming an X across his chest.

"Say it," she said. She had to hear it.

He smiled. "I promise."

Warm liquid eyes stared back at her, the shadows cast by the lamplight overhead giving them an endless depth ringed in sparkling blue. He cupped her cheek with his hand, running the pad of his thumb along her jaw, his actions … hesitant? Sweet Farore, he was actually nervous. She leaned closer, her eyes lidded and her lips parted, inviting. She could taste his breath on her lips, mere inches away. If only he would close those last vexing inches...

"Well, this is a lovely sight," A voice intoned from overhead.

Malon and Link both jumped apart at the sudden interruption, Malon's eyes going wide with embarrassment while frustration burned in Link's.

A lightly armored figure sat astride the iron lampost above their heads. One leg hung lazily over the river as he regarded them through golden bangs, a single piercing eye staring dispassionately at the
startled couple. A finely crafted porcelain teacup was cupped gently against his abdomen, its contents steaming.

Link opened his mouth to speak, but paused as Malon tugged at the hem of his sleeve, her voice a whisper. "Link … is that a ...?"

He gave a sharp, derisive laugh. "You remember that friend I was looking for? The one I haven't seen in a very... long ... time?" He stressed the last words through his teeth, focusing his glare on the Sheikah before he turned and hooked a dismissive thumb at the masked figure. "Guess who has the worst timing in the world?"

Sheik merely raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to the side. "It would seem that we have much to discuss, then. Let's take a walk," His eyes locked pointedly on Malon, who fidgeted under his ruby-eyed gaze.

"Alone."

They strode down a shadowy sidestreet, skirting the edges of the festivities. Link's dark eyes followed the silent Sheikah as he led them around a corner and into a small courtyard before finally alighting upon an old, boarded up well.

He procured his familiar golden harp from the Sheikah parchment secured around his wrist, settling into a comfortable position as the wooden planks groaned softly with his weight. His surprisingly delicate fingers strummed a few experimental strings before settling into a slow, almost reverent tune.

"Let me tell you a story," Sheik said softly as the music set the mood. "Of a time long forgotten by the people of this realm."

Link crossed his arms and leaned against the wooden winch. 'Pissed' did not begin to describe the sensation burning in his gut. "Oh good, story time," he intoned. "I love story time."

"Ahem." Sheik coughed and speared him with an irritated glare, then resumed playing. "Long ago, after the world's creation but before the land of Hyrule was first founded, a great fissure split the earth. Dark creatures spilt from the crag and flooded the world, mercilessly attacking the peoples of the realm, slaughtering them and destroying their land. They did this in search of the ultimate power; a gift left by the Goddesses capable of granting any wishes of its holder.

"This power was watched over by Her Grace, the Goddess of the land. Not one of the Three, mind you, but the keeper of the land and the people of the world, left behind to guard against such a fate. The Goddess battled the dark hordes fiercely, but one by one the human settlements were overrun. Eventually, when all seemed lost, She gathered the last surviving humans on a piece of earth and, with the help of her chosen Hero, sent it skyward, beyond the clouds.

"These chosen people were the first Hylians. With her people safe, the Goddess joined the remaining land dwellers and fought the evil forces in a war of unmatched scale and ferocity. They eventually sealed the evil forces away, restoring peace to the surface.

"But the Hero was mortally wounded in the battle. He had given the last of his strength to send his comrades into the sky. Hylia found him there, and tended to him in his final moments. And so, as he lie there, watching the ascending Skyloft, he departed from this world.

"Although they won the battle, it was not a complete victory, for Hylia knew that Her seal would not last forever. She forsook her powers, so that whenever evil once again threatened this land, two brave souls would be born to defend it, the reborn Goddess … and Her chosen Hero."
Link raised a skeptical brow. "So … what, you're saying that I'm this hero? That I'm part of some sort of prophecy?"

Shiek gave a gentle sigh, and continued to play. "A thousand years ago, Her Grace foresaw that a great darkness would once again sweep across the realm, and that only a Hero – born with the Courage of the Goddesses and gifted with the powers to manipulate time itself – would be able to push it back into the Shadow Realm," He plucked at an extremely sour note. "Imagine. In another thousand years they'll tell stories around the campfire of the Hero rolling about in the mud with some peasant girl when he should have been off cleansing the temples and helping the Princess regain her throne… Not to mention defeating the King of Evil." Sheik eyed him with a frosty glare, his head tilted derisively. "Way to set your priorities straight, Hero."

"Oh yeah?" Link countered, straightening. He jabbed an accusing finger at the Sheikah's face. "Well where the hell have you been, smartass? I know you're good at hiding, but three months is a little long for one of your disappearing acts. You expect me to search every square inch of this kingdom in your absence?"

"I had some matters that needed to be taken care of regarding Ganondorf's hunt for the Princess. He was getting far too close for comfort, and needed to be … diverted," Shiek said smoothly. "To my error, I had assumed that you would be able to operate by yourself for a time without requiring me having to mother and coddle you the entire way."

Link felt his teeth grit. "Coddle me? The way I see it I've been doing all of the work. All you do is pop up once in a blue moon with a brand new riddle. Would it kill you to lend a hand when I'm beating down temple doors?"

The enigmatic Sheikah seemed to have not heard him. His eyes had focused back the way they had come. "Why do you waste your time on her?"

"Because I want to live my life!" Link couldn't control his outburst, his arms sweeping wide. "I want to experience everything that I missed during those seven years that I was locked away within the Temple of Time. I want to experience what it's like to have friends, a family. Saria's the closest I've ever had, but then I grew up and found out that she's some Din-damned ageless Sage of the forest and hasn't got the time to spare on us mere mortals."

"Yes, I know it's selfish of me. I get that. But given that you were my only real guide I thought I was due for a little break when you up and disappeared!"

Sheik's eyes had focused back on his like a beamos. "Do you love her?"

And just like that, Link felt the wind driven from him. He slumped, feeling drained. "I … I…"

He'd never put it into words before. What he felt for Malon went far beyond simple friendship. A sense of loyalty. Devotion, even. He would – had – fought for her. Bled for her, and would do so again, if only to see her smile.

I suppose I do.

The revelation felt like a punch to the gut. No, a little higher. Like someone had wrapped a gauntlet around his heart and squeezed.

"The kingdom needs you, Hero." Sheik pressed. "You have more important things to attend to."

"I can't leave her now," Link said. "Not just yet. Give me a little more time."
"Time." Sheik laughed, his eyes going distant. "Time can be such a fickle thing. We have so much, and yet so little. Greedily we demand it, devour it, then let it slip through our fingers like so much sand. Even you, who wields the Ocarina of Time, asks for more. Time," he bit out the word like a curse. "is the one thing that we simply cannot afford to spare."

"How can you save the world if you can't even protect the ones that you love?" Link noted the slight widening of Sheiks eyes and pressed on. "Impa said that to me, right before she had to flee the castle. She never said, but I've always known that she was talking about the Princess Zelda when she told me that. I think she knew what was coming, in the end."

The Sheikah's eyes darted back and forth, as if seeing a memory long past. "Perhaps…"

"I know I have a duty to the Princess," Link said. "And I swear I will fulfill it. But I can't leave her, not until I know that she's safe."

Sheik was quiet for several moments, his gaze lost in distant memories. Eventually he regained his focus enough to speak. "Yes, I suppose so," he said, and his hard eyes softened, taking on an almost feminine quality. "Then I suppose it can't be helped."

Sheik sighed, then stood and reclaimed his harp in a flash of blue light. "I might be able to buy you a slight reprieve. But I warn you, I don't exaggerate when I say that Ganondorf is closer to finding the Princess than he has ever been in the last seven years."

The young Sheikah stared up at the star-speckled sky, lost in thought. A crescent moon was just peaking over the muted crimson caldera of Death Mountain, bathing Kakariko in an ethereal light. "It's funny," he said, his tone wistful. "I suppose before now I never really thought of you as a real person with wants and needs and dreams. I always assumed that you would want what everyone else wants; the end of Ganondorf's rule. Like the Goddesses had created you for one mindless reason only."

They were quiet for a moment, reflecting on the path that had led them here, before Sheik turned back to face Link. "Do not forget your duty, Hero," he warned. Link opened his mouth to protest, but stopped at Sheik's upturned hand, "But do not let those that care for you suffer because of it." He cocked his head, the faintest hints of a smile tugging at his mask. "It is an interesting position that you put yourself in. In one hand you have the life and happiness of a single farm girl, yet in the other rests the fate of an entire kingdom. How well you balance the two will speak greatly of your courage in the coming months."

Link was quiet, mulling the Sheikah's words.

"Come," Sheik finally said, turning and walking back the way they came. "I'll walk you back to your... friend."

"So you see why I won't abandon her?" Link asked, falling into step beside the Sheikah.

"I do," Sheik said as they rounded the corner. Malon came into view, visibly fidgeting at the foot of the bridge. "But as I said: With every day that passes, Ganondorf grows closer to learning the secret location of the Princess Zelda. As much as I wish I could freely give you the time that you wish to spend with the ranch girl, the unfortunate truth is that we have very little to spare." His eerie crimson eyes flicked towards Malon, then back to Link, and he sighed gently. "I should be able to buy us a few more days for you to finish up what you need to, then I need you to meet me back here, at the boarded up well. The next temple is more difficult than anything you've yet faced, and Impa has informed me that she will be accompanying you."
"Impa?" Link asked eagerly, pivoting to face him. "Impa's here? Is the Princess with her?"

Sheik stopped and held up a conciliatory hand. "Impa is nearby, and the Princess is safe. That is all that is important for now."

Malon stepped forward. "Finally done with him?" she asked Link, eyeing Sheik nervously.

"For now," Shiek said, stepping into the conversation with a formal bow. "I apologize for interrupting your evening my lady, but it was something that could not wait." His ruby gaze swept over her form, and a hint of a smile could be seen in the crinkle of his eyes. "Well then, I'll leave you both to enjoy the festivities tonight."

Sheik looked down and opened his cupped hand. He contemplated the pair of deku seeds nestled in his palm, spinning them around, then glanced at Link. "I suppose I can save the theatrics, just this once," he said, and with another mild bow he turned and strode off, disappearing into the deepest shadows between a pair of buildings.

"You have the strangest friends," Malon muttered as they watched the Sheikah depart.

"You have no idea," Link replied, turning back to find her staring up at him.

After a long moment, Malon spoke. "You were telling me how you weren't going to run off again?" she asked hopefully. "How you were staying?"

He winced and glanced away. "I'm going to have to leave soon. I need to finish this."

Malon nodded. She had expected this. "Will you come back once its over?"

"Of course," he replied. "Nothing could keep me away."

"Something did before," she pointed out.

"I like to think I have more reason now," He said, then turned and rested his hands on the swell of her hips, drawing her close. "But how about, just for tonight, we forget about everything and just enjoy ourselves?"

Her lips parted, her head tilting upwards invitingly. "I think I'd like that…"

A shrill cry split the air. "Heeey yah two! S'not kissy-kissy time yet! Save it fer after th' fireworks!"

They pulled apart quickly, both turning a light crimson. Malon pressed her burning cheek against Link's tunic and groaned in frustration.

A trio of drunken revelers were stumbling over the bridge, throwing out catcalls and loud kissing noises in between swigs of ale. Link eyed them as they passed, keeping a protective arm wrapped around Malon's shoulders.

He huffed as they finally made their way out of earshot, then turned and began leading Malon in the opposite direction. "I'm not ready to head back to the festival just yet," he said, entwining her arm with his. "How about we walk some more?"

Malon's smile gleamed in the lamplight, the corners of her eyes crinkling in the way that made his heart race. "Let's."

They strode off into the gathering darkness, eager to find a quieter side of town.
The bonfire crackled as the logs settled, spitting a flurry of sparks into the night sky.

Link and Malon curled up across from the fire, propped up against one of the dozens of logs laid out in a loose ring. Link had his arms stretched wide across the log, while Malon leaned back and was using his shoulder as a pillow with her legs curled beneath her. They watched as dozens of forms flitted about like silken wraiths, dancing and celebrating.

The couple had found themselves wandering towards the edge of Kakariko with no destination in mind, and soon stumbled across a Gerudo encampment. They'd paused on the outskirts, curious at the celebration this far from the festival. The ring of wagons encircling the large bonfire had drawn a small crowd of festival goers and the desert folk had eagerly waved them closer.

Link had been hesitant at first, but Malon recognized several of the wagons and drew him along, reassuring him that she had dealt with this tribe before. These were not allies of Ganondorf, but one of the many splinter tribes that had fractured off when the Dark Lord took power. They now wandered the kingdom as outcasts, pariahs. Unwelcome at home in the desert at the heart of Ganondorf's power, but almost equally unwelcome everywhere else.

The smell of spices and perfume hung heavy in the air. Several of the women had set up a small grill pit to the side and were busy carving up a wild boar. Racks of cooked meat were laid out to dry, and the pair had been offered a delicious meal at a reasonable price, which they'd devoured eagerly. Now they rested, enjoying the show with full stomachs and light hearts. A small cluster of women near the wagons had broken out their instruments, and the night was alive with the sound of drums and flutes, lyres and castanets. A pair of girls – twins, possibly – sang a duet, the harmony of their voices echoing into the starry sky.

The couple's ears perked up at the sound of padding footsteps and Malon glanced to the left. A Gerudo girl a year or two younger than herself approached from the direction of the grill. Her dark sun-kissed skin peeked through the loose folds of her silken sari, gleaming with perspiration in the firelight.

"Have a drink, sa sa?" she asked, offering a pair of large, steaming mugs. She bent low, offering a salacious view down her low-slung halter.

Link accepted the mugs with thanks and passed one to Malon. The Gerudo's golden eyes shone appreciatively, speculatively, roaming over the boy's outstretched frame. A predator's eyes, hungry and intelligent. But then her gaze flickered towards Malon and with a knowing smile she turned to rejoin the dance, her hips swaying seductively as she departed.

Malon eyed the desert beauty cautiously as she left. Every so often one of the Gerudo girls would break from the circle and approach a lone male that had filtered in from Kakariko. Predictably the two would talk for a short time, the girl's face all smiles and laughter. They'd lean forward for a gentle caress on the arm or knee, moving closer so that the pair were speaking in whispers, before eventually leaving the warmth of the fire and disappearing into one of the wagons.

Malon was no innocent. She knew what was happening in those gently swaying carriages. She snuggled closer to Link, unsure of what her reaction would be if one of the Gerudo were to proposition him. So far they had all kept a respectful distance, sensing perhaps that he was not a prize to be won without a fight, but she was starting to regret not walking right on by when they'd first discovered the camp.
Link was, of course, completely and utterly oblivious. He was busy inspecting the contents of his mug, taking a tentative sip before humming appreciatively. "Mn, that's pretty good."

Malon sat straighter and held her own mug to her nose. The aroma was sweet, heady. She took a slow sip, felt the tingling fire of alcohol burn its way down her tongue, and immediately spit it back out into her mug. Link noted her reaction.

"Not thirsty?" he asked, obviously fighting back the impulse to laugh.

"I don't drink," she replied curtly.

"Ah," he said, and left it at that. He continued to sip from his mug as they watched the bonfire.

After a moment of pensive silence she felt she owed him more of an explanation. "I've seen what alcohol did to my father after my mother died," she said quietly. "I've seen what it does to Ingo. I'd rather not go down that path if I can help it." She paused, then added, "That, and I think it tastes like horse piss."

"Been drinking a lot of that lately?" Link replied, a wan smile ghosting over his lips. His smile widened at the unamused glare she threw his way. "Do you think you'll end up like Ingo if you have a drink every once in a while? Lose your temper, start beating on the horses?"

She looked at him in shock. "What? No. No, of course not."

Link swirled the liquid in his mug, his face contemplative. "I can see how easy it'd be to get lost in a bottle. But, like most things, I think a little every once in a while wouldn't hurt. Especially if you're among friends."

She watched him impassively as he took another drink, then examined her own mug. The liquid inside was a rich golden amber, almost red, like the setting sun over Hyrule Field. It fizzed gently, tickling her senses.

"You'll tell me if I start making an ass of myself," she said, watching him expectantly until he nodded.

She turned back towards the fire and took another sip, slower this time. The liquid burned slightly as it pooled on her tongue, though she found that it wasn't entirely unpleasant as she let it slide down her throat. Some variety of mulled wine, or perhaps mead, she wasn't sure that she knew the difference. Fruity, but with just a hint of sweetness to counter the bitter bite.

He caught her contemplating her mug as the aftertaste made her mouth water. "Not good?" he asked.

"Not bad," she replied, closing her eyes and tilting her head back for a larger swallow.

Not bad, even if it had been delivered by a pretty Gerudo girl.

For some reason she found that she couldn't let it go, this desert beauty that had dared bat her pretty golden eyes at Link. Malon's gaze danced around the crowded clearing, trying to catch a glimpse of the Gerudo girl, but there were so many of her kin flitting about the fire that for the moment she had disappeared into the mass of dancing bodies. All the better, then. Maybe she'd already found another mark to spend the night with.

They continued to drink and enjoy the atmosphere as Malon kept a silent vigil for any more unwelcome callers. Perhaps sensing her wavering mood, Link kept quiet, except to occasionally express his appreciation for a particularly eloquent dancer. Jealous though she was, Malon could not
deny the inherent grace of the desert women as they spun and twirled around the fire. They cast a display of fire and shadow, a pageant of colorful satins and silken skin. They were, in their own way, quite beautiful to watch.

All too soon she found that she had drained her mug, and she discovered that maybe she didn't mind the taste so much after all. In fact she felt a brief pang of disappointment that she had finished so fast.

She felt a nudge and looked up from her empty mug to find Link shaking his own. "Getcha a refill?" he asked, and she handed over her mug, allowing him to slip away. This gave her the chance to lean back and admire him from the rear as he walked away, something that the Gerudo girl hadn't been able to enjoy.

She licked her finger and ticked off an imaginary mark in the air. "Score one for mee," she sang quietly to herself, then giggled. Her skin felt flushed, and she ran her hands through her hair to try and relieve some of the heat she felt building in her core.

While she waited for Link to return, the Gerudo songstresses started up another song. This one began slow, almost mournful, but quickly progressed into a more spritely tune. The drums and castanets played off of each other, rising together before pulling apart like the ocean tide.

She felt herself begin rocking to the tune, her shoulders swaying in time, her head bobbing lightly to the beat of the drums. A warm buzzing sensation had pooled in her navel, lower, filling her with warmth. It made her feel different, almost giddy.

Free.

She felt free. Freer than she had felt in a long time. Free of worry, free of Ingo and free of the grueling labor of the ranch. Freed of all of the expectations she had lived under for so long, expectations that seemed all the more smothering now that she had escaped them – even if only briefly – flying away like a bird whose owner had forgotten to lock the cage door.

*Free*...

She began to eye Link speculatively as she listened to the throbbing pulse of the drums, her gaze wandering in ways that gave her a silent thrill. He was leaning forward over a table across from the barbecue pit, waiting his turn to catch the attention of the older Gerudo woman serving as barmaid. His legs were crossed, corded muscles stretching nicely against his tights. Broad shoulders, and – she noted as he waved the bartender over – rather nicely shaped arms. Strong, but lean. She’d felt those arms wrap around her waist once before, and she found that she wanted to experience that feeling again.

But Link wasn’t looking at her. As the barmaid went to fill his mugs, Link had turned to watch the dancing crowd, men and sometimes even women stripped down to nothing more than loincloths, bodies glistening with sweat as they circled the fire. He was watching the nearest Gerudo girl – the same girl, Malon realized with a jolt, that had given them their drinks – his eyes wide, lips slightly parted, and she felt a sudden sharp pang of jealousy.

In an instant Malon was up and making her way towards the fire, and then she was dancing too, letting the music wash over her as she began to move. She’d never danced like this before, but after watching the other girls she felt a confidence in her ability to fake it. She closed her eyes and raised her arms above her head, feeling the rhythm of the drums flowing through her, swaying her hips in time to the castanets. She twirled her head and spun in place, casting her arms wide and feeling her hair spill over her shoulders and curl around her throat.
She let herself go and lost all sense of time as she danced, allowing the larger body of revelers to draw her with them as they circled the bonfire. It was liberating, this mass of dancing bodies, all moving in time to the same song but each different and unique in their own way. All of them brought together in celebration, because they were alive. Because they were free.

Her eyes opening slightly at a familiar sound to find Link standing to her side with two steaming mugs in his hands, utterly slack-jawed. She smiled, secretly pleased that she could draw such a reaction out of him, and threw her hair around to cascade down her shoulders.

She turned to him, keeping the slow rhythm moving through her hips, swishing her skirt from side to side as she reached out and wrapped her hands around his belt to draw him closer, his feet dragging as he moved across the dry grass. Her lips were parted, her eyes hooded as her hands ran up his tunic, over his shoulders, then down his arms. He swallowed nervously, wetting his lips, but then she snatched both mugs of wine out of his surprised hands and danced away, giggling at the look of shocked indignation on his face.

He chased after her, pursuing her through the dancing crowd. She took a deep drink from her mug and held the other out above her head as he reached for it, dangling it just out of reach of his grasping fingers. Warm wine spilled over the lip and ran in rivulets down her arm. Her eyes met his over the rim of the mug, and he paused again, his lips parting in surprise. She felt fiery and flirtatious, and she wondered briefly if she would have ever gathered the courage to tease him like this had she not accepted the wine.

She decided that she could forgive the Gerudo girl after all.

She managed to fend Link off long enough to drink half of the mug, pausing in her flight only long enough to allow him to catch her around the waist.

Ah, there it was. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against his shoulder as his arms pulled tight against her belly, holding her fast. Without a sound she offered up what was left of the untouched mug. She felt him give a wearily huff before he took the mug from her, and she cracked her eyes open enough to see the bemused glower he was throwing her way.

It was just too cute. She leaned back and planted a light peck on the corner of his jaw, and the stunned surprise that coursed through him like lightning was enough to let her slip away once more.

Malon spun, cupping her mug to her lips, her gaze inviting as she slowly backed away. Link gaped after her for a moment before taking several long swallows from his mug, then dropping it to the grass and taking off after her.

The chase carried them halfway around the fire, long enough for her to finish her drink. She spun with a gasp as he wrapped a gloved hand around her wrist, the empty mug falling to the grass between them, forgotten. Her breath was coming in soft pants, his own causing her bangs to ruffle as he looked down at her. The look in his eyes caused an ache to form deep in her belly and she wet her lips, suddenly nervous. Hunter's eyes, dark and serious, and he'd just caught his prey.

He pulled her closer, closing the gap between them. She began to move against him, slowly at first, regaining the rhythm of the drums. Her hips softly swayed side to side, moving against him, her legs twining with his. She felt him react, felt the hitch in his breath as she pressed her body fully against his.

Then Link joined in, and for a few sublime moments they were dancing together, their bodies melding as if forged from the same mold. But it wasn't the kind of dancing she'd thought so exciting in storybooks when she was younger. This was no ballroom waltz. This was wild, more primeval,
sensual...

Free.

But then, just as suddenly, it ended. The drums stopped, the flutes sighed their last warbling tune, the lyre hummed into silence and the two singers sung their final notes. Malon and Link suddenly found themselves alone in the space around the bonfire as the band started to pack up and the people began gathering their clothes, retrieving plates and cups they had left scattered about, and streaming out into the cold air to return to their own homes.

Their breathing still came heavy, nearly panting. Malon was excruciatingly aware of how close Link was, the feel of his tunic beneath her hands, his scent washing over her. She wanted to get closer. She wanted him to touch her, to want to touch her. She wanted...

She started to close those last excruciating inches, but was suddenly jerked back by a strong hand on her arm.

"N'ver seen a Gerudo in farm clothes b'fore." an older man said with ale on his breath. "Looks good on yeh." He pulled her off balance, his fingers wound painfully tight around her elbow, and if it weren't for the solid grip on her arm she would have fallen.

"Sir, please let go, you're hurting my arm," Malon said, alarm piercing the fog laying thick on her mind, but the drunk either didn't hear or care.

The look on Link's face could have slain dragons, but just as he made to intervene a pair of Gerudo girls took notice and broke off from the crowd. Both wore a matching pair of violet silks, and it took a moment for Malon to recognize the singers from the band. They positioned themselves on either side of the old drunkard and skillfully pried his hand away from Malon's arm.

"Ayah,leave the poor farmgirl alone and let a real woman take care of you, sa sa?" One of the girls admonished.

"Oh, we'll make sure to take good care of you tonight, handsome," the other girl said, drawing the drunk's attention as they maneuvered him away from Malon and towards the circled wagons.

A third Gerudo approached, this one several years older with the lower half of her face covered by a gilded veil. Her eyes flashed over Malon's copper hair, then took note of the dark welt on her arm.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

Malon nodded, rubbing her elbow. "Yes, yes I'm fine."

"Apologies, des Shia'ting," the older woman said with a small formal bow. "We shall keep the rude one preoccupied."

Malon glanced nervously in the drunkard's direction. "You're not going to hurt him, are you?"

"Rudeness is not a crime, though perhaps it should be," the woman mused as the two girls disappeared around a wagon with their drunken cargo. "No, he did no harm, so he will wake up tomorrow with a bad headache and a few rupees poorer for his troubles."

"Thank you for the help," Link said, stepping forward.

The woman spared him a glance, then waved him off. "Mia and Lita are skilled singers, but they excel in tempting easy marks to do their bidding. Drunk as he was, he stood no chance. This was child's play to them." She gave a final nod of her head towards Malon, then turned and left.
Malon watched as the Gerudo woman worked her way back towards the grill pit, then turned when she felt Link wrap his hand around her elbow. The other elbow, she noted as he gently led her away from the fire. She sensed the tension in his frame as he stalked towards the encircled wagons.

"Link, what's wrong?"

He was quiet for several long moments, and their steps carried them to the first of the wagons before he spun to face her. He drew in a heavy breath as if to say something, then clamped his jaw shut and turned away. His shoulders were trembling, his hands clenching and relaxing at his sides, as if he were fighting to hold something back.

"Are you mad?" she asked quietly.

"I'm furious. I'm—" He lashed out and drove his fist into the side of the cart, then continued, calmer. "I don't like seeing you get hurt."

"But I'm fine," she said, working her elbow. "See? No harm done. I've dealt with handsy drunks before."

Link spun back towards her and ran a frustrated hand through his hair, then jammed his cap back on his head. "Now. You're fine, now. Because someone was able to step in and help you. But what if that doesn't happen next time? What if next time there's no one that swoops in at the last second to save you?"

She smiled, reaching out to run a reassuring hand down his arm. "You'll always be there to protect me."

"I can't promise that," he said, shaking his head, and for the first time she saw the haunted look in his eyes. "I wish I could, but I can't."

"Then I'll protect myself," she said, raising her chin and daring him to doubt her.

Link pinched the bridge of his nose, breathing deep. After a moment to calm himself he said, "Did you at least catch how those girls managed to pry him off of you?"

"Offered to take him behind the wagons and show him a good time?" she drawled, which earned a laugh from Link.

"No no, it was something they did to him. Here," he held out his arm, fist closed. "Grab ahold of my arm like you were, ah ... gonna take me somewhere seedy and have your way with me."

"Be careful what you wish for," Malon said, her grin widening as he glanced away, momentarily flustered. "Oh, and how he blushes!"

"Ah, right." He waited until she had a firm grip on his wrist, then brought his hand up over hers. "Impa – the other Sheikah friend I told you about – showed me this trick a while back."

His fingers were gentle but firm as he pried her thumb back and quickly twisted her palm, effectively breaking her grip on his wrist.

"You place the pad of your thumb on this pressure point … here, and twist" he said, demonstrating again, then reversed position and locked a hand around her wrist. "Now, you try it on me."

He worked her through several techniques, showing her how the elbow and wrist would always move in relation to each other, how an unskilled attacker would latch onto her wrist, and how she
would be able to force her arm forward to break his grip instead of instinctively pulling away.

Malon tried to pay attention. She really did, honest. But after the third time he pulled her close to
demonstrate, all she could concentrate on was the way his hands felt on her bare skin, on the scent of
his sweat when they brushed together a little too roughly.

Her pulse was pounding in her ears now, making her skin feel electric. Alive. Although she wasn't
sure where this was going, she knew she wanted to find out. Maybe it was the alcohol slowly
flooding through her system. Maybe it was just the earnest look in his eyes when he said that he
wanted to keep her safe.

Maybe she just didn't want to wait anymore.

Once more he walked her through forcing him to relinquish his grip on her. His hand clasped around
her wrist, tight but not painfully so. Once more she stepped forward and pushed his arm back, setting
him off balance, and her free hand came up to twist his thumb and dislodge his grip.

Only this time she didn't let go.

Link looked at her uncertainly as she traced her fingers up his arm, over his shoulder, along the
hollow of his throat before twining in the hair at the back of his head. His eyes were full of questions,
his lips pursed, ready to form a query.

She leaned forward and answered with a soft brush of her lips across his.

Their lips touched briefly, as tender as the brush of a butterfly's wing, before gently parting. Their
first kiss. Malon could feel her head swimming as his warm breath tickled her lips, now a bare inch
from her own. She licked her lips nervously, her mouth suddenly dry. She had wondered for so long
what it would be like to be able to hold someone like this, to trust another so completely and to feel
their lips pressed against hers. And this … this…

Link inhaled deeply, studying her face through half-lidded eyes, and she allowed herself to smile at
the nervousness he exuded. He could be so cute when he let his guard down. She worked her jaw,
trying to find the words, thinking briefly that she must either be really good or really bad at kissing to
have rendered him so pensive. To her pleasant surprise it was Link who leaned forward a second
time, pressing his lips more firmly against hers.

The first kisses were soft, tentative. Cautious, as if anything but the slightest pressure would send
them scurrying back. Sweet, with the slightest meeting of tongues.

When they finally broke apart, she couldn't quite form the words. For several long moments she was
content with drinking in the sight of him as she caught her breath.

"Wow," was what she eventually settled on.

Link smiled that damnable self-assured smile of his. "That good, huh?"

Malon dipped her head, feeling a rosy blush warming her cheeks. "Maybe."

Link cocked his head, studying her. "Maybe?"

"Something like that," she replied, glancing up through her bangs.

"But you're not sure?"
She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

"I think we need to try that again, just to be sure," he said

She tilted her head back, inviting. "Sounds good..."

Their lips met again, more impassioned this time around. He drew her closer to him, wrapping a gloved hand around her waist. She could feel his warm body melding against hers, smell his masculine scent and taste those wondrous lips that she had been dying to taste for the past several months. Or was it seven years? It really didn't matter right now. All that mattered was the feel of his hands as they slid down her back and pressed her against him, sending shivers of delight running across her skin.

She broke from the kiss first, trailing a line of nips and licks down his throat and tracing obscure patterns on his arms with her fingers. Her reward was a low, throaty moan, his hands trailing down her back until they cupped against her bottom, flooding her veins with fire.

They broke apart suddenly to the sound of wolf whistles and cheering from a departing group of revelers, both gasping for air. Link gave a disappointed huff and leaned his forehead down to rest on the crown of her head.

"I'd say today went rather well, wouldn't you?" he said, and she could hear the teasing smile in his voice.

She stood on the tips of her toes and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in the crook of his neck. "I missed you."

They almost managed to make it back to the Nag's Head Inn before the alcohol caught up with them. By that time Link decided that they would be better off spending the night in Kakariko instead of attempting to make the journey back to the ranch in the dead of night. Malon – due to her smaller stature and the fact that she had finished off two whole mugs of wine to Link's one and a half – was stumbling over her own feet by the time Link was able to nudge open the front door to the inn.

Malon leaned heavily on Link as they stepped inside, her head drooping as she fought to stay awake. The tavern was quiet at this time of night, Baru's wife having enacted a strict closing time for the bar. Baru himself still stood behind the bar, casually wiping down the last of the dirty tankards. The hefty barkeep raised a solitary eyebrow at the sight of the two teenagers, but didn't remark on the fact that Link usually wasn't the sort of patron to stumble through his door drunk.

It took a few tries to get his point across, but eventually Link managed to explain that they would need a place to stay the night, and Baru slid a key for an empty room across the counter. Link made a hasty grab for the key but it slipped past his hand, and he had to fumble across the counter to grab it without dropping Malon. Good man, that Baru. Always knew what he needed, and always fair with his tab.

"There's only one," Baru rumbled with an apologetic shrug, but Link waved him off. That was fine. He wasn't going to lose it.

The stairs were a particular challenge, but they made it to the top of the landing without tripping and tumbling to the bottom. Upon finding their room at the end of the hall and unlocking the door, Link paused at the threshold, a pit in his stomach yawning open.

"Oh..." Link said as he took in the room, then muttered a curse.
"Wu's wrong?" Malon slurred, raising her head.

The room was the largest the inn had, possibly the reason it hadn't been rented yet, but that didn't mean it was spacious. A single bed sat against the back wall, and a small divan sat in front of the empty hearth, with a private washroom directly between them. The window over the bed overlooked the building next door. A silver ray of moonlight was peaking over the mountain range, giving just enough light to see by.

The bed was small. Comfortable enough for two children perhaps, but for two nearly full-grown adults, it would be extremely snug.

Malon made a small distressed sound and disengaged herself from Link's arm, then slowly trudged her way across the room to the washroom. She slipped inside and closed the door behind her without a backward glance.

Link glanced around the room, then shrugged. "Can't be helped then," he muttered, grabbing a pillow off of the bed. A spare blanket lay draped over the divan, which he snapped open and laid out before sitting down with a sigh. His gloves and boots were shucked, and he settled himself in for the night.

Malon left the washroom and shuffled over to sit on the corner of the bed as Link made his final preparations, her stomach sour but settled.

She watched as he fought the stubborn laces on his boots and glanced around, realizing with a start that he was giving up the bed to her. Even tired as they were, he was still willing to play the perfect gentleman. She chewed on her lower lip, considering her options. She could still feel the heat of his lips on her own, his hand roaming down her back. The kiss had been wonderful, incredible even, but perhaps it was too forward of her to offer to share the same bed for the night. She didn't want to seem too forward this early in their relationship, especially if he was going out of his way to make her comfortable. Or maybe all he needed was some reassurance. They'd fallen asleep together in the barn, hiding from the gargoyle. Would this really be so different?

Link laid back on the low couch, disappearing from view with a contented sigh.

After another moment's contemplation she decided not to push the issue. He seemed comfortable enough where he was for the night. She watched as he fought the stubborn laces on his boots and glanced around, realizing with a start that he was giving up the bed to her. Even tired as they were, he was still willing to play the perfect gentleman. She chewed on her lower lip, considering her options. She could still feel the heat of his lips on her own, his hand roaming down her back. The kiss had been wonderful, incredible even, but perhaps it was too forward of her to offer to share the same bed for the night. She didn't want to seem too forward this early in their relationship, especially if he was going out of his way to make her comfortable. Or maybe all he needed was some reassurance. They'd fallen asleep together in the barn, hiding from the gargoyle. Would this really be so different?

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She shimmied out of the skirt in a rush and dove beneath the covers.

Sleep wouldn't come. She lay awake for what felt like hours, his eyes tracing the wooden beams overhead. The moon traversed the span of the window, tracking a long finger of moonlight across the far wall, then down and across the rug at the center of the room.

Some time ago the room had stopped spinning, the alcohol having worked its way through her system. Now she was left with a empty gnawing low in her belly, a giddy sensation as the adrenaline from earlier slowly drained away.

She pressed a hand to her breast. Her heart was still racing. Singing. She'd never felt this way about anyone before. Was this love? This sense of belonging and hope and … fear?

She was afraid, she realized. Scared that he would disappear again, that his duty would call him
away, and he would never return.

She didn't want him to leave. She knew that he would have to, to finish this quest of his. She knew that it was selfish of her to try and make him stay. But she couldn't let him go again, not without making it clear how she felt about him.

In the end, her decision came easily.

She slid from her bed, bare feet moving across cool wooden floorboards, then finely woven carpet, before she found herself standing over him. She watched him for a moment as he slept, his head propped on the arm of the couch, the blanket pulled up to his chin. Golden bangs fell over his eyes in serene slumber. The lines in his face were less taut like this, she noticed. Maybe it was only in his dreams that he truly felt at peace.

Her hand reached out, then paused and clenched into a fist, before opening once more and continuing its journey.

She lifted the blanket and slid her leg over his waist, straddling him.

He jerked awake, blinking groggily as her weight settled over his hips. "Mal—?"

She cupped his jaw in her hands and kissed him deeply, turning his surprised query into a low, throaty moan. Her loose auburn hair spilled over her shoulders as she pressed her body tightly against his. Link's arms circled her waist and she snaked her hands down, then up beneath the hem of his tunic, tracing the contours of his chest. She hummed in pleasure against his mouth as his hands roamed down her shoulders, across her back, lower, and her hips rocked against him as desire became desperate need.

All she wanted – all she ever needed – was for him to never let her go again…
Morning sunlight filtered through the window, casting a golden square on the floorboards as dust motes danced in invisible currents of air. Bird calls heralded a new day, and soon the sounds of the morning bustle could be heard emanating from the floor as the rest of the inn awoke. Time slowly crept by, creeping along as the square of golden light inched its way along the floor, up the side of the bed frame, and across the quilted covers before finally coming to rest across Malon's sleeping face.

The farmgirl's eyes fluttered as the sunlight reached her, and she turned her head away with a soft groan. She nuzzled deeper into the crook of Link's shoulder, her arm snaking around his waist beneath the covers until she was snuggled against him. Her cheek rested against the flat plane of his bare chest, and in her sleepy haze she could feel the steady thrm-thrm of his heartbeat.

She heard a tinkling of chimes and felt a soft prod at her temple. Her eyes cracked open just enough to see a soft bluish glow and fluttering gossamer wings hovering inches from her face.

"Wakey wakey, sleepyhead," Navi sang. "Remember me?"

"Oh," Malon replied, then yawned mightily, holding her hand over her mouth as Navi fluttered upwards. When she could speak again, she said, "Link's faerie, right? I was wondering where you ended up."

"Oh, you know, I've never been much of a farmer. So I've been floating around, keeping out of your hair," Navi replied cryptically, then flitted over to Link and alighted on his nose. She reached down and peeled back an eyelid, waving a tiny hand until his iris focused. "Hey, time to wake up sleepyhead," she cooed, snapping her fingers. "Don't you two have a ranch to take care of?"

Link blew a sharp puff of air that sent Navi fluttering upwards in a fit of giggles.

Malon sat up straighter and glanced around, bleary-eyed. She didn't remember moving to the bed last night. All she remembered after they made it to the room were flashes and moments, a blur of roaming hands and heated kisses...

Malon glanced at Link. Did they... did she...?

"You okay, Red?" Navi asked with a sly grin in her voice as she settled into an orbit above Link's head. "Your face looks like a tomato."

Link finally blinked himself to wakefulness, turning a curious eye to Malon as he propped himself up on his elbows beside her. She quickly averted her eyes as the blanket slid a few inches further, revealing that he'd lost his tunic sometime during the night. Even as she squeezed her eyes shut, the image in her mind of his bare torso full of lean muscle and battle-marked skin was causing her stomach to perform somersaults. Or maybe that was just the beginning of a hangover.

"It's going to be a long time before you convince me to drink again," she muttered, running her hands down her face. The warmth in her cheeks wasn't dissipating. "And where have you been hiding?" she asked, turning her face upward to look at Navi. "I remember Link's faerie companion. I thought you two were inseparable."

"Ah, I figured the both of you deserved some space." Navi replied, alighting on Link's shoulder. She nudged him in the cheek with her elbow, shooting him a sly look. "About time if you ask me."
"No one asked you," Link grumbled, his ears burning with embarrassment. He swung his legs out from under the blanket and began hunting around for his tunic.

Malon peeled back the covers, then immediately threw them back over her bare legs with a startled squeak. Link gave her a curious glance as her sheepish gaze swept the room. It felt as if the burning in her cheeks had increased a hundred fold.

"Um," she spoke quietly, "Has anyone seen my skirt?"

Breakfast in the downstairs pub was a brisk and relatively quiet affair. Link was content to eat the inn's morning porridge in silence while Malon nursed the gentle, insistent throbbing in her temples.

_Never again_, she swore to herself, wincing slightly at the rising cacophony of shouted greetings and scraping chairs that accompanied the morning meal. A few of the patrons looked to be in an equally delicate mood after the previous night's festivities, nursing steaming cups of coffee and querulous scowls. It wasn't hard to pick out those who had over-enthusiastically enjoyed the previous night's festivities. Every so often one of these morning misers would meet the pained gaze of another, and with a silent nod a brief moment of camaraderie would pass between them.

After Link closed their tab at the inn, they saddled Epona and paid a visit to the washerwoman's shop. While Malon went inside to finish paying for her dress, Link stayed with the mare to adjust the saddle, tying his sword and shield to counterbalance the satchel on Epona's flank.

He glanced up across the mare's back as Malon ducked out of the shop, a small parcel wrapped in wax paper and baling twine tucked beneath her arm. The gratified smile on her face and the spring in her step caused the last of the acid burning in his gut to dissipate.

Link realized he was staring as she approached, drawing a deep breath as he gently shook himself. "Ready to go?" Malon asked as she stashed her package in the saddlebag on the opposite side of Epona.

"Ready," Link replied, laying a hand on the mare's long neck and ducking beneath her head to stand beside Malon. The young rancher finished tightening down the leather straps, then reached out and grasped the neck of his tunic, drawing Link downward. He blinked in surprise as her lips briefly brushed against his, her blue eyes smiling and her breath sweet with the honey used to flavor their porridge. Then, before he could react, she hiked her skirt and placed her foot in the stirrup, hauling herself up into the saddle.

Link stood in a daze for a moment, admiring the strip of pale calf peeking out from between her skirt and work boots. Then Malon's hand appeared in his vision and he reached out to take it.

"What was that for?" he asked as he climbed into the saddle to sit in front of her.

Malon was quiet for several long, lingering moments. Eventually, just as he was about to repeat the question, she said, "I've decided to forgive you after all."

Link twisted far enough to catch the mischievous look on her face. "Wait, you hadn't decided until just now?" he asked.

"Hmm," was the only answer Malon gave as she very pointedly avoided meeting his gaze, a coquettish smile on her lips.

Link gave a soft huff and turned back around to flick the reins. With the last of their errands done, he steered Epona through the slowly dissipating remnants of festival-goers and out the front gate of Kakariko. With Malon humming a jaunty tune, they began the long journey back to Lon Lon Ranch.
Halfway down the mountain pass, Link glanced back with a devilish smile of his own. Malon barely had time to parse his cryptic look before he flicked the reins and kicked Epona into a gallop.

With a shriek of delight Malon grabbed tight to Link's tunic as he brought Epona up to speed. The mare gave a delighted whinny, then took off thundering down the winding road, weaving to pass the occasional cart or traveler. Epona seemed pleased to finally be allowed to fully stretch her legs, charging ahead with wild abandon. She bolted down the path from Kakariko, across the weather-worn Kakariko Bridge, and out into the wide, loamy expanse of Hyrule Field.

Malon kept her fingers dug tight into the fabric of Link's tunic, a wide grin plastered across her face and her hair whipping out behind her as they galloped across the plains.

Breathless and wild and free.

The run was thrilling, but after several minutes they slowed to a gentler pace for the rest of the journey so as not to overly tire their mount. Along the way, Malon's hand kept drifting towards the satchel at her flank that contained her mother's dress. She'd been ecstatic to find that the washerwomen had done a remarkable job at removing the mud without damaging the delicate fabric, although she couldn't decide if perhaps the hue was a shade or two lighter now. But that was all right, since the dress was going back into storage the moment they got home. She didn't know when she would be able to wear it again, if ever. It was the memories of last night that she would treasure forever.

An hour into their journey, Malon found that she didn't need to be nearly so surreptitious about clinging to Link as she had on the previous day's ride. She kept her arms firmly wrapped around the farmhand's waist, content to doze with her cheek pressed between his broad shoulders. Every so often she would perk up enough to take a few small sips from their water flask in an attempt to push back her lingering headache.

By noon her stomach had settled and she was fidgeting in the saddle, plans spinning in her mind. The horses had been cooped up for far too long, so she'd need to let them out to pasture. The cows had already missed two milkings, and would likely be irritable with swollen udders. The cuccos were able to forage for themselves, but they'd be just as irritable. It was simply their nature.

Malon had the rest of her day planned out by the time they arrived back at Lon Lon Ranch. Link drew Epona to a halt at the main gate long enough for Malon to dismount and grab a small stack of incoming letters from the mailbox. She flipped the painted metal rooster back down, ready to receive new mail.

She unlocked the gate, then followed Link as he steered Epona into the heart of the ranch. Her fingers idly shuffled through the handful of letters as she walked, nothing of note catching her eye. She entered the barn through the side door while Link circled around and lead Epona to her stall. Once inside he began unhitching the saddle and hauled it off her back, setting it, the saddlebags, and the blanket on the rack near the door.

Malon tucked the letters beneath her arm and unhooked Epona's bridle. The mare turned its head and playfully nipped at Malon's hand as she set it aside. "Don't be so impatient," she chided, rubbing her hand over the mare's nose.

Link returned to the stall and plucked the brush from the sideboard before she could reach for it. The redhead glanced around, suddenly feeling a little expendable as Link began running the brush along Epona's flank. It was irrational, but seeing the easy confidence the farmhand had with her prized horse surprised her. She'd never known Epona to respond so well to anyone but her, not even her
father. Over the course of the last month she'd watched their interaction with mild jealousy. Of course, it made sense now that she realized he was the same boy from seven years prior. Epona had been a young filly when Link first came to the ranch. She'd been skittish of him at first, but after Malon had taught him to play her mother's song on his ocarina, he'd managed to win the filly's trust.

But knowing what she did now did little to ease the odd tightness in her chest.

Malon turned and strode down the main hall of the stable, flipping latches open along the way as unwelcome thoughts buzzed through her mind like a swarm of bees. Curious cows and their few remaining horses pushed against newly unlocked doors and began an orderly shuffle out into the yard to graze.

Flicking the final latch, she stepped back and let the animals pass, thoughtfully tapping the unopened letters in her palm. It wasn't fair that the animals had to stay couped up all day long. There had been no one on the ranch to watch them with Ingo gone, so it couldn't be helped in this case, but the injustice remained. What else could she do? There was simply no money to hire more farmhands. The economy was in shambles, and horses did not come cheap. Until something changed, the animals would remain here in their cages, only tasting brief periods of freedom before being locked away once more.

Her feet carried her back to Epona's stall.

"It's quiet," she remarked as she leaned against the door frame. "It feels so empty with just the two of us here."

Link glanced up, but continued giving Epona long, slow strokes down her flank. "Is it that different from when it was just you and Ingo?"

Malon didn't answer. She continued to watch as Link worked, her fingers idly tapping against the envelopes in her hand. The mare stood patiently as Link cleaned the dust and sweat from her coat.

Eventually Malon worked up the courage to speak again. "She really likes you," she began.

Link smiled, giving Epona an affectionate pat on the rump. "She's a good horse. Probably the best I've ever known."

Malon nodded slowly. "I think Epona would be happy with you," she said, forcing the words out. "You should take her with you when you go."

Link turned to her, dark eyes searching her face for a moment before speaking. "Don't you want to keep her?"

Yes.

But the ache in her heart couldn't keep the words in. "She needs to run," Malon said simply.

Link let his hand drop, his head tilted in concern. "There's plenty of room on the ranch," he said cautiously.

Malon glanced at Epona, who had dipped her head to drink from the water trough. She reached down and ran a loving hand along Epona's long neck. The mare's warm skin was familiar beneath her fingers, soft and smooth over corded muscle filled with the promise of wild power.

"Not for her," she finally replied, a sad smile tugging at her lips. "I can't stand the thought of selling her to someone who doesn't appreciate her, and she deserves better than what I can give her here."
She met his gaze once more. "I think she'd be happier running across the fields instead of cooped up on the ranch all day. And, you need help on your journey. She can give you that."

She drew in a steadying breath, then continued. "I can give you that. I want you to have her."

She saw his jaw work as his eyes swept over Epona, but he never quite managed to find the words. Eventually he turned to meet her gaze, and simply nodded, accepting her gift.

She smiled lightly, not trusting herself to speak, though the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. She didn't trust herself not to take it back. The less said about it, the easier it would be when he left. With that done, she exited the stall and turned to the comparatively less strenuous task of keeping the ranch solvent. She looked to the unopened letters in her hands and began to sort through them.

All told it was a disheartening collection of correspondence, but then what else was new? There were a handful of bills, which she tucked under her arm for later review when she could crack open the ranch's ledgers. Another two milk orders from the Zora enclave at Lake Hylia. A letter with an unfamiliar scrawl for a signature caught her eye. Sadly it turned out to be an offer from some speculative Holodrum nobleman to buy her ranch for a fraction of what it was worth. She wouldn't even deign to write a reply. It ended up being thrown on top of a small stack by the side door that would be torn up for cucco bedding.

The next letter sent her heart aflutter. She'd missed it when she'd first shuffled through the mail. The lazy, looping scrawl of her father was instantly recognizable. Her nails quickly parted the odd poison-green wax seal, and she drew out the short letter, finding a patch of sunlight streaming down from the rafters to better read.

Her eyes scanned the page.

"No..." she muttered to herself.

She read it again, her eyes hastily running across the page, sure there must be some sort of mistake.

"No, no, no!"

The rest of the mail scattered across the ground, forgotten. She gripped the letter in her trembling hands as she read it a third time. The paper crumpled in her fists as tears began to blur the world around her. The barn began to fall away, everything becoming soft and grey and muted.

She couldn't see. Her feet carried her forward in a blind panic, the rapid pulse pounding in her ears drowning out all other sounds. She had the vague impression of passing through a pair of doors, of climbing a staircase, taking the steps two at a time.

She made it to her room and had barely slammed the door shut behind her before she let loose with the scream that was burning in her throat.

Link hadn't known what to think at Malon's sudden outburst, and she'd fled through the side door before he'd poked his head out of the stall. Navi fluttered down from her roost to inspect the commotion, but Link waved her away and followed Malon. With a worrying glance Navi resumed her watch in the rafters.

Link had just opened the door to the kitchen as Malon's muted scream echoed through the house. He tracked the rancher to her bedroom, but the door was shut. A light test of the door handle showed that it was locked. So he gathered his courage and raised his hand to gently knock on the wood paneling.
"Malon? What happened?" Link asked through the door. "Is it your father?"

A long silence followed. Just as Link was about to try again, there came the sound of shifting bed-springs followed by the slow shuffle of feet approaching the other side of the door. But Malon didn't answer, so he waited quietly while his nerves buzzed. Eventually something heavy bumped against the door, and he heard the sound of cloth sliding against wood. A faint shadow at the doorjam told him that Malon had slid down the door, and a faint sniffling could be heard from the other side.

Link crouched by the door, fingers pressed against the lacquered surface as if he could reach through and run them through her hair. "You can let me in, Malon."

Another long silence. "Not right now, Link," she finally said, her voice choked with tears. "Please."

He considered that for a moment. "Okay," he said, then turned and sat with his back resting against the door. He wasn't going anywhere.

The silence stretched between them, the only sounds he could hear being her occasional sniffles. He spent his time letting his mind wander through possible scenarios. Had it been news of Talon that set her off? Was it the death of a distant relative, some favorite Aunt perhaps? He didn't have enough information to form a theory. So he waited patiently.

Eventually she grew calm and quiet. He shifted his seat as time went by, trying to find a comfortable position, but his body hummed with an eagerness to slay the dragons menacing her. His ears perked up when she spoke.

"I hate this part of me," Malon whispered, so low that he wondered if he'd heard correctly. A gentle rhythmic thump began to vibrate through the door, as if she were knocking the back of her head against the wood. "I hate that I can't stand up to stuff like this. I hate that my first reaction is to just run away and cry into a pillow. What kind of business owner am I?"

Link shrugged. "To be fair, you had just finished offering to give me your favorite horse. That can't have been easy."

There was no response from the door. Link waited a few moments before continuing.

"Tell me how I can help," he said.

"I don't think you can."

"Won't know until I try," Link said, glancing upward at the shadowed ceiling as dust motes spun in the air. "Can't try until you tell me what's wrong."

Another long silence, pregnant with indecision, then the sound of something soft being slid against the wood floorboards.

Link glanced down, his fingers finding the crumpled paper that Malon had stuck beneath the door. He unfolded the letter carefully, noting the dark splotches where the ink had started to run from what could only be Malon's tears. Every word on the page lanced out like an icy dagger being thrust into his heart.

_Dearest Malon,_

_Wondrous news! Ingo has asked for your hand in matrimony, and I've gladly accepted. He's informed me of how much in love you two are, and after seeing how well he's taken care of the ranch all these years, I had no choice but to accept. I know that he will make a wonderful husband_
for you and I hope that he will take care of you long after I am gone. I've granted him an official
marriage edict stating that you two are to be wed as soon as Ingo returns. I wish I could be there for
your wedding day, but Ingo and I agree that I should stay here until I am feeling better.

All of my love,

Talon

"Well," Link began, but couldn't find the words. "That's … terrible."

A bitter laugh from behind the door. "Yeah, that about sums it up."

He let the shock of the letter wash over him, then took a steadying breath before rereading it,
scanning for clues that would confirm his suspicions.

"This," Link began carefully, "Doesn't really sound like Talon."

Malon was silent for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"It's too … what's the word? Articulate. Here," Link began to read the letter. "'Ingo has asked for
your hand in matrimony.' When has 'matrimony' ever been a part of your father's vocabulary?
Whenever I've talked to him, it's always been 'getting hitched' or simply just 'married.'" He folded
the note in half and stuck it back beneath the door. "It's like whoever wrote this was trying too hard."

The note disappeared, and Malon was silent as she read it again. Finally, she said, "Maybe … maybe
he was just trying to be eloquent?"

Link shook his head, his confidence building. "Nuh-uh. The letter is all about Ingo. There's nothing
in there about how your father is feeling or if that doctor in Labrynna is helping him get better. Don't
you think that would be something Talon would want you to know?"

"Then … what?"

"I think Ingo forged the letter," Link said. The longer he thought on it, the more sure of his theory he
became. "He's playing games, and he's using your father as a bargaining chip. He needed Talon off
the ranch and out of the way."

"But it's my father's signature," Malon said. "I'd recognize it anywhere."

"Then he forced Talon to write this letter. Maybe." Link scratched the back of his head, his mind
whirling with possible scenarios. "I dunno. It's just awfully convenient, isn't it? You've told me how
Ingo thinks he should own the controlling share of the ranch, and he's been treating you like dirt to
try and force you to sell. What if he's been planning this all along? If he couldn't run you off, he'll
take over the ranch through marriage," Link gave a dark chuckle. "And let's face it; The instant
you're married, if anything were to happen to you then the ranch would go to him by default."

"And if I don't agree to go along with it, then I'll never see my father again," Malon finished the trail
of thought. "That bastard waited until I came of age to pull this. He's probably been planning this for
years. Ugh, now I realize what he was seeing whenever I caught him staring at me the last several
years. Makes my skin crawl."

"I'll admit, I didn't think he was either smart or patient enough for something like this." Link said.

Malon grew quiet again. "How do I fight something like this?" she asked, her voice forlorn. "I don't
have anyone I could turn to to back my claim. He could slit my throat in my sleep and no one would
question it. We only get visitors, what? Once a month? He would have all the time in the world to make it look like an unfortunate accident."

"You have me," Link replied.

"But you're going to leave again," Malon reminded him, her voice taking on an accusatory edge. "You'll leave, and I'll still be stuck here. Stuck with him. And no," she quickly shot in, "I'm not leaving and abandoning the ranch to him, so you can take that idea and shove it."

Link slowly closed his mouth before the words made it past his lips.

Malon continued, a newfound heat in her voice. "I am the last member of my family on this ranch, and I refuse to let it go without a fight. But I'm hanging on with one hand, and I can feel my fingers slipping."

Link had no answer for that, the pain in her voice rubbing him raw. It was true. Short of killing Ingo, he hadn't come up with a way to keep the old rancher from gaining control of the ranch. And he wasn't sure he wanted to cross that line, no matter what his darker impulses were currently telling him.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the door. He needed to think.

Start at the beginning. Marriage. There wasn't much use for courts in the last seven years as Hyrule descended into anarchy. The butchery of Castle Town and the dissolution of the royal family meant that each town was left to their own fates, and Lon Lon Ranch had none of those meager protections.

The rule of law was virtually non-existent. No soldiers protected the border towns from bandit raids, no constables patrolled the caravan routes. Justice was in short supply, and where it could be had it was dealt out in brutal fashion, such as Link's particular brand of vigilantism. If a couple wanted to marry, there were no remaining temples to bless the union. There would be no witnesses, no grand wedding with dozens of guests. Who would argue if Malon disappeared and Ingo produced a signed document from the girl's father saying that they had been married?

This "marriage edict" that Ingo carried was the key. If what the letter said was true, then Ingo would be returning with a weapon powerful enough to wrest control of the ranch away from the Lon family. All tucked away in a piece of paper written long before anyone would be able to inspect it.

His eyes snapped open. Something had stuck out in his mind, like a battle standard snapping the in breeze. He began rifling through the thoughts in his head. Marriage. Law. Edict. There.

"I might have something," Link said, puzzle pieces clicking into place in his mind. He picked himself up and strode off down the hall. Malon's door creaked open and she poked her head out, her eyes rimmed with red. She caught sight of him just in time to see his green tunic disappear into her father's bedroom.

She climbed to her feet and followed him down the hall, then cautiously stuck her head around the doorjamb, watching as he crouched in front of the oak dresser by the window and began pulling out drawers. "Hey," she said weakly, then cleared her throat. "Hey, what are you doing in there?"

"Your father told me about something before he left." Link answered, pulling open a dresser drawer. A stack of old, patched tunics greeted him. He pushed his hands down, rifling through the clothes, but finding nothing of interest he closed the drawer again.

"About what?" Malon asked, choosing to ignore the admission that he had previously snuck into her father's room. She entered the room, coming closer to try and see what he was up to.
"Let me see if I can find it before I get your hopes up," Link replied, pulling open another drawer.

Malon frowned. "I don't like you pawing through my Dad's clothes."

"He wasn't very specific on where he hid it, and he wasn't in any condition to show me," Link said. "Just trust me, okay?"

With that last cryptic plea, he fell silent and resumed his hunt. Malon crossed her arms and watched for another moment before she turned and swept her gaze across the room. Talon's bed was a sore sight, the old mattress crumpled and stained with sweat and other fluids from his worst days. She made a note to clean it on their next laundry day. A small shelf of books hung on the far wall, their spines cracked and fading with age. A small charcoal sketch was framed above the bookshelf, depicting a stern looking man with a pipe gripped between his teeth, a portrait of a grandfather she had never known.

The curtains above the dresser were drawn, allowing only a weak beam of sunlight to fall across the floorboards. Malon reached out and spread them wide, letting more light into the room.

Her eyes fell to the wide pictograph on top of Talon's dresser. She ran her fingers across the wooden picture frame, wiping away a thin layer of dust. "Do you think we'll ever be able to go back to the way things were?" she asked quietly.

Link paused in his search and glanced upward, taking in the details of the picture. It had been taken in front of the secondary gate and facing the ranch's entrance, with the old, freshly painted wooden emblem visible above their heads. A dozen farmhands stood arrayed around a much younger Talon, who had one arm draped across Ingo's lanky shoulder. The rest of the people present were unknown to Link, presumably former farmhands. One figure on the opposite side of Talon had a crutch under his arm and a leg that had been amputated above the knee. Another was crouched at the forefront, smoking a thin tabac stick. Towards the back towered a muscular Shiekah woman that rose a full head above most of the men. The tattoos on her bicep bulged as her arm curled around the throat of another hapless rancher who appeared to be clawing futilely for air. All were smiling towards the pictographer, as if proud of a major collective achievement.

There were no red-headed women to be seen.

"Your mother's not in the photo," Link commented before he resumed digging. "I thought she was there at the beginning?"

"I think she was the one taking the picture," Malon replied, lifting the frame from the dresser and wiping her fingers across the dusty glass. "I remember her telling me about how this was all my father's dream, and she was just along for the ride. She didn't like to travel. A lot of people didn't even know he was married until I arrived."

She glanced down, noticing that Link had grown still. At the bottom of the drawer lay a small stack of documents, many of them yellowed with age. One in particular drew her eye. It sat near the back of the drawer, a small, wound scroll that looked newer than the rest and was marked with her father's seal.

Link took it in his hands and stood, turning to face her. A few scribbled words were written across the top, hard to make out from Malon's angle, but she recognized both her's and Link's name.

"What if your father gave you something that would stop Ingo in his tracks?" Link asked, his eyes serious. "What if he wrote that letter knowing that it would never work? What if he left you something that would nullify whatever Ingo's carrying ... because someone else had that right first?"
Malon's gaze snapped to the roll of parchment in Link's hands. The frame in her hands slipped, but she caught it before it fell, setting it safely back on the dresser. Her mind felt fuzzy and numb. Surely it couldn't be that easy?

Link continued. "Seven years ago your father wrote a letter to a boy promising payment for his services around the ranch. He was still hurting after your mother's death, and he told me that he wanted to make sure that someone was around to take care of you if he couldn't be.

"I didn't think anything of it at the time. I even laughed it off when he told me about it. But he kept it safe, just in case." He swallowed nervously. "I'd, uh ... like to collect, if it's all right with you.'"

Malon's hands rose to her lips, her eyes going wide as she met his gaze.

"Link," she whispered against her fingers. "Did you just propose to me?"

"Um," the confidant farmhand disappeared, and for an instant in his place stood the wide-eyed 10 year old boy. His face flushed with heat as he swallowed nervously. "Kind of?"

Whatever she had been expecting, it certainly wasn't that. Her heart felt like it wanted to leap from her chest.

"Even if it's just for show." He started to backtrack hastily at the look in her eyes. "I mean, I've only been back for a couple of months and I still need to finish unlocking the temples. Not that I wouldn't want to, eventually, but I—"

Malon took a step closer, putting pause to his rambling. A smile lit her eyes as she shook her head.

"No, Link, it's all right. Even I don't think it's the right time to be talking about something like ... like marriage." Her blush darkened, turning her face the color of her hair. "But ... you would be willing to do that? For me?"

Link drew a steadying breath. "I think your father gave us a chance at stopping Ingo's little scheme. Knowingly or not. We confront him with this, then we can hold him off for a little while longer. Until I can come back, at least."

He turned the scroll over and had positioned his thumb to crack the seal before Malon laid her hand over his, stopping him. His eyes found hers, questioning.

"I don't need to see it to know what it says," she said quietly. "Link, you weren't just some lost little boy we found in the rain. You were like family to us. I wasn't the only one who was heartbroken when you disappeared seven years ago."

"Daddy always had a soft spot for you. And you know as well as I do that he was a bit impulsive. I don't doubt for a second that he thought of you like the son he'd never had, and that you'd make a good husband for me some day." She let her hand drop to his shoulder, "Look ... we really don't have the time to properly sort this out. But maybe after all of this is done, and you come back to me safe, then we can talk about us?"

He nodded. "I'd like that."

She leaned in, planting a lingering kiss on his lips. Link's free hand wrapped around her waist, planting itself on the small of her back and drawing her close. Her arms curled upwards, her fingers tangling in his hair as a delightful electric buzz sizzled between them where their bodies melded
together.

Eventually she pulled away with more than a little regret, her gaze never leaving his. "Thank you, Link. I think I might actually be able to fall asleep tonight after all."
Horseplay

Malon and Link had two more days to pretend that all was right with the world. They got by as well as they could, but a dark cloud had descended over the ranch, and neither one of them managed to sleep well at night. Neither did they broach the subject of their deepening relationship. It just never seemed like the right time to bring it up.

Late into the second night, Link laid awake with his arms hooked behind his head, staring up at the inky darkness that obscured the rafters of the barn. Navi's soft glow illuminated one corner of the ceiling, her lookout perch near the air vent giving him a point of reference to focus on. The nights were still warm, so he'd shucked his tunic for the day, lying atop his blanket as he splayed out over the straw mattress. Dark shadows raced through is mind. Would Ingo return tomorrow, or the next day? Were they fully prepared to face him? Would he be able to scare Ingo off without killing him?

He worried that he couldn't see any other option if Ingo pressed the issue. Was it because he wasn't smart enough to come up with some clever plan? He'd lain awake the previous night and run through all of the possible scenarios with Navi, just like they would before tackling the guardian of a temple. But nothing they came up with seemed like an acceptable alternative. If Ingo didn't back down from Link's threat, then it would come to a fight. He couldn't trust that Ingo wouldn't try something while he was off unsealing the next temple, and that frightened Link to his core.

He didn't want to kill Ingo, but not for his sake. It was for Malon's. He didn't want her to think of him as some sort of butcher. And it bothered him that it wasn't himself that he was concerned about. Or rather, that his concern was purely selfish. He couldn't live with himself if he saw the light die in Malon's eyes, only to be replaced by fear. Of him, of what he could do when pushed to anger. He knew if that happened, then he'd never win her back. She'd be lost just as sure as if he'd thrust the blade into her own heart.

He balled his fists and dug them into his eyes, frustration tearing a yawning void in his gut. What did it say about him that he wasn't overly concerned with murdering a man if they threatened someone he cared about? What did it say that he'd felt little about the six men he'd killed to protect Malon three months ago? They hadn't been monsters, at least not in the typical sense. They'd been hungry, desperate men, and he'd cut them down with little thought. Did the Goddesses accept what he'd done out of necessity, or would there some day be some sort of accounting for his sins?

He let his arms drop. Stressing about it wasn't enabling him to come up with a better plan. He'd be better off just doing what he and Navi did best: wing it and hope they managed to keep one step ahead of any problems. But sleep wasn't coming, and his mind inevitably wandered back to the same problem in an endless spiral.

Suddenly the ladder to the loft rattled, interrupting his thoughts. Link glanced to the yawning darkness of the lower levels, curious. Soft steps crept upwards, unhurried and unconcerned with stealth.

Malon's head appeared over the lip. She paused only long enough for her eyes to adjust, to see that he was awake before resuming her climb. She clambered up and approached his bed cautiously, one arm crossed protectively across her abdomen to clutch at her elbow. His breath caught in his throat as she stepped into the faint starlight spilling into the barn from the open window.

She wore a simple cotton shift that fell to her knees, some feminine sleeping garment that was at once
completely chaste but did wonders for her figure. Her feet were delightfully bare, the pale curve of her ankles peeking out with every step. Her auburn hair was mussed, her eyes bruised with worry.

She paused when she reached him and knelt at his side, her knees resting on the blanket with her feet tucked beneath her. An electric tingle quickened his pulse as she tucked a few stray strands of hair behind her pointed ear. Her head tilted to the side as her gaze slowly ran from his crown, down his bare chest and across his abdomen, before coming to rest at his navel, where his work pants kept his body's reaction to her appearance blessedly concealed. She didn't speak, and for a moment he wondered if he was dreaming, if he was imagining the whole thing.

He held out his hand, reaching for her, but she pushed it aside, her fingers wrapped firmly around his wrist. Not a dream, then. She pinned his arm down with gentle pressure, and he didn't resist. He couldn't, not when she was looking at him like that. She continued to watch as his chest slowly rose, then fell, her eyes wandering across the thin tracery of scars he'd accumulated over the years.

Her eyes met his, and his lips parted as he breathed deep. There was so much swimming in her bright eyes, but the fear that he expected to see was barely there. Instead they shone with hope, and something more. Something specifically for him.

Trust.

He drank in the sight of her, the faint scent of her soap brushing against his senses. Eventually she shifted, her eyes briefly turning downcast before she leaned closer and curled up beside him, her head finding the familiar crook of his shoulder. He ran his fingers through her hair before his hand fell back to lightly rest on her hip, drawing her closer. Her body molded to his on the straw mattress and her hand curled upward, delicate fingers trailing along his abdomen before coming to rest an inch below his heart.

"Couldn't sleep," she said softly, her eyes falling shut.

The night grew quiet once more, and her breathing began to slow as she relaxed against him. It was the only explanation she offered, but it was enough.

Dawn broke red on the morning of the third day, casting a warm glow through a soft smattering of clouds. Malon awoke first to the distant crowing of cuccos, her gaze finding its way to Link's sleeping countenance. His jaw was slack, his lips parted slightly as he slept, all tension having fled his body. It was oddly endearing, to see him like this at his most vulnerable.

She shifted herself closer and began pressing a light trail of kisses under his jaw, moving ever upward until she found the area just under his ear. He shivered against her, blinking himself to wakefulness, and she smiled to herself. She'd discovered a sensitive spot, it seemed. She'd have to remember that.

Malon stood and stretched her arms high over her head, earning an appreciative grunt from Link. She threw a knowing smirk over her shoulder, holding the position for a moment longer than necessary, then strode to the ladder and began making her way down. They'd awoken later than usual that morning, so she needed to get breakfast started before it got too late in the day. The cows weren't going to milk themselves.

So began another day on Lon Lon Ranch.

They were almost ready to break for a late lunch when Navi came flying down from her lookout post
in the barn rafters.

Malon glanced up from her stool in surprise as the faerie gave her breathless report. The mottled cow before her chuffed and shuffled, startled at the tinkling firebug that had come to pester it. Malon set her stool aside and picked up the milking pail to avoid a spill, and they both went to find Link.

The farmhand had just ducked out of the cucco coup with a basket of fresh eggs on one arm and his cap clutched in the other. The dozen feathers stuck in his work tunic were accompanied by an equal amount of new tears, but thanks to the layer of chainmail beneath there was no blood, so he counted it as a win.

He was still inspecting himself for possible wounds when Navi flared to a stop and delivered her warning. Malon followed two beats later, her face already etched with worry.

A wagon was approaching the ranch. Ingo had returned.

Link had just enough time to retrieve his equipment before they heard the distant sounds of Ingo cursing his mount to ride faster. They waited inside the farmhouse while Ingo stored the wagon and stabled the horse. Link changed into his usual green tunic, setting his sword and shield into their familiar place on his back. The comfortable weight calmed his nerves. He wasn't looking to make a fight of it, but he wanted to be prepared if it came to that. If the sight of his equipment could intimidate Ingo into backing down, then so much the better.

Fully equipped, Link approached Malon as she chewed nervously at her thumbnail. She stood near the window while Navi perched on her shoulder. With her free hand she pulled the curtain aside, allowing both of them to peer out into the yard.

"You ready?" Link asked quietly.

"It's a good plan, right?" Malon replied as she briefly met his gaze, her eyes clouded and pensive.

Navi fluttered to Link's side. "I still say we should barricade the front gate," the faerie offered. "If he's dumb enough to try anything then we could turn him into a pin cushion."

Link considered her words, then shook his head. "But it wouldn't change anything. I think we can pull this off. It's the best chance we've got to finish this peacefully."

Malon nodded, took a steadying breath, and opened the front door.

They strode out to meet Ingo, Malon following a step behind Link. They came upon him just as the lanky rancher closed and locked the barn door, then set the keyring back on his belt. He turned as they stopped a comfortable distance from the barn, his eyes widening with surprise. Then his smile turned nasty.

"Ah, and here is my little bitch-to-be," Ingo sneered. "Come to welcome me home, darl—" His eyes found the glowing orb hovering above Link's head. "What in the flamin' Din-damned hell is that?"

"Drop the crap, Ingo," Link snapped. "You're not going to get away with this. Any of it."

Ingo snapped his attention back to Link, taking in the armament arrayed over the farmhand's shoulder. He hocked deep in his throat, then spit. "And you think after all this time I'm going to let the hired help stop me? I have the papers from that oaf Talon, right here." He tapped at his chest pocket, where a square of folded paper peeked from his overalls. "I have permission from the only person that matters."
"You forgot about mine," Malon cut in. "How were you going to do it, Ingo? Poison? Slit my throat in my sleep? Because there's no way I'd marry you willingly, so you obviously have something else up your sleeve."

Ingo waved her words away as if swatting an imaginary bug. "Nothing a few nights in the cellar wouldn't cure. I'm a patient man. I had to be to work for your father. He managed to drive everyone else away, but I've been biding my time for all these years. What's a few more weeks? By the time anyone cared, the problem would be taken care of, one way or another."

Link laid a warning hand on the hilt of his sword. The holy blade hummed beneath his fingers, sensing possibly the promise of impending violence. His fingers loosened, acid suddenly burning in his gut. This wasn't how he wanted this to end.

Ingo noticed the gesture. He took a step backwards, but to his credit he didn't run. He merely eyed the young swordsman warily. "So that's how it is. Just gonna kill me, is that it?" he asked, turning to Malon. "Maybe bury my body over with your mother? Wouldn't that be a hoot."

"You don't deserve the honor," Malon shot back.

Link let his hand drop, shaking his head. "I don't want to kill you, Ingo. I don't want to kill anyone. But I'm not letting you take the ranch."

Ingo spread his arms wide, his smile mocking. "There's nothing to stop me. All I need is the deed to this wretched place and I have everything I ever wanted. Marrying the girl just means I get to have it sooner rather than later."

Link gave him a smile that was all teeth. "You're forgetting something, Ingo."

"Eh? No, no, I'm sure I've got everything."

"You forgot me," Link replied, hooking a thumb at his chest. "I've been here all this time, and Malon has agreed to become my w-wife."

Well, it would have sounded better if he hadn't fumbled the last word, but it still sounded convincing to his own ears. Maybe, if Navi hadn't snickered quietly to herself.

Ingo stared at him in disbelief for several moments, then began to laugh maniacally. "It doesn't matter what the little whore wants! I've got documents signed by her father giving me permission to marry her as soon as I was to return! There's a bloody paper trail! I've got copies of everything I had your father write! Nobody in all of Hyrule would side with you if I contested! So hurry up and make up your mind about trying to kill me, because it's the only way I'll stop!"

Malon shot Link a concerned look, but he pressed on. "I think I could change a few minds," Link replied calmly, drawing a sealed scroll from his belt in a way that a man would draw a sword for combat. He held the paper in the air, high enough to make sure that Ingo's full attention was fixed on the binding wax bearing Talon's seal. The rancher's triumphant expression melted, becoming uneasy.

A sudden thought came to mind, causing Link to smile.

"Do you like stories, Ingo?" Link asked, and pushed on without waiting for a response. "I do. I think you're familiar with this one. Seven years ago a wandering ten-year-old boy got lost in the rain. That boy was deathly sick, but thanks to the loving attention of a rancher and his daughter he got better. To show his thanks, he stuck around the ranch for a few weeks to help out while he regained his strength. Eventually he had to leave to continue his journey, but he always made sure to come back and visit when he was in the area."
Link lowered the letter as he continued. "One day, after a particularly nasty storm swept through, the boy helped the rancher collect all of his wayward cuccos. The rancher, seeing that the boy was unusually reliable for his age, offered the hand of his daughter in marriage. When they came of proper age, of course.

"A silly thing, especially at such a young age. They both had a good laugh about it. But, unknown to everyone, the rancher drew up the proper paperwork and kept it hidden away. Just in case. A long time passed, but eventually the boy grew up, and when he returned to the ranch he was reminded that the offer was still open."

Ingo stood frozen on the spot, horrified realization dawning on his face as Link finished his tale.

"You …" Ingo began, but seemed to have trouble finishing his thought. His eyes flicked back and forth between the glowing orb above Link's shoulder and the farmhand's forest-green tunic. Finally, he managed to spit out, "You're that brat?!"

"Surprise!" Navi chimed, startling Ingo.

Link returned the scroll to his belt. "So if you think your paper gives you the right to take ownership of this ranch, then you're about seven years too late. Unless, of course," he glanced back at Malon. "You have any objections?"

Malon strode forward and took Link's hand in her own, entwining their fingers. Her chin rose defiantly as she spoke. "I choose Link, Ingo. Not you. Never you."

Link smiled gratefully at Malon, then turned back to Ingo. "So you see, your twisted little plan isn't going to work. So we're going to have to ask you to leave."

"No! No way!" Ingo snarled, stamping a foot in rage. He speared a shaking finger at Malon. "I have an equal stake in this ranch. No matter what, you're not going to steal that from me. I won't let you run me out of my own home!"

"It's true," Malon said, answering Link's questioning look. "It's not a controlling share, but it's the largest after my father and myself. Assuming the royal treasury doesn't come to collect, which seems unlikely given that the bank we dealt with is a smoking crater. All the old partners sold their shares back to my parents when they left. Then Daddy made it simple and gave me my mother's after her death."

Link’s feeling of triumph soured in his gut. If he couldn't guarantee that Ingo would leave the ranch in peace, then they were back to square one.

Link turned back to Ingo. "What if we bought your share?" he asked.

"Not happening," Ingo replied. "Even if you could afford it, no way in hell am I going to let this go. I'll take this straight to Lord Ganondorf himself before I let a brat like you steal everything away from me!"

"If he wanted to sell, we would have bought his share years ago," Malon said. "It was never about the money."

It was a stalemate. Both men glared at each other with withering gazes, each unwilling to budge as their minds raced. If Link walked away to continue his mission, Malon would be completely at Ingo's mercy. If Link somehow stayed, Ingo would only continue to harass Malon, gaining new leverage now that he had assumed complete control over her father. The only other path forward led to violence. It was his absolute last choice, but he couldn't find another way.
Link watched as Ingo slowly reached the same conclusion. The rancher tensed as Link's jaw set, ready to flee if Link reached for his sword. The fingers of his free hand flexed against his waist, eager to do just that and get it over with.

Before he could act, Link felt Malon stiffen against him, then she withdrew her hand from his. She took a step forward to address Ingo.

"A race, then."

"What?" came from both men at once. Ingo skewered them both with a suspicious look, his eyes darting back and forth.

"You and Link. A horse race," Malon continued, her voice growing animated. "Say, two laps around the horse paddock? Winner takes all."

Before Ingo could respond, Link hooked a gloved hand around Malon's elbow and pulled her back several steps, dragging her close to whisper in her ear. "This wasn't part of the plan," he hissed.

"Well he's not falling for the plan," Malon shot back heatedly, keeping her voice low. "So we make a new plan. He'll never agree to fight you, but horse training is his entire life, and he's a compulsive gambler. He's too proud to admit that you're the superior rider. So we make a deal he thinks he can't lose and then beat him at his own game.

"I'd do it myself, but he knows I'd leave him in the dust if I rode Epona," Malon continued, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "But you? He doesn't know a thing about you. He hasn't cared. So kick his butt and we can finally end this."

Link worked his jaw, but her logic was sound. This was the only way forward that he could see, and Nayru bless her it was better than anything he had come up with.

"You should have included her in the war council the other night," Navi said with a laugh. "She's probably smarter than both of us combined."

Malon threw a questioning glance at Navi, then peeled Link's grip from her elbow. "What do you say, Ingo?" the redhead asked, taking a step forward. "You win, and I'll walk away. Give me my horse and tell me where to find my father, and I'll sign everything over to you."

Ingo didn't seem convinced. His brow was furrowed as if sensing a trap. "Just like that?"

Link spun back to Ingo, giving the old rancher what he hoped looked like a contemptuous once-over. "You want me to race?" he said, working a scoff into his voice. "With him?"

The snub sparked an indignant fury in the rancher's eyes. "*Grrrr,* I've been breaking horses since you were a tingle in your father's sack!" Ingo yelled, stamping his foot. "Fine. Fine! We'll do it your way. One race, twice around the paddock. But—" His smile turned nasty. "I get to pick the horses."

Malon and Link shared a look.

"Proper horses, Ingo. They should be well rested," Malon said cautiously. "Rhonus just got done pulling the wagon for several days, Tilda's pregnant, and Arion hasn't received saddle training yet. That only leaves three left."

Ingo continued to smirk. "I think it's only proper that your champion gets to ride that wild horse that you've refused to train properly. So I say he gets to ride Epona." He stabbed a finger at Link. "You think you're such a great rider? Let's see the smug look on your face when you're thrown before the
Link quickly strangled the grin that threatened to appear, hoping that the expression on his face looked worrisome.

"I suppose that's fair," he intoned, his voice carefully neutral. "But if I win, then you sign your share over to Malon and get off her ranch."

Ingo paused, then shook his head. "I'm not betting my entire future on some stupid race."

Link sucked on his teeth. That didn't quite go as well as he'd hoped. "Seems only fair given that that's exactly what Malon's risking," he pointed out.

"Not when I already have everything I need. You can have— ah..." Ingo trailed off as he struggled to come up with something worth betting.

Link gave him a moment before interrupting Ingo's trail of thought. "The papers in your pocket, then. All of them," Link said pointedly as Ingo grasped protectively at his overalls. "We start fresh. Malon gets to keep her ranch, you get to stay, Talon comes home, and we forget all of this ever happened. Everyone's equally miserable."

Ingo growled. "Fine. The papers."

The rancher turned and unlocked the barn, sliding the door open wide. He disappeared into the interior.

Link turned back to Malon. "Not everything we could have hoped for, but it's a start."

She stepped parallel with him, placing a hand over his heart. "I trust you," she said quietly, laying a quick peck on his cheek. "Don't lose my ranch." With that she followed Ingo into the barn.

While he waited, Link took the opportunity to remove his sword and shield, leaning them against the barn. After a moment's consideration he pulled his tunic over his head and shucked his chainmail, adding it to the pile. The extra weight would only serve to slow Epona down.

A minute later both ranchers exited the building leading their chosen mounts by the bridle. Malon led Epona while Ingo led an older, slate-grey geldling that Link was familiar with but couldn't name.

Ingo re-locked the barn, giving the door a solid tug before he continued.

They gathered near the entrance to the corral, taking a few minutes to buckle down the horses' saddles. Link stood by Malon while she adjusted the blanket and tightened the cinch around Epona's belly.

"That's Sanctil," Malon offered as she worked, her eyes watching Ingo's chosen steed carefully. "He's a great workhorse, but he's not nearly as fast as Epona. Take care around the corners, but you can really let loose on the straightaways."

"He really likes carrots," Navi offered. At the couple's curious look, the faerie bobbed. "What? I've had a lot of time to make friends while you two were out sweating all day. If he starts to take the lead, I could throw some carrots on the track to try and distract him."

Malon laughed. "It's devious, but no. Don't give Ingo any reason to doubt the outcome. He needs to lose fairly or we'll be right back where we started."

"Fine," the faerie muttered in disappointment.
"Are you two done yet?" Ingo called. They turned to find the rancher using his heel to dig a long furrow into the dirt near the fence, designating the finish line.

Malon stuck her tongue out in his direction, but stayed safely hidden behind Epona. "All set," she answered. Ingo grunted, then mounted his horse and led Sanctil to the line he'd dug. He took up position closest to the fence, which gave him – intentionally or not – a minor edge in the race. Judging from the self-satisfied smile on his face, Ingo knew exactly what he was doing.

Link laid a hand on Epona's saddlehorn, but paused as Malon stepped forward. She raised herself up on her toes and pressed a fast, desperate kiss against his lips.

"For luck," she said as they parted, then turned and pressed her forehead to Epona's snout, running loving hands along the mare's jaw. "Win for me, baby," she whispered, planting another kiss on the mare's nose, then stepped aside. Epona chuffed, pawing at the ground as if eager for what was to come.

Ingo rolled his eyes in disgust as Link mounted Epona and steered her towards the starting line. His glare turned suspicious as the mare responded easily to Link's direction. He'd just opened his mouth to speak when Malon strode onto the track in front of them and clapped her hands loudly to grab both rider's attention.

"Okay, here are the rules," she called, planting her hands on her hips. "Two laps around the corral. First one across the finish line wins. Keep it clean. That means there's to be no contact between the riders, and don't," she speared them both with a look, wagging her finger back and forth. "Don't you dare hurt my horses."

Both riders nodded, properly chastised. Malon continued, "Then this is the prize: If Link wins, Ingo hands over whatever papers he's carrying and tells me where to find my father. If Ingo wins, I sign over the ranch and everything on it with the exception of Epona and, I dunno, some clothes and food." She faltered for a moment, but pressed on. "And he still tells me where I can find my father. So that happens either way. Agreed?"

Both riders gave the other a distasteful look, then nodded again.

"Agreed," Link said, followed by Ingo a beat after.

"All right then," Malon said, then cleared the track. She picked a spot in the grass a comfortable distance away from the riders and turned. Navi followed, assuming an orbit above her head.

"Everyone ready?"

A final nod from both riders. Sanctil pawed at the dirt while Epona edged forward an inch. Link pulled back gently on the reins to keep her from crossing the line.

"On your mark..." Malon called, raising a hand high overhead.

Link bent low over Epona with his heels set in the stirrups, ready to spur her into action.

"Get set..." she continued.

"Hurry up already," Ingo grumbled.

Malon speared him with a look, then extended a single finger from her raised hand in salute. After a long, lingering moment, she quickly chopped her hand through the air.
"Go!"

Epona leapt forward at Link's command, with Sanctil a split second behind. Ingo gave a whoop as he laid into his mount with a riding crop. Their steed's hooves became a steady rumble of thunder in Link's ears as he bent low in the saddle.

The first turn came quickly. Link slowed as he approached, momentarily losing his center of gravity, which allowed Ingo the chance to regain the ground he'd lost on the sluggish start. They came around the corner and sped forward, Link digging his heels into Epona's flank as she charged onward.

The wind was whipping through his hair. He held a hand over his cap, afraid to lose it, but then the second turn came up and he had to trust it would stay on. He did better on this one, leaning into the curve as Epona ran, but Ingo always seemed to be hiding in his peripheral vision.

The instant the turn ended and the track opened up, Sanctil's muzzle flashed by. With a whooping holler Ingo laid his crop across the geldling's flank, urging it faster. Link gritted his teeth and dug in harder. Epona tossed her head lightly, as if offended that the other horse had overtaken her. Then the mare's head dipped lower a fraction, and she began to close the distance, her hooves tearing across the ground like lightning. Link could only hold on, his mouth parted in awe as Epona sped past Sanctil on the straightaway.

_Sweet Farore, Epona is one hell of a horse._

He had a comfortable lead by the time they reached the third turn. Link pulled towards the fence to cut Ingo off, drawing Epona so close that he swore he felt the metal bars graze his cap. He heard a shout of frustration behind him, but held the urge to glance back, maintaining the lead into the fourth turn.

Malon was waving frantically as she came into view, then she put her fingers to her lips and gave an ear-splitting whistle as they passed the lap marker. Her unintelligible shouts followed them down the track as they sped past.

The race was intense. Ingo was no slouch when it came to getting the most out of his chosen steed, but Epona had been Malon's pride and joy for a reason. The mare was the perfect blend of speed and power, and when she ran it felt as if they were one being tearing across the ground.

Link felt a wild smile cross his face as they thundered around the first turn again. For the first time it felt as if winning wasn't just possible, but a sure thing.

Sanctil was starting to huff as he ran, while it felt as if Epona had barely broken a sweat. Ingo's strikes with his riding crop were becoming more brutal, and falling more often. The poor creature's eyes had started to bulge, whether from fright or pain or something else Link couldn't say.

They came to the second turn before anything happened. As soon as Malon fell out of view, Link sensed Sanctil coming up on the outside. When Epona began to slow for the turn, Sanctil darted ahead on their left, and that's when Ingo struck. He jerked the reins hard to the right, sending Sanctil crashing into Epona.

"Hey!" Link shouted as the horses jostled and champed at each other through their bits. "Ger'off!"

Ingo laughed gleefully as Epona's shoulder scraped against the wrought-iron fence. The mare cried out in pain as the unyielding metal tore into her flesh.

"You cheating—!" He didn't get to finish the thought as Ingo tried again. Link pulled Epona back,
just enough to slip behind Sanctil. The geldling surged ahead, powering around the curve. Link sputtered as dirt was kicked into his face – unintentional on the lead horse's part, but no less devastating, causing them to drag even further behind.

Link cursed himself. He should have seen it coming. Ingo wasn't just going to let the ranch go without trying some underhanded trick. But he was losing now. He couldn't lose, not like this.

They closed the gap on the straightaway, but Epona was still lagging behind by the third turn, unable to give it her full power. Link glanced down, his jaw clenched with worry. The shoulder wound bled freely, a pair of thin rivulets splashing free with every stride, but the mare seemed strong despite it. They could power through the rest of the lap.

"Hyah!" he cried as they rounded the third turn, giving Epona a final spur in the flanks. The mare huffed as she charged forward, coming up on the outside of Sanctil. Ingo spared them a glance, his eyes bulging in disbelief as they entered the final turn.

Link held on tight, one hand still on the reins while the other clenched tightly in Epona's ivory mane. Once out of the turn he bent low, his view dead center between her ears as his gaze locked onto the finish line ahead of them. The horses were neck and neck, their legs churning the ground as they galloped into the final stretch of the race.

"Go, Epona!"
Schemes Within Schemes

It was finished. Link had done it.

It had been far too close for comfort, but Epona surged ahead at the last instant, winning the race by half a length. A rage-filled scream pursued Link across the finish line as Epona closed the second lap, indisputably ahead.

The tension in Malon's chest fled as she expelled the breath she had been holding. Her knees quivered, and she knelt to the grass as Epona cantered past, her hands cupping against her racing heart. Her eyes fell shut and she tried to steady her breathing as she sent a silent prayer of thanks to Nayru.

*We did it,* she thought, almost not daring to believe it. *We beat him. We actually did it!*

Link drew Epona around, giving time for the mare to cool down. She chuffed as she drew in deep, rumbling gulps of air. "Easy girl, easy," he cooed, running a soothing hand along her neck. "Good job. You did great."

Ingo had dismounted Sanctil and was quite literally hopping mad, stomping the ground in a fit of blind rage and shouted curses. The grey geldling shied away as its rider kicked up a spray of dirt from the track and continued hurling insults at luck, the Goddesses, and whomever else he could think to blame. Link climbed down from his saddle and stalked towards the raging rancher, his fists clenching at his sides.

"Link?" Malon called in warning, seeing the angry set of his jaw. "Link?" She climbed to her feet and quickly crossed the distance, only a step behind as Link spun Ingo around and grabbed him by the overalls. With a surge of adrenaline he twisted and pinned the rancher to the corral fence.

"What the hell was that?" Link yelled, his face inches from Ingo's.

"You're a sloppy rider," Ingo replied with a sneer. The rage burning in Link's core flared, and he hammered the rancher back against the iron bars, lifting him so that his toes barely kept contact with the ground. Ingo gurgled as his collar cut into his throat, but he kept his gaze defiantly locked with Link's.

"Malon made it clear; We agreed that there would be no contact between riders," Link said through gritted teeth.

"I didn't touch your precious Epona. Blame my stupid mount," Ingo spat, then his eyes narrowed. "You wanna talk about cheating, eh? Want to tell me how you managed to tame that wild horse under my nose? I don't recall hiring you to break in our stock."

His gaze turned to Malon. "Or maybe it was you? You set me up for this. You knew he could ride Epona." His focus swung back to Link. "Is that how you seduced her? Some sort of sappy horse taming bullshit while I wasn't paying attention? I knew I should have kept a closer eye on you two. You clearly had far too much free time on your hands."

Link snarled, then froze when he felt Malon lay a hand on his shoulder. "Link! It's done. Put him down."

The farmhand didn't respond, his furious gaze locked with Ingo's disdainful own. Then his arms began to shake from the effort, and he let Ingo down. The rancher gave him an insulted look as he
regained his balance and reached up to straighten his collar.

"Malon," Link said through gritted teeth. "Bring me my shield."

Malon glanced between the two men, but the threat of violence seemed to have passed. So she turned and jogged to the barn, retrieving his shield from where he had left it leaning against the wall near the sliding door. She picked it up — momentarily surprised by how heavy it was to be wielded with only one arm — and carried it back to Link, who hadn't let Ingo leave his sight.

Link accepted the shield from her, flipping it over and finally tearing his gaze from Ingo to scan the Sheikah scroll on the rear. He tapped the icon of a glass bottle, pulling it from the scroll in a flash of blue light. The bottle was only a third full as he held it up to the afternoon sunlight, a dollop of crimson liquid swirling at the bottom.

"Here," he said to Malon, passing her the bottle before tossing his shield to the grass. "Dab this on Epona's shoulder. It didn't look deep, so hopefully it won't scar."

Malon turned and put her fingers to her lips, giving a sharp trill. Epona's ears perked and she lifted her head from grazing.

"C'mere, baby," Malon cooed as she pulled the cork with a hollow pop. The mare obeyed her call, coming closer and snuffling at Malon's blouse. Malon bent to the task of inspecting the wound on the mare's shoulder, using her work apron to wipe away a thin stream of oozing blood.

Link turned back to confront Ingo while Malon worked. "The papers, Ingo," he said, holding out his hand.

Ingo continued to grumble to himself. "There's no way that horse should have let you ride it."

"Now, Ingo."

"Fine." Ingo ripped the handful of papers from his overalls and slapped them against Link's chest. He caught them — barely — before they spilled across the lawn, and gathered them into a tidy stack.

"Doesn't matter," Ingo sneered. "I can make more of them. You still don't know where Talon is. He'll sign as many documents as I want."

Malon glanced up from her work. "You made a promise, Ingo," she said, a warning in her voice.

"And I'm following it to the letter, if not the spirit," Ingo replied. He turned back to Link. "That's your problem. The both of you look down on me from your high horse, thinking I'm some sort of imbecile. But I've spent years busting my ass on this ranch. I'll have what's mine, one way or the other."

Link took a threatening step towards Ingo. "Talon's location. Now."

Ingo gulped, but stood his ground. "And who's going to go get him? You? You'd leave Malon alone with me for a week?" At Link's faltering expression, he pressed on. "Or would you take her with you? Leave me unattended here, free to do whatever I pleased? Now that we're done being civil, do you really think I'd just sit around and wait for you to return and kick me out of my home?"

"But," A maniacal gleam shone in Ingo's eye. "I can offer you something better."

"You have nothing else I could possibly want, Ingo," Malon called.
"I disagree," Ingo replied. "I have everything you've ever wanted. All you have to do is win one more race."

Link barked a laugh. "No way. We had a deal."

"That was before you tried to swindle me," Ingo said, wetting his lips. "I'm challenging you to a rematch."

"A rematch?" Link raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I already won your papers. What else do you have to barter with?"

"Like I said, everything you originally wanted," Ingo replied. "We'll reverse the original bet. You win a second time, I'll take a horse and leave. You'll never hear from me again. But if I win," he directed a leer towards Malon. "Then we do things my way."

"Deal," Malon cut in before Link could answer. He spun in alarm to find that she'd finished with Epona and was rejoining the conversation. She tossed him the remains of the potion with an underhand pitch as she approached.

Link caught the nearly empty bottle and gave her a worried look. "Mal—"

Malon cut him off. "No. I'm sick of this. We're going to finish it now, one way or the other." She passed Link and pressed a finger to Ingo's chest, her eyes blazing. "I'm not worried at all. We can beat you twice in a row. We can beat you a hundred times. But if you try to weasel out of your bet again, then I won't be held responsible for what happens next."

With a huff Malon turned, not even waiting for Ingo's response. She bent and hefted Link's shield, aiming the backplate towards him. He regarded her carefully for a moment, then without comment he returned the potion bottle to the Sheikah scoll. Malon took Ingo's papers from his hand, hooked the shield over her arm, and carried it back to the barn.

Ingo seemed pleased, stroking a finger along his thick mustache. "Excellent. Of course, since your horse was injured, I suppose that means you'll have to ride the other one. Such a shame."

"Nope, Epona is as good as new," Malon shot back with false cheer. "But you two go ahead and set up, don't wait on me."

Ingo's face soured, throwing a glance at Epona. The mare had returned to grazing, her injured shoulder turned away. He grumbled to himself, something about "cheating" that Link didn't quite catch.

"Once more, Ingo," Link said. "Mount up."

They set up the same as before, Epona pawing the dusty track as the afternoon sun beat down upon them. The mare's shoulder was newly mended, a pinkish patch of bare flesh peeking out from her auburn coat.

Once more Malon cut her hand through the air, and once more they leapt forward from the starting line. Epona powered around the first turn, maintaining a comfortable lead now that Link had the feel of the track. Sanctil was right behind him, but Ingo's mount was still tired from their first race and wasn't able to dog them like before.

Link held onto his lead through the straightaway, around the third and fourth turn, and past the finish line. One lap down, one to go. He kept his head low and spurred Epona onward.
It wasn't until halfway through the second lap that he sensed that Sanctil was no longer hounding their tracks. He threw a quick look over his shoulder, curious, only to find that he was completely, horrifyingly alone.

She was distracted. Looking back on it, she cursed herself for not seeing it coming.

While the men ran their circuit around the track, Malon was sorting through the stack of papers that they had won from Ingo. Her head was down as she scanned the letters, her stomach roiling as she found page after page of utter garbage detailing a life she had never lived. It was the worst fiction she'd ever read. Her, fall in love with Ingo? She would just as soon kiss an octorok.

She wasn't overly concerned with the second race. Link would win. It was inevitable. Sanctil was a good workhorse, but he wasn't a Gerudo Destrier hybrid like Epona. The Lon Lon specialty breed was a true prize in speed and endurance, and Epona had turned out to be their greatest success thus far.

So Malon only gave a passing glance when Link thundered past on the first lap, his head down and his green cap flapping in the wind. She'd already turned back to the letters as Ingo brought up the rear, farther behind than the first race.

She only caught on that something was wrong when a shadow flickered at the edge of her vision, and the sound of hooves started growing much closer than normal. So distracted was she that it took her a moment to glance up, but that was all the warning she had before Ingo's heel caught her across the cheek.

Link finished the lap, his heart racing as he rounded the far side of the corral. A gaping hole opened in his gut as the barn came fully into view. Sanctil trotted along in the distance, riderless, and Malon was nowhere to be seen.

No, there, a flash of red and a sparkle of fireworks. Ingo was retreating between the buildings with Malon slung over his shoulder. Navi, bless her diminutive heart, was busy dive-bombing the rancher in an attempt to keep him distracted. He swiped at the faerie ineffectually, unbalanced with Malon's limp form burdening him, but he never stopped moving forward.

"Ing-oooool!" Link roared, kicking Epona into a full gallop. The rancher turned and blanched as he saw the mare baring down on him. Link stood in the saddle as he approached, ready to leap from his mount, but Ingo reached out and slammed the gate shut, flipping the locking bar into place and blocking the way forward.

Link cursed and jerked Epona's reins to the side before she could crash into the gate. The mare swerved at the last moment, nearly colliding with the wall of the farmhouse. He dropped the reins and pushed down hard, hopping backwards over Epona's rump. His groin barely cleared her powering hind legs, and he skidded to a stop as the mare continued to run along the palisade wall.

Navi rejoined him as he rushed back to the gate, and he was surprised to find the rancher was still standing on the other side. The smug look on Ingo's face set his blood to boiling.

"Ingo you lying bastard!" Link yelled as he threw his shoulder at the gate, sending a lance of fire up his shoulder. The iron locking rod clanged against the brace set deep into the barn's wall, but the unyielding metal didn't budge. He jogged back a couple steps and took a running leap, planting his heel directly on the wrought-iron emblem. The gate rattled again, but held.
Ingo gave an appreciative whistle. "I need to send flowers to the Smiths," he said with a manic grin. "You didn't think I'd let you leave, did you? Just walk out of here after ruining everything I've worked to achieve?"

Link snarled, hammering the gate with his fists. "Put her down, Ingo!"

Ingo chuckled and patted Malon on her rump. "Don't worry, boy. I'm going to take very good care of her," he said, his voice growing soft with deadly promise. With that final threat, he turned and disappeared into the farmhouse.

Link let out a frustrated cry of rage, then spun, taking stock of the situation. He ran for his sword and shield where they lay against the barn, throwing the scabbard across his shoulder. Then he reached for the barn door, yanking the handle. The door held fast, and Link remembered Ingo taking special care to lock it after bringing out their horses. The bastard had been thinking ahead this entire time.

"Ahhh ... Link, what do I do?" Navi cried in panic.

The choice flashed through his mind. Should she stay, or follow Malon? "Find me a way out, quick!" he decided. The faerie zoomed off down the side of the building, wasting no time.

He left his chainmail where it lie, not having the time to spare to throw it on. Then he ran his fingers down his Sheikah scroll, his mind racing. Bombs? No, the lane between the buildings was too narrow. The kitchen and a horse stall would be shredded, and he didn't know where Ingo had taken Malon...

"Link, here!"

He glanced up. Navi was hovering at the corner of the barn, near the second story. A moment later it clicked, and he pulled his hookshot from the Sheikah scroll as he followed his faerie companion.

He raced around the corner, taking a running leap up onto the bench of the parked wagon, and took aim at Navi's glow. She flashed a yellow warning and ducked away the second he pulled the trigger. With a rattle of hydraulics his hookshot lanced out and embedded into the soft wood above the loft window, and then he was sailing through the air.

His feet briefly touched the windowsill as he ducked into the loft, yanking out the barbed head of the hookshot on his way. The instrument clicked in his hand as it reset, his feet churning the hay across his mattress. Without slowing he took aim at the far side of the barn and fired again. The hookshot speared into a horizontal beam on the far side and pulled tight.

He stepped out into open air. His thumb worked the button, retracting the chain as he fell, and he gave the instrument a sharp yank as he reached the apogee of the swing. He landed hard and skidded a few feet, his knees aching with the brunt of his landing, but in an instant he was up and out the side door.

The farmhouse's kitchen door was still ajar. He replaced his hookshot and drew his sword, then charged through with shield raised.

No one greeted him. The house was quiet, the table set for an afternoon meal that had long since passed. Navi darted inside a second before the kitchen door quietly closed behind them.

He held his breath for a moment, cocking his ear. Something had changed. A low purring sound was moving through the house. He took two steps forward, then halted. A faint puff of wind had brushed against his skin, coming from the stairwell. He charged up the stairs, coming out on the landing of the second floor. The door at the end of the hall that led out to the palisade rested on broken hinges,
the wood around the lock shattered as if someone had kicked it open.

He stepped outside into the afternoon sun, glancing left towards the Ranch's entrance. But nothing there caught his eye. There were no waiting wagons, no horses galloping into the distance. So he turned right, looking deeper into the ranch, just in time to see Ingo duck into the upper level entrance of the previously locked Windmill #3.

"What the hell?" Link muttered.

Malon knew that she wasn't much of a fighter. She hadn't anticipated that Ingo would pull something like this. When Ingo's boot connected solidly with her face, it set the world spinning like an unbalanced top. Her sight grew dim as pain erupted along her cheek and brow. As she sprawled in the grass she had the vague sense of being picked up and slung over someone's shoulder like a ham hock, followed by the gentle swaying sensation of someone walking. Then a heated exchange of voices, rumbling low and unintelligible as if from the bottom of a deep canyon. Any attempt to raise her head was met with a wave of nausea.

Her mind worked feverishly to piece together her predicament, but her thoughts were sluggish. Ingo. He had truly gone off the deep end. Where was he taking her? She had an impression of shade for several long moments, though time seemed unusually slippery. Then the sunlight returned, and she felt a sharp jolting in her gut as his bony shoulder bit into her stomach. He was jogging somewhere, as fast as he could move with her slung over his shoulder.

Her senses were coming back to her. She blinked against the afternoon sunlight, but it was hard to see. Her left eye was beginning to swell and her hair stuck to her cheek, tacky with drying blood. Was her nose broken? It was hard to breathe. The throbbing pain in her face formed a ring centered around her eye socket.

She felt Ingo pause, heard the sound of a door with neglected hinges squeal open. Then she was carried into a darkened room.

This was her chance, Malon decided, while his eyes took time to adjust. Without warning she reared up and drove her elbow into the junction of Ingo's neck with all of her strength. Ingo grunted in pain and surprise, cursing as he shoved her away. She felt a brief moment of relief before she fell past the level of Ingo's feet, then panic flared white hot.

She was falling into the yawning void. A moment of terror surged through her as the darkness engulfed her, but the scream was barely ripped from her throat before the floor rushed up to meet her. The floorboards gave a deep, hollow thunk as she landed hard on her belly, her knees and wrists taking the brunt of the fall. Stars erupted before her eyes as her jaw rebounded off the floor and her teeth clicked together. The taste of copper began to flood her mouth. She began to cough heavily as a layer of dust erupted around her in a thin cloud.

She vaguely heard the sound of shuffling from above her. "Now where is— ah!"

A bloom of light pushed back the darkness. Malon grit her teeth against the pain in her wrists as she rolled over. Twisting to look up from her prone position, she found Ingo standing on the catwalk above her, holding a glowing lantern out over the ledge. She blinked in surprise as she finally registered where she was. Why had he brought her to the shuttered windmill?


Above her, he stepped over the ledge and dropped. Malon cried out and held her arms across her
body to protect herself, but he landed with both feet framing her legs. Before she could think to
launch his family jewels into his throat, he stepped around and reached down with one hand, taking
ahold of a tight fist of hair near her scalp. With a grunt he began to drag her backwards along the
floor, pulling her deeper into the windmill.

Malon cried out in pain, her fingers clawing at the fist clenched in her hair. Was this really Ingo?
Where had he found this strength? Farm work could build muscle, but not like this. It couldn't be
simple rage that drove him. There was something otherworldly in the demonic glint in his eyes when
he looked down on her.

"Would have been so much easier if Lord Ganondorf had just let me kill you," Ingo said. "But nooo,
its was all 'honor debts' this and 'blood oath' that. Lotta noble-sounding horse-shit."

"Let me go! Let me go!" Malon screamed, lashing out with her feet.

Ingo hauled back and landed a punch across her cheekbone, causing another explosion of fireworks
to erupt in front of her eyes. Her body went limp, and she felt herself lifted up and dropped on her
belly onto a hard metal surface. "Stop wiggling, wench," she heard Ingo mutter above her, his rancid
breath beating down on her as she felt her arms lifted over her head.

A length of rusted iron chains was produced, which he quickly wrapped around her wrists. Then he
lifted something over his head, and she flinched at the vague shape of a heavy mallet before he
brought it down several times in quick succession. The sharp metallic whacks near her scalp caused
her to jump with fright. She attempted to pull her arms down, but found herself trapped by an iron
stake that had been driven into the metal chute she was laid out on.

"You won't get away with this," Malon groaned into the metal, then felt a weak laugh bubble past
her lips. "When Link gets his hands on you, he's gonna tear you in half."

"We'll see," Ingo replied, then slapped her across the mouth. Dazed, she didn't notice when he
produced a worn length of rope and shoved it between her teeth, binding it tightly around her head.
"Now shut yer trap and be good bait. Your sweetheart will be along shortly, and then I can finally
take what I deserve."
With sword and shield in hand and Navi at his shoulder, Link rushed through the unsealed door on the second story of the windmill.

There, he paused. Darkness greeted him, the only available light spilling in through the doorway behind him, casting a long golden rectangle on the floor ahead split with his shadow. He cast his eyes about. If Ingo were hiding somewhere with a crossbow, he would be easy pickings, but he couldn't rush headlong ahead into a room he couldn't see.

Something slammed to the ground at his heels, plunging the room into darkness. He jumped in fright, bringing his sword up as he spun in place, only to find that the door had been blocked. A heavy wood panel now sealed the entrance, the same color as the boxes delivered to the ranch a month ago by Ganondorf. In fact, as Link inspected the barrier it appeared as if someone had dismantled the last mystery crate and placed one of the panels above the door as a trap, effectively locking him inside.

Link held his shield hand out towards the dark mahogany wood, but before he could touch it a complicated, inverted triangular rune flared to life, giving off an eerie purple hue. From the center of the triangle, a hiss of discharging static leapt across and singed his hand. He yelped in surprise, scooting back a step. Steam wafted up from his gauntlet as he shook his tingling hand. Had he not been wearing the glove, he'd probably be looking at a few roasted fingers.

"Ooooh, I have a bad feeling about this," Navi muttered, alighting on his shoulder. She peered at the heavy barrier before them before declaring, "Apparently those boxes were imbued with the same kind of magic that the bulblins painted on the outer walls, only much, much stronger. This one was crafted by a professional."

Link flexed his fingers, wincing as the pain dissipated. "Then why in Din's name didn't we notice it when it first came to the ranch?"

Navi's wings went still. "Probably because the warding spell was only focused inward. That would mean that these wards weren't there to keep people out. They were focused to keep something in," she said, her voice growing small. "What did they need to keep contained?"

"Navi, give us some light," Link said, and the faerie's glow brightened, fighting back the gloom as they walked deeper into the windmill. Strange shapes hung in the air, old lengths of rope and rusted chain long forgotten cast sinister phantoms of shadow about the room. The catwalk they stood on encircled this level of the windmill and overlooked the lower floor, with a ladder near the end leading both up and down. Farther in, they could see that the building extended out past the ranch's walls farther than any of the other windmills, but anything past several paltry feet was lost in shadows. Heavy beams lined the walkway overhead, supporting a mass of ancient cogs and machinery that ascended into the gloom until it became lost from view.

"Ah! Link, look!" Navi cried, and zoomed down to the lower level. Her glow turned golden as she hovered over Malon's still, supine form.

Link placed a hand on the ledge as he kneeled, and carefully dropped to the lower floor, causing an eruption of long-dormant dust around his feet. It had been years since anyone had set foot in this place, and the wooden planks gave a hollow groan beneath his boots, suggesting there was another level below this one. The floor itself was stained with dark, splotchy layers of some unidentifiable substance, and the fetid air carried the unpleasant stink of a distant outhouse.
He approached Malon cautiously, his hand working the pommel of his sword as his eyes darted around the windmill. It was an obvious trap. Where had Ingo gotten off to?

Malon was laid out on her belly in a shallow, rusted metal trough, her arms wrapped in chains and bound over her head to an iron spike that had been driven into the floor. A large mallet had been carelessly discarded at her side. The trough was gently sloped, emptying into a low basin that disappeared beneath the floorboards. For a moment his heart seized in his chest at her still form, but then he saw her shift as she struggled sluggishly against the chains binding her hands.

He rushed to her side, sheathing his sword before loosening the gag in her mouth. "Malon," he panted in relief, brushing loose hair away from her face. Bright, angry bruises were beginning to swell over her temple and cheek, and a thin trail of blood oozed from her brow. "Where's Ingo? Do you know where he went?"

"He's here, somewhere," she whispered, her eyes darting. "Didn't go far, said he was going to finish it. Finish us." She tried to draw her hands down, then shook her arms in frustration. "Help me get loose."

Link inspected the chains around her arms, finding them locked solidly in place by the iron rod. An experimental tug found there was little give, but maybe if he could jiggle it loose...

Navi jingled in alarm an instant before Link's senses registered the change in light. "You! You've ruined everything!" Ingo's voice called down.

Link spun and drew his sword. Ingo stood above them on the catwalk. He held a brass lantern at waist height, casting long demonic shadows across his scowling face.

"Do you know how long I've waited for this?" Ingo called out. "Do you know how many years I've spent working my hands to the bone in this shithole waiting for my chance? How many times I've had to stand aside and let that imbecile Talon continue to drive this ranch into the ground? And now some know-nothing brat thinks that he can come along and just take it all away from me! Did you really think—"

Link heard Navi sigh beside him, and he shared the sentiment. Ingo was just ranting now. Why did the crazies all feel the need to rant at him?

As Ingo droned on about the injustices of farm labor, Link slowly shifted back towards Malon and began working at the chains binding her to the metal spike. If he could only loosen it enough to work her hands free, then they would be able to make their escape, or at least get her out of the way while he dealt with Ingo.

Ingo finally paused his monologue long enough to catch what Link was up to. "Ah uh!" he tutted, dashing across the walkway. He lifted the lantern higher and brought his free hand up to hover over a small metal lever set into the support pillar. "You'll leave her right there if you want the wench to keep breathing. If not, then we'll see how well these machines work after all this time."

Malon's body tensed, and she twisted to look above her. Link followed her gaze and felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. Navi floated upward, her blue glow turning gold as she found the half-meter steel spike held overhead by a complicated contraption. Link's eyes danced across the metal framework, gears and coils and pistons reaching upwards into the gloomy heights of the windmill.

"You'll remember why we boarded this windmill up, yes?" Ingo sneered.

"Slaughterhouse," Malon whispered softly, her eyes going distant. "I didn't like hearing the pigs die,
so Daddy stopped selling them. We stuck to horses and dairy cows."

"Cut out over half of the profits from this ranch, too." Ingo said, spitting in disgust. "Almost single-handedly drove us to ruin. Just another of your father's stupid decisions. But we didn't bother breaking everything down. Oh no no no, such a waste of money if we did! All we needed to do was install a block on the windmill to keep it from turning. Well, one flick of this switch and the block is released, then we'll see how much of a smart-ass you are with a hole in the back of your skull."

"If you wanted to kill her, you'd have done it a long time ago," Link called. "What do you want, Ingo?"

Ingo giggled deliriously, actually giggled. "I want what's coming to me. I want what was rightly mine, before you showed up and ruined everything. I knew hiring you in the first place was a mistake, but you're a sly one. I'll give you that much. You weaseled your way in, like a parasite. Now I just want you to go away."

"I'm not leaving without Malon," Link said, trying to keep the uneasiness from his voice. Ingo had never been the most stable individual, but now there was a madness underlying his voice. "You let her go, and we'll just walk away. You can keep the ranch."

"Like hell he will!" Malon shouted, causing Link to wince as she writhed against her bonds. "I'll burn this ranch to the ground before I let him take it from me!"

"Seems like the girl really wants to stay," Ingo mused, rubbing a thoughtful hand along his chin. Then he cackled as a thought struck him. "Of course, it wouldn't be the first building I've had to torch to get what I want."

Malon stilled, her face going white. "What do you mean?"

"D'ya really need me to spell it out, you dumb girl?" Ingo crowed. "Oh, fine then. How do you think that fire in the barn started ten years ago? Some horse kicked over a lantern?"

Malon froze as realization set in, then she bucked against her chains, fury etching her face. "You bastard! I'm going to kill you! I swear by Nayru that I'm going to rip your fucking head off!"

She screamed wordlessly, a sound of primal, animal rage that ripped from her throat as she arched against the trough. Then she collapsed as the energy fled her body, sobbing into the cold metal. Link reached down, running his gloved hand through her hair in an attempt to soothe her.

"I never met Malon's mother," Link said, his teeth clenched as he fought back his own feeling of helpless rage. "But everyone says that she was a kind woman. She didn't deserve to die like that."

"She chose that stupid oaf Talon; That was enough reason!" Ingo snapped, then drew a steadying breath and shrugged. "Didn't mean to kill her, for what it's worth. I was just looking to force Talon to sell. After we sold the pig herd, losing half of our remaining stock would have done it. It was her own stupid fault for running into a burning barn. Really, who does that?"

Suddenly a dull thump echoed through the windmill, and a pressure wave that tasted vaguely of magic blew past them, causing dust to drift from the rafters. Link staggered backwards, his stomach roiling from nausea while Malon moaned softly. Navi wilted, shivering as her glow grew dim. "What was that?" she muttered weakly.

Ingo glanced behind him, seemingly unaffected by whatever had just happened, then turned back and smiled. "Well, looks like I've stalled you long enough. Too-da-loo!" he crowed, then spun on his heel and dashed away deeper into the windmill.
"Ingo, get back here!" Link called. He took one step in pursuit, then skidded to a stop, turning back to Malon.

She quickly shook her head. "Go! I'll be fine."

"But—"

"Just go!"

With that he turned and chased after Ingo into the darkness.

"Kick his ass, Link!" Malon shouted after him.

He followed the faint glow of the lantern light, past metal gates and animal stalls and long-forgotten barrels that smelled of rotten refuse. The path through the windmill wasn't long, but there were several turns that obstructed a direct line of sight. Some obstacle always seemed to be blocking his way forward, while flickering shadows danced at the edge of his vision, making him cautious. An ambush could be sprung at any moment, and he wouldn't see it coming until it was too late.

He paused as he came around another stack of wooden pallets, then began to inch closer more cautiously. The lantern had stopped bobbing.

"Be careful, Link," Navi said. "I can feel something big ahead."

Link readied his sword, and advanced.

He found the lantern hanging from a hook set in a pillar at the end of the corridor. It creaked as it rocked in place slightly, as if Ingo hadn't even slowed to hang it. Next to it was a panel with several long, wooden levers, cracked and warped with age. The metal plates underneath denoting their use were rusted and undecipherable.

Link decided to leave the lantern hanging on its hook. Navi gave him enough light to see, and he wanted his shield hand free just in case.

The windmill opened up again here. Or, perhaps this was no longer part of the windmill proper, but some secondary core. The ceiling was much lower, just barely visible. The walls expanded outwards, and the entire floor was open, with nothing to block his line of sight. He continued forward, stepping out into a wide arena of sorts. The sound of his footsteps changed, becoming lighter, as if some hollow void had opened beneath him. He glanced around, finding that the platform he stood on was held in place by a network of chains and swayed slightly as he moved.

_A lift_, he realized, moving to the edge and glancing down. The tower extended several stories downward into inky blackness, though he could just barely make out faint shapes cluttering the floor. Bare rock could be seen forming the inner wall of the lift, the outer rim of the hillock that Lon Lon Ranch sat upon.

Navi gave a low whistle. "All of this extends out the back of the ranch? I never knew about this."

"I remember hearing something about a cargo lift once or twice," Link muttered. "I always thought they were talking about the hay winch in the barn."

He knew that this building extended out into Hyrule Field, but he had never approached Lon Lon Ranch from the western side. Was this originally a way to move large amounts of supplies into the ranch? It would make sense. The winding path to the front gate was narrow, barely large enough for their cart. If they needed to move something as large as, say, a millstone or the central mast of a
windmill, this would be the way to do it.

The floor swayed as something on the lift shifted. Link spun, swinging his sword up to an *en garde* position.

Something sat at the center of the lift. He squinted into the shadows, but Navi's light wasn't allowing his eyes to adjust. So he stalked forward, his shield at the ready.

The hulking shadow rested on a slightly raised platform – No, Link quickly realized. It was the bottom panel of a cargo crate.

"So this is his surprise," Navi muttered, brightening her glow.

The suit of armor was colossal even in its kneeling position, rising a few inches over Link's head. Formed from blue-grey steel with a matte, unpolished finish, its cuirass was sharply angled and decorated with a gaping, fanged maw that reminded Link of the gargoyle he'd slain a month prior.

As he approached he began making out more details. Thick metal plates were riveted together around its waist, forming a flexible iron skirt. Short spikes erupted from its sabatons, giving the illusion of clawed feet. A massive double-bladed axe laid its feet, and its arm was extended with the palm cupping a horned helm as its elbow rested on its upraised knee. Which meant that the head staring down at him belong to...

"Ingo," Link sneered.

"Glad you could join me, boy," Ingo hissed. "Saves me the effort of hunting you down."

With that he gripped the helm with both gauntleted hands and brought it down over his head.

As the helm settled, the steel plates seemed to take on a life of their own, humming with dark energy. Link could see the great suit of armor molding and reshaping itself to its new wearer as if alive. Sinister purple runes sprouted to life on its chest-plate and rippled outward along its limbs, dark and sinister.

"This suit is Lord Ganondorf's greatest creation!" Ingo crowed. His voice shifted as he spoke, gradually becoming deeper, echoing with menace. "It gives me the strength of a hundred men! It grants me the power to slay entire armies!"

"It...

becomes...

**ME!**"

With a roar of unleashed magical power, the Iron Knuckle shuddered to life.

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"Hruah!" In one swift motion Ingo stood from his kneeling position, gripped the broad-axe in both hand, and swung it over his head, bringing it down in a powerful two-handed strike. Link danced backwards as the giant blade cleaved into the lift floor where he had been standing moments before. The wooden planks splintered under the blade's weight, but the cargo elevator was built solid and
held together.

The madman was drunk with dark power. "The wise Lord Ganondorf foresaw this day," Ingo rumbled, yanking the axe-blade free. The timbre of his voice was lowered an octave by the armor's helm, echoing with dark menace. "He knew that someone would threaten this ranch, and he blessed me with the tools to protect it. This ranch is mine." He hammered an armored fist against his breastplate. "Everything on it is mine!"

"Not everything," Link replied with a mocking smile. He held his sword cross-guard as he used his shield hand to give Ingo a taunting wave forward.

The Iron Knuckle charged with ferocious power, faster than anything that size and made of metal had any right to. Ingo roared with fury as his axe cut through the air, again narrowly missing Link as the swordsman dodged to the left.

The followup strike was devastatingly quick. Ingo used his momentum to spin through the full circle. The blade sang as it scraped the floorboards and sliced upwards, coming within inches of taking off his nose. Link's arms spun in a pinwheel to keep his balance. His steps took him to the edge of the lift, and he shot a quick glance behind him in panic. The black void opened up beneath him, promising a swift end if he fell into the inky depths.

He regained his balance and charged forward. Ingo was fast, but Link was faster. While Ingo was still recovering from the spin, Link landed a quick strike across the back of the Knuckle's cuirass, and continued past. The Master Sword glowed blue as it encountered the cursed armor, leaving a shimmering after-trail in its wake. As he skidded to a stop, his stomach sank when he saw the shallow mark that scored the armor, but hadn't come close to penetrating.

He bit back a curse. "Navi, how do we kill it?"

"Um— working on it!" the faerie shouted as she darted around a spiked pauldron.

"Work faster!" Link shot back, deflecting a glancing blow with his shield.

"I'm going to cut off your damn head," the Iron Knuckle intoned. "And mount it on the front gate."

Link leapt backwards in a panic as the axe swept across his belly, barely an inch from gutting him. For a moment he desperately missed his chainmail, left lying against the barn. But then he decided to count it as a blessing, and that it would only slow him down. He couldn't afford the fractions of a second it would cost him, and that axe didn't look like it would be slowed much by a thin layer of woven metal.

Still, if Ingo managed to get a lucky swipe in, he was finished.

Link swallowed nervously. He'd fought dodongos that could shield their vitals with their armored hide, but he'd never fought anything like this. There didn't seem to be any weak points on the armored titan, and the unreal speed with which Ingo struck was keeping him from pressing the attack.

Navi's voice was edged with panic as Link sidestepped another blow. "Ahh, Link, I can't find anything! He's armored from head to toe!"

"You gotta give me something to work with!" Link replied.

Navi fluttered in distress. "Uhh ... Try hitting the joints and you might be able to open up a weak spot?"
"Was that advice or a question?"

Link danced back another couple steps, his eyes scanning the segmented armor covering Ingo's vitals. The scalloped steel plates flexed as he strode across the platform, allowing him an excellent range of movement while protecting from a lucky strike. The armored skirt flexed in rippling segments, and Link could see heavy greaves covering the titan's shins. Would his thighs be equally armored? Likely not, given how fast Ingo managed to close the distance between them, but they were invulnerable just the same.

Link swapped his sword to his shield hand. "Navi, heads-up!" he called, cupping a hand against the back of his shield. The faerie darted away as Link whipped his arm, lobbing the last of his Deku nuts.

A half-dozen flares exploded in rapid succession across Ingo's helm and chestplate. The Iron Knuckle roared, halted in its relentlessness advance. The axe head dropped to the floor as Ingo waved his arm in front of his face in an effort to clear his vision.

After a moment the sparks began to clear, and Ingo looked up, only to find that his target had disappeared. "Where are you?" he barked.

"Right here," Link replied. The Iron Knuckle twisted towards his voice, but Link was already bringing his sword to bear. The Master Sword bit deep into the space between the cuirass and the tassets as Link struck with a downward thrust. Any normal sword would have been useless against the heavy armor plating, but the holy blade hummed as he dug deep, ripping a hole through the plated skirt guarding Ingo's rear. With a quick twist he managed to rip some links free, and several small steel plates scattered across the ground, hissing and bubbling as they began to dissolve into a sickly purple mist.

Then Ingo completed his turn and drove his armored elbow into Link's cheek.

Time seemed to skip for a moment, and Link found himself lying on the floor with no memory of lying down. He worked his jaw as pain flared along his face, though thankfully nothing seemed broken. Then Ingo stalked into view with his axe raised overhead for a killing blow.

Link's eyes flared, and scrambled backwards. His shield hand found something hard, and he grabbed it, slinging it at the Iron Knuckle's head.

"Gah!" Ingo cried as the armor chunk ricocheted off his helm, knocking him back a step.

It wasn't much of a distraction, but it was enough to regain his feet. Link flexed his hand, gasping in pain as fire lanced up his arm. A thin wisp of smoke rose from where the dissolving armor fragment had nearly burned through the glove.

He didn't have time to relax. Ingo strode forward once more, hauling back for a horizontal blow. Link feinted left, then rolled beneath the swing as Ingo corrected, coming up behind the Iron Knuckle's steel sabatons. There he spun on his knees, and thrust his sword upward in a two-handed strike.

Ingo grunted in pain as the Master Sword pierced his side, finding the gap he'd carved earlier. The Iron Knuckle shuddered, slumping forward slightly, then grew still. But Link's triumphant grin turned sour as the helm turned towards him, fixing its darkened visor on his face. Ingo reached out and wrapped his gauntlet around the holy blade, and began to slowly draw it from his body, forcing it back against Link's quaking arms. A putrid spray of dark steam hissed and shrieked as the blade scorched the cursed metal of his gauntlet. Black ooze began to run from the wound in his side,
splattering the floor.

"You can't hurt me, boy."

Link quickly adjusted his grip on the sword, then drove his shield into the blade's pommel, knocking it upward and out of Ingo's grasp. He drew back a few steps, his mind racing. The titan's armor was too thick to cut through in time, and he was starting to tire. He needed a new strategy.

The Iron Knuckle advanced once more, sauntering inexorably towards its intended victim. The wound in its side splattered the wooden planks with black ichor, though if Ingo cared or even noticed he gave no sign. Axe marks scored the floor of the cargo lift, a testament to Link's superior mobility.

Link paused, a smile ghosting across his lips. When in doubt, cheat.

He waited until Ingo had fully committed to a swing, then rolled towards the lift's exit, feeling the passing wind of the axe blade as it cleaved the air behind him. Coming up, he sprinted towards the exit, then turned. He quickly swapped his sword to his shield hand, then tapped an icon on the back of his shield, withdrawing a matte blue sphere. He twisted the cap off and chucked it underhand towards the Iron Knuckle's sabatons as Ingo regained his balance. Then he crouched and braced behind his shield as Navi quickly joined him.

The armored titan had a split second to glance down at the hissing orb that bounced off his feet before the bomb detonated. The concussion hammered against Link's shield, pelting him with splinters and shrapnel. Ingo was engulfed in an eruption of smoke and flame as the wooden platform splintered beneath his feet, and he plummeted into the inky darkness with a echoing, wordless cry of rage.

A few seconds later there was a deep, resounding crash that Link felt through his boots as the titan impacted the ground floor. The sound reverberated throughout the windmill, followed quickly by a long, deafening silence.

"Good job, Link!" Navi cheered.

Link shook his head, his ears ringing slightly from the proximity to the blast. "Let's never fight something like that again, yeah?" he muttered.

He stood at the lift's edge and tried to steady his breathing, staring down into the shadows for what felt like an eternity. Fragments of the lift spun in the air, the shattered corners hanging from slackened chains. After several long, silent moments he finally turned and sheathed his sword. He strode back in the direction he'd come, grabbing the still burning lantern along the way.

The faint rattling of chains greeted him as he returned. Navi flew ahead, casting her light over the supine form of Malon, who had made no progress in freeing herself.

"Link?" Malon called as he stepped forward. "Link, what happened? Is he— did you...?"

Link shook his head in resignation, working his jaw in an effort to eliminate the faint ringing in his ears. He twisted a nob on the lantern until it stopped, and the shadows retreated a little farther. Malon's wrists were chafed red, and her cheeks were splotchy with shed tears. But her eyes were clear as she gazed at him.

"I think I made a mess of your lift, but it's taken care of," Link said. "We can get out of here."

The smile that lit up her face was bright enough to light the darkness. Link hung the lantern from a hook set into the support pillar near Malon's head, then wrapped both hands around the metal spike
holding Malon down. It was firmly jammed through the metal chute and into the floor, but by rocking it from side to side he was able to draw it out an inch at a time. The grinding metal squealed as he began to work.

"Did he—" Malon swallowed nervously. "How did it happen?"

"I'll—" He gave the rod a solid shove, grunting with exertion. "—Tell you about it—" A sharp yank. "Later."

Navi flew down to hover low over Malon's brow. "Ooh, looks like you're gonna have a real shiner, Red."

Malon blinked up at the faerie before turning back to Link. "I heard thunder, or an explosion?"

He paused, his eyes finding hers. "Later," he finally said, then turned back to her chains.

Malon watched his face as he worked. "Ok," she said quietly. "But I—"

Then her gaze turned to look past him, and her eyes grew wide with panic.

"Link, look out!" she screamed just as Navi chimed a warning.

He'd sensed the faint tremors through his boots just before she spoke. Link spun, his blade already swinging down over his shoulder. The Iron Knuckle's broad-axe cleaved the air in a vicious horizontal strike, slamming against him with full force. He barely managed to raise his shield in time. But the Master Sword was struck from his hand by the force of the blow, the blade singing as it spun through the air. It carved through an old air vent above the door, leaving a gaping rent in the rotted shutters as it was ejected from the building. A thin beam of light cut through the darkness, adding to the illumination.

The axe blade pinned his shield arm to his torso. White-hot pain bit into his flesh, ripping across his forearm and shoulder, opening him up in two separate places. Then the force of the strike picked him up and sent him sailing backwards over the trough.

The Iron Knuckle's blade tore through the air inches above Malon's nose. She gave a startled squeak as the iron spike was sheared in half. Then the axe bit deep into the support pillar near her head, ending the swing.

While the Iron Knuckle recovered, Malon quickly lifted her wrists off of the stump that remained and rolled to the side, falling to the floor. Her wrists were still bound, but her feet were free. She managed to duck away while the armored monstrosity was distracted, a long trail of loose chain hanging from her wrists.

Link groaned as he picked himself up off the floor. He shook his bleeding shield arm, trying to work the feeling back into the stunned flesh. The axe had cleaved through half of his shield from the force of the blow. Now it hung loose on his forearm, the blade having chewed through the leather strap that secured it near his elbow. Worse, the Shiekah parchment was split almost completely in half, a handful of drawings erased in an instant. But he didn't have time to take stock of his losses.

Ingo was trying to remove the axe from where it had embedded in the support pillar, but was having little luck, grunting with the effort. The Iron Knuckle's helm was dented inward at its temple, and a thin rivulet of dark blood leaked from beneath the chin and onto the breastplate.

Link glanced down at his wounded shield arm. The bloodstain was slowly creeping up to his shoulder. He set his jaw, looking back to the Iron Knuckle. The Master Sword was gone, but he
wasn't entirely weaponless. If he couldn't cut Ingo down or blow him to pieces, Link decided, then he was going to cook him alive inside of that stupid tin can.

The titan rocked backwards as it gave one last pull on the haft of its weapon. Then it turned as it registered the sound of approaching feet.

Link's fingers tapped against the glowing red crystal on his gauntlet as he dashed forward. The hum of magic surged through his body, filling him with the fire and fury of Din. He took a running step up onto the opposite side of the trough and arced a vicious uppercut straight into the armored titan's exposed chin.

"Ah!" Navi flared in panic as he leapt. "Link, your magic is no good against him!"

Oh. So not good.

Din's Fire erupted from his gauntlet, shrieking as his fist impacted on the glistening armor's surface. A complicated tapestry of purple runes flared to life, and the holy fire scattered upward like a ricocheting arrow. A dozen screaming comets of flame sped upward and erupted against a support beam overhead, igniting the rafters and far wall of the windmill.

Link dodged backwards as the Iron Knuckle swiped at him, putting the trough between them. The sudden increase in light caused his eyes to water and he squinted against the sudden glare.

Well, hell, what else could go wrong today?

Pieces of the windmill's construction begin to fall from the rafters, dislodged by the explosion. A length of rusted iron pipe clanged to the ground, followed by small chunks of scaffolding. The remains of a ladder fell against the far wall, and several loose chains rattled to the floor like iron snakes. Flames licked from some of the debris, igniting new fires where they landed.

He turned at the sound of pained exertion to find Malon still struggling to remove her bindings. "Navi," he called. "Go help Malon out of those chains. Get her out of here!"

Malon looked up sharply at him. "I'm not going to leave you to die in here!"

Fear, desperation – and yes, love – all swam in those haunted blue eyes. Still, Link waved her away. "Just go! I can handle this! Go!"

He turned back to the Iron Knuckle as Navi darted off. Malon would have to take care of herself while he kept Ingo distracted.

He waved his shield over his head. "Hey, ugly! Did you lose your axe?"

The Iron Knuckle gave one last pull on its axe, ignoring him. But the blade was embedded deep, and didn't budge. So it turned, glancing around before its gaze settled on a large steel cog that had fallen from the rafters. It bent low to pick it up, then grabbed a long length of chain as well, threading the two together. With a sharp screech of tortured metal, the titan clenched its fist around the two ends of the chain and twisted them tight. Dark runes flared to life along its gauntlet, and when the Iron Knuckle removed its hand the chain had fused together, glowing faintly with molten heat.

Then the chain began to blur through the air as the armored titan swung the makeshift mace in a whistling arc over its head.

Link skittered back a step, his eyes going wide. "Oh, come on!"
"Hruah!"

The mace chased Link as he dodged behind a support pillar. He ducked just as it pulled taught, narrowly escaping decapitation as it wrapped around the thick oak. With an ominous crackling sound the Iron Knuckle planted its feet and drew the chain around its elbow, then pulled. The wooden column shattered, sending splinters flying.

Link picked himself up and ran as more debris rained down from above, his breath coming harsh and ragged as he clutched his shield arm in pain. He wove a wide clockwise circle around the edge of the windmill, hoping to draw the titan's attention away from Malon. But no matter how fast he ran, the Iron Knuckle closed the gap with ease. There was only so far he could run before he hit a wall, and the titan owned the very center of the windmill.

Link dodged past the ladder leading to the catwalk, but it wasn't nearly sturdy enough to take the hit, splintering as the mace cleaved through it. The chain caught him across the calves, sweeping his legs out from under him. He slammed on his back, stunned, then quickly rolled aside as the mace arced down and shattered the floorboards where he'd fell.

Link drew his hookshot, aiming from a prone position. He fired just as Ingo was winding up for another swing, catching him on the crown of his helm. The Iron Knuckle rocked backwards with an indignant roar. A flash of crimson hair past the titan's pauldron caught Link's eye.

"Malon, get out of here!" he shouted as the hookshot retracted, and he picked himself up.

The Iron Knuckle had already recovered. He pursued Link with dogged determination, as if driven by some mindless instinct. But the worst part was how little sound he made. On the lift, Ingo had been full of insults and bluster. Here he only grunted with exertion, and even that was subdued. Had the fall rattled something loose in his skull?

Link ducked to the side, the wind of the mace's passing caressing his cheek. The mace wrapped around another pylon as Link passed, and again Ingo cracked it in half. The catwalk above Link's head began to groan in warning, flames licking at its underside as debris continued to fall.

Link stepped out from behind the shattered remains of the pillar, spreading his arms wide. "You lunatic, you're going to tear the whole place down around our heads!"

The Iron Knuckle silently tilted its head, as if contemplating. Then it swung its mace far to the left of Link, wrapping around a third pillar. The wood began to groan ominously as the titan planted its feet.

The hookshot's barbed head cracked off its helm once more. "Hey," Link called. "If you're gonna swing that thing, swing it at me!"

The pylon shattered as the Iron Knuckle recovered its mace. Link dove aside as the catwalk collapsed, his wounded calves screaming in protest. Long wooden trusses fell to the ground in front of the passageway leading towards the lift, their tops already burning brightly, effectively blocking his only escape.

Link glanced around, his heart sinking as he considered his options. Everything burned. The lower floor was still relatively free of flame, but that was about to change as more debris rained from above. His shield arm was now completely soaked red with blood, and his legs were beginning to shake from exhaustion.

Now would be a good time for a miracle, he thought ruefully.

Instead of divine intervention, the Iron Knuckle struck. Its mace hummed through the air as it swung
in from Link's right. He chose to stand his ground rather than finding another pillar for the titan to break, using the ragged remains of his shield to force a glancing strike. But he misjudged the sheer ferocity of the attack. The mace crashed against him, caroming wildly upward while pinning the shield to his shoulder, knocking him back several feet to smash into the broken remains of the collapsed catwalk. Pain drove through his ribs like a white-hot spike, and he knew that he had likely cracked several ribs.

It was getting harder to breathe, and the sharp pain in his side didn't help. Link picked himself up once more and planted his feet, readying his hookshot. If he couldn't find a way past the Iron Knuckle, then he was going to shove the tool down Ingo's throat. The armored titan began to spin the mace over its head once more.

That was when Malon struck.

The rancher leapt up onto the elevated trough behind the Iron Knuckle and drove the sheered metal spike into the joint at its neck. The mace flew from its hands as its fingers stiffened in surprise, flying off to crash against the far wall.

Malon stabbed deep with the spike, causing an eruption of black blood to spurt from its cuirass. Then she wrapped the chain binding her wrists across the titan's throat, hooking it around the spike to give her leverage. She planted her feet and hauled back on the chain, screaming a wordless cry at the effort. For a moment Ingo remained standing, but slowly gravity began to take hold, and he began to teeter backwards.

Link charged, slamming his shield into the Iron Knuckle's chestplate. The titan wobbled even farther, reaching with one hand to try and grab Malon while the other clawed at the chain wrapped around its throat. Link drew his hookshot, taking aim at the underside of the Iron Knuckle's chin. Then his eyes shifted past the titan's helm, and he adjusted his shaking aim an inch to the left.

The Iron Knuckle rocked backwards, its steel helm colliding solidly with the crown of Malon's head. She gave a faint gasp of pain as her clenched fists went limp, and she sprawled backwards across the fouled floor. Without her weight pulling him back, the Iron Knuckle began to rock forward.

In that instant, Link fired. The hookshot lanced upwards, past pulleys and burning beams. It collided with a short iron rod that had been locked between two gears, dislodging the mechanism with a sharp metallic clang. The gears began to spin rapidly, releasing their weight.

The windmill was falling apart around their heads, but gravity still worked perfectly. A flash of steel, and seconds later, it was over. Link stiffened as the Iron Knuckle sagged against him, the half-meter spike that hung over the trough embedded deep within the titan's helm.

Dark blood poured from the inflicted wound, staining the blue-grey steel plates black and crimson. Link quickly backed away as the plates of cursed metal began dissolving into a fine purple mist as the magic that had held the enchanted armor to this world dissolved.

All that remained behind was Ingo, staring upwards into eternity with a steel spike lodged in his brow. His eyes were glazed silver, wide and unseeing, and his mouth was slack. His clothes were torn, as if dissolved by something inside the armor, and his skin was mottled and blotched with darkness. Great open wounds covered his flesh where the armor had melded with its host, seeping oily blood onto the trough.

Something darker than pitch oozed from the great wound on his stomach and splattered on the ground, reminding Link uncomfortably of the amorphous creature from the Water Temple. It reached forward as he approached, some oily parts taking on the appearance of small grasping hands or a
gaping mouth before folding back into the core.

He raised his boot and stomped on the sludge creature. It gave a hissing shriek that was painful to the ears, then quivered and died. A puddle of bubbling ooze began to spread across the floor, hissing as it dissolved into more of the purple mist.

The Iron Knuckle was gone.

Ingo was dead.

He scraped his boot on the floor to remove any lingering trace of taint. With a tired huff he strode to Malon's still form and knelt, gathering her into his arms. She moaned hazily, the goose egg forming over her eye red and swollen.

Navi resumed her usual orbit. "Link, we need to go."

He glanced behind them. The path to the lift was wreathed in flame. They were stuck in the windmill's core. He looked forward. The lower entrance was barred from the outside. His gaze swept upwards. The catwalk leading to the palisade had collapsed. His hookshot … but no, the walls overhead were already weak from years of termites and dry-rot. The flames slowly engulfing every inch of available surface didn't help matters.

He shook his head. The blood-loss had left him weak, the adrenaline draining from his system causing his limbs to shake. "Get out of here, Navi. There's nothing you can do now."

Navi glanced around in panic, then slowly turned back to Link, her wings wilting. "You know I'm not going to abandon you, partner. Together 'til the end, right?"

"You find me a way out of here, and maybe we can push that off a bit further," Link said, giving her a crooked smile. "I'm not giving up just yet. Go, Navi. You can't do anything for me in here. Find me a way out."

Navi hovered quietly, then flew off without another word towards the rafters, hoping to find an exit.

The truth was that Link could see no way out, and he was still losing blood. He wracked his brain trying to come up with a solution to the puzzle, rolling his arm over to inspect the jagged remains of his shield. But the Sheikah scroll held no answers. His supply of bombs had been obliterated. His favorite slingshot had an inch-long cleft through its design. His stash of fire arrows had been wiped away. A length of rope and his spare tunic were gone as well. Nothing that he wouldn't be able to replace, aside from the priceless Sheikah scroll itself.

But he had nothing else that seemed able to fix his predicament. Farore's Wind wasn't able to whisk away multiple people at a time. Even if he were able to make it back to the lift, he didn't trust his hookshot to take both of their weight. But if it came down to it, wouldn't it be better to risk falling to their deaths rather than be burned alive? The drop was short enough that they might not even break any bones.

Shit. There had to be something he wasn't thinking of. He was better than this. He'd been in tougher spots than this and come out relatively unscathed. Granted, he couldn't think of any particular instances at the moment, but he was sure they had happened since he was still standing here. Or kneeling. Whatever.

Farore help them, he was coming up blank. The truth was, he was just too damned exhausted. The fight had drained him, and the slow trickle of blood running down his arm wasn't helping matters. Meanwhile the flames crept ever higher around them, and the heat was starting to become
unbearable.

"Don't give up."

Link raised his head, blinking against the rising heat. Had he imagined it, that voice? Soft and feminine, almost musical. He shook his head, fighting to clear his thoughts, then bent over nearly double as he coughed heavily into Malon's shoulder. It was getting harder to breathe, the thick smoke smothering them in a cloying miasma.

A beam began to creak ominously overhead, then something cracked sharply, showering them in sparks. Link raised his shield, sparing them from the worst of it, though his shoulder felt singed. As the sparks sizzled around him, he brought the shield down and found the stylized drawing of a ruby-colored tunic. He tapped the parchment, drawing the Goron tunic out in a flash of blue light. Then he lifted it over Malon's head, keeping her arms close to her body as he wrapped it around her like a protective cocoon.

Hopefully it would protect her from the flames, for a little while at least.

Something overhead began to groan, low and threatening. He glanced up, finding the heavy beam he'd initially ignited. It crackled and smoldered, charred with white ash and wreathed in flames, then with a sharp snap something important gave way. Link bent protectively over Malon as the flaming timber crashed to the ground in front of them. It teetered on its axis, so wide that he wouldn't be able to wrap his arms around it. For a brief instant it seemed as if it would topple towards them, and he tensed, pulling Malon closer as he prepared to roll aside. But then something at its base cracked and it tilted away, cleaving through the far wall.

The smoke shifted, pouring through the newly rent gap in the outer wall. The flames leapt higher, fed by the rush of air as waning daylight spilled into the windmill. The newly formed path to freedom had a burning floor a dozen yards long, as if fate were taunting him.

He heard the voice again.

"This way..." it said. Smoke and sparks seethed on swirling eddies of air. Something shimmed, shadows coalescing as if they moved with purpose, and then suddenly a figure knelt before them.

Her body – and it was a very definite her – was wrapped in clothes of living flames, her narrow waist and flared hips melding into the smoke. Her arm was outstretched in a coaxing gesture, long fingers wrapped in guttering flame beckoning Link to follow. Her hair was a blazing halo of fire, her face veiled behind a curtain of black soot with piercing eyes of molten gold.

Link blinked in surprise, certain that he must be hallucinating. Where had this woman come from? Was she a spirit of some sort? His lips parted, but he couldn't force the words from his throat.

Seeing that he had heard her command, the woman stood, turned, and marched into the conflagration. She extended her arms, spinning swirling currents of air in a circle before drawing them over her head and pushing down and away. She took a step forward, then repeated this gesture. Then another, her hips swaying with ever step. It was almost like a dance, the moves rhythmic and full of purpose, with no effort wasted.

Wherever she stepped, the flames withered and died.

For a moment the smoke parted, and a path lay open before them. The flames shuddered and writhed against an invisible corridor. Fire licked eagerly at the walls but flickered feebly between Link and the gaping hole in the outer wall, as if held back by some invisible force.
The woman of fire turned, her glowing golden eyes locking with Link's. Her lips parted, a flickering heat illuminating her from within as she spoke.

"Go. Now," she said, and in an instant she dissolved into a shower of ascending sparks, leaving the way forward free and clear.

Link gathered his legs beneath him and hauled himself to his feet. His thighs were trembling with the effort, his back screaming in protest at Malon's weight. But he held her close, cupped protectively against his chest. He struggled to follow the path, each plodding step feeling like it stretched a mile. Ash crumbled beneath his unsteady feet as he walked, and blood roared in his ears, nearly as loud as the fire around him.

As he walked, he felt the flames springing up in his wake, dogging his heels. The ruins of the wall would have been easy for a child to climb. With his burden it proved to be nearly insurmountable. But he persisted, placing one foot in front of the other, and finally he stumbled out into the chilly evening air.

He made it halfway to the farmhouse before he collapsed to his knees. He tenderly laid Malon's still form down on the grass, then rolled to lie beside her, the last of his reserves exhausted. Smoke and steam wafted from their charred clothes and into the darkening sky. The low roar of the flames and the ticking of weakening beams competed with the sound of crickets as dusk settled around them. Cool grass tickled his face as he took long, panting gulps of air.

When he'd caught his breath, he rolled onto his back and propped himself on his elbows. For a long moment he just watched as the fire engulfed the windmill, breathing the clean air. The flames leapt ever higher, eventually reaching the roof of the building. Soon an almighty crack was heard, and something important gave way. The roof of the tower collapsed, sending a shower of sparks spiraling upwards, and the walls began to crumble inwards.

Link stretched his aching sword arm across his hip and drew his Ocarina. A tired moment passed, then he gathered his breath and brought the instrument to his lips. The Song of Storms echoed across the field, and the waning sunlight was replaced by the rumble of distant thunder.

It began to rain.
Epilogue: Paradise Calling

One week later...

Malon took a bite of her sandwich, then set it aside. She brushed the feather of her quill across her lips as she chewed thoughtfully, her eyes sweeping over the fine, snow-white parchment set before her.

She was almost finished. Almost ready to put it all in order, but for these last few details.

Her sigh was wistful as her gaze turned towards her bedroom window and the horse paddock beyond. Out towards the demolished windmill.

Almost...

Malon dipped her quill into the inkwell to her left and turned back to her work. The thick tome had been a gift from her father many years ago, a place to record her innermost thoughts. It hadn't seen much use in the last few years, but she felt that this was an appropriate time to break it out again. She held the delicate quill tip over the page, collecting her thoughts before she continued.

I awoke safe and sound in my own bed. I didn't know what to make of that at first. All I really cared about was how wonderfully soft the sheets were and how very, very tired I felt, but eventually I managed to make myself sit up. I felt so weak and dizzy that I was barely able to stand, but somehow I made my way down the hall to the window to inspect the damage.

Windmill #3 will never be the same again. I don't think we would ever be able to piece it back together. We'll have to dig out the rubble and extend the palisade in its place. Good riddance, I say. I never liked that place anyway.

She paused, again gathering her thoughts. The next part was harder.

Link, Ingo, and Epona have all disappeared to only the Goddesses know where, along with that strange armor that Ingo was wearing. It was Ingo, wasn't it? If it weren't for the burnt out windmill and the axe marks in the support pylons, I'd have thought that it was all just a very bad dream.

Malon paused again. Then, when her mind remained blank for several long moments, she cleaned the quill and set it aside. Her fingers reached up absentely as she reread her latest passage, massaging the thin white scar that now bisected her eyebrow. If not for that lasting mark, she might have been convinced that she had hallucinated the whole thing.

Instead she was only left with more burning questions. Where had Ingo disappeared to and why had his room been ransacked? For that matter, why wasn't she dead, buried beneath tons of smoldering timber and stone?

Most of all, where was Link? She had theories for everything, but no way to confirm any of them. His disappearance worried her the most. Waking to find him gone had nearly sent her into a panic. Only the discovery of a note tucked beneath an empty potion bottle on her nightstand had finally calmed her. The single line of text in Link's messy handwriting was like a beacon of hope in the darkest night.

I'll find him.
But days passed with no word. Eventually she had decided to write it down – everything that had happened over the past three months – if only to try to make sense of it all.

She gently blew on her words to dry the ink, then once more picked up her quill.

*But life goes on. This past week it's been all I could do just to stay ahead of the chores and maintenance before I pass out from exhaustion. It was a rude awakening, realizing just how much I've come to rely on Link helping out around the ranch. And how much I've come to care about him.*

*I just wish*

Again, Malon's trail of thought left her. She set the quill aside once more, glancing out the window and leaning back in her chair, her lunch forgotten. The sun had just passed the top pane, leaving a bright beam of golden light to rest upon her open diary.

She stared at her last aborted line, thoughts whirling through her head like a dervish. So much had happened in the last three months. When Link came back into her life, he'd turned the last seven miserable years of her life on its head. He'd stood up to Ingo, and shown her how to stand strong as well. He'd given her a reason to smile again.

What did she wish?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the muted whinny of a horse, but it had sounded much closer than the corral. Curious, she stood, the chair scraping backwards as she bent forward to get a better look out of the window. A horse in full tack was standing between the house and the barn, its rider gingerly lowering himself from the saddle. Her heart seized as she recognized those rounded shoulders and balding pate.

She unlatched the window and hoisted it upwards in its frame, pinching several fingers. She didn't even notice the sharp pain as she called down in disbelief.

"Daddy?!

He was tall, but somehow shorter than Malon remembered. His frame was soft from years of drink, but his wasting sickness had cut most of that back. Talon glanced upward, one hand still on the saddle to steady his trembling legs. "Hey there, darlin'," he answered with a soft smile, as if he hadn't been bedridden for the last several years.

The giddy little girl inside of her had her across the room in an instant, her chair toppling over with a clatter as she dashed out into the hallway, taking the stairs two at a time, and charging through the front door. Three strides across warm grass and she collided with her father's chest, barreling him backwards against the saddle.

"Oof. Easy there, hun. Not back to my old self quite yet," Talon said as her arms wrapped tightly around him in a hug.

He'd lost a lot of weight over the years, and as she tightened her grip she could feel the sharp edge of his bones beneath his pallid flesh. After two years of living in constant fear of losing her father, it felt good to have his arms wrapped around her, to hold him again without fear of breaking him, even if her arms were trembling. No matter how old she got, this was her father, her Daddy. This felt right.

Finally she pulled back, wiping the tears from her eyes. "How?" was all she could ask as she looked up into his face.

Talon blew out a soft breath. "Long story," he replied cryptically. "One best told over a good meal
and a pint'er two."

His face grew pensive. "I— Well, I wanted to say I'm so sorry I signed those letters. There's no excuse that makes it better, but the witch that Ingo left me with kept feeding me some sort of mushroom concoction. I wasn't sure what was real half ah the time. But I knew that whatever happened, I could trust Link to take care of you."

Malon shook her head, blinking away tears. "It's ok, Dad. I—"

The sound of approaching hooves made her look up. Her heart leapt into her throat.

*Could it be...*

Even though the pair of horses that came around the bend weren't Epona, she still held hope. But then the cart came into view, with a Goron in the driver's seat, and her heart fell. The open cart was laden with stones and wood, with a single goat hitched to the rear. A mail-carrier of some sorts. The Goron pulled the horses to a stop, lifting its red cap to acknowledge the two Hylians while the goat glanced around with disinterest and began chewing at the grass nearest the wagon.

Her father noticed her disheartened face.

"He wanted me t' tell you that he didn't mean to disappear so quickly, but he had other promises to keep," Talon said, extricating himself from her hug. "Said you'd know what he meant. Way it was told, there was a bit of ah fight?"

Before she could answer, Talon reached into his vest pocket and produced a small brown envelope. "This is all his way of saying sorry, I s'pose," he said, handing her the letter.

Talon gave her a quick peck on the forehead, then turned and took ahold of his mount's bridle and drew the horse through the second gate, leading the delivery Goron through with a wave.

Malon held the letter in her trembling fingers, her thoughts racing as she was struck by the sudden need to find her calm center. Her feet began to move, leading her towards the barn as she inspected the envelope in her hands. The paper was simple and course, of the kind often found in backwoods towns without a proper printshop. Her hands began to gently shake as she read the front of the envelope.

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TO: Malon Lon
Lon Lon Ranch, Central Hyrule Field

FROM: FB
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Her heart beat fast in her breast. She wet her lips, suddenly irrationally nervous. It was from him; the one who had come back into her life and brightened her darkest hours, who had given her her father back.

The boy who had stolen her heart.

Her legs felt weak. She made it several steps into the barn before her knees gave way, sending her sinking to the ground in front of Epona's stall. A pool of sunlight fell from the rafters, illuminating the letter in her lap as her skirt spilled around her. She quickly flipped the envelope over in her hands.

Tears began running long trails down her face as she slid her nails through the seal, gently removed the carefully handwritten note, and began to read.
And as the sunset came to meet,
   The evening on the hill,
I told you I'd always love you.
   I always did,
   I always will.

~ Fin ~

Closing:
youtu.be/3nxIw5TrBs

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